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Stock in engineers rising; Oilpatch busy recruiting as activity builds

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Engineers who found themselves laid off during the recent economic downturn are once again in high demand in the heart of Alberta's oilpatch as oil and gas projects are beginning to ramp up this year, according to one company that had a hiring fair earlier this year and saw 1,000 professionals in a single day.

"Clearly, our industry is heating up," says Kevin O'Brien, president of engineering, procurement and construction firm IMV Projects, which caters largely to the oilpatch. "The oil and gas companies that we work for are increasing their capital budgets, which means there are a lot more processing facilities to be built and that translates into a big need for engineers and all professional support services."

IMV is one of many companies related to the energy sector that have been on a hiring spree recently. IMV, for example, added 20 per cent to its talent base to bring its workforce to about 600 in Calgary.

"The oil and gas companies themselves are going to do a lot of hiring and we've seen that for the last year," says O'Brien. "The bulk of the opportunities are going to come to service providers like ourselves at IMV Projects because we're the ones that have to ramp up our staff levels greatly in order to execute these projects for them."

A lot of engineers left Alberta in 2009 at the height of the recession and many industry insiders speculated they wouldn't come back. "I disagree," he says. "I think talent will come back to our province and industry." That was demonstrated during IMV's job fair when many of the applicants were from out of province.

It's not just engineers that are benefiting from the increased capital budgets of oil and gas companies. "There is a huge amount of support in order to execute projects -designers, drafters, procurement, construction management, human resources, IT -and anything else you can think of in support services," says O'Brien.

Pam Nemeth, IMV's director of human resources, says the recruitment environment is getting more competitive, making things like organizational culture, career development and other factors beyond salary or compensation more relevant once again.

"Having fun and having that tremendous team environment . is really what sets us apart," says Nemeth. While there used to be a gap in experience across the energy sector in general related to 10- or 15-year engineers and geologists, there is now a need to fill in the younger demographic, including new graduates, says O'Brien.

"Having just gone through a downturn, I do see our workforce getting a little bit older, so I do see a need to replenish at the junior level," he says, noting the company is still looking for all types of experience levels across all engineering disciplines.

With lessons learned from the boom-bust cycles inherent to the energy sector, a lot of companies now place as much emphasis on retention as they do recruitment, says O'Brien. They try to staff at sustainable levels so people can grow their careers in a more stable environment. "We don't hire people just for a project," he says. "We really want them to come and stay with us for a career."

Many university students are now starting summer internships in the oilpatch, so it's a good time to make those connections that could translate into jobs after graduation. Many recent grads are reporting a better employment outlook as they hit the job market, according to post-secondary officials in career services.

As for IMV's recent hiring spree, it's a trend that will continue throughout the year, says O'Brien. "We're not done yet," he says.

"We are very optimistic about the year ahead and we are going to have more positions to fill, so we're going to keep up this pace of recruiting."

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