

# Forestry Recruitment and Retention in the New Economy:

More than just the money

Jordan Tesluk, PhD

Forestry Safety Advocate

This slideshow summarizes a presentation delivered on Sept 12<sup>th</sup> in Kamloops to attending Contractors.

All speaking notes are not captured in the text, and there was extensive discussion beyond the materials shown here.

An unabridged (fully detailed) article will be provided in the near future.

The goals of this presentation were to put the recruitment and retention challenges in silviculture in context with reports from the field, changes in other sectors, and impending changes to minimal wage, so that contractors have more information to inform their activities as they structure bidding and negotiation strategies for imminent seasons.

# Objectives

- Discuss recruitment and retention challenges – primarily in tree planting, but industry is a proxy and entry point for other silviculture and forestry jobs.
- Examine challenges in context of a changing economy – and shifts in other sectors.
- Share observations from the field
  - Contractor responses to interviews in the field.
  - Worker experiences from 270+ Facebook messages, numerous interviews, and additional personal messages.
- Inform a discussion of adaptation so employers can make informed decisions in client negotiations and employee management.

## Sources of information

- Payroll analysis (Katja Dilkina)
- Visited contractors in office and the field
- Spoke to workers in camps and in the field
- Messages from workers

# The min-wage issue

2019 (until June 1)

2021 (as of June 1)

- Portal-to-portal 11 hour day
- 8 hours at regular time + 2 hours overtime (breaks considered)
- 11 payroll hours x 12.65 = \$139.15
- 139.15 x 1.08 (holiday + vac) = **\$150.28** (average over pay period)

\$150.28 x 65 days = **\$9,768** – camp costs (\$1706) – initial gear costs (\$700) – day off expenses (\$600) = **\$6762 (before taxes) – takeaway for worker**

- Portal-to-portal 11 hour day
- 8 hours at regular time + 2 hours overtime (breaks considered)
- 11 payroll hours x 15.20 = \$167.20
- 167.20 x 1.08 (holiday + vac) = **\$180.58** (average over pay period)

180.58 x 65 days = **\$11,737** – camp costs (1706) – initial gear costs (700) – day off expenses (600) = **\$8731 (before taxes) – takeaway for workers**

Figures are approximate, and different systems may be used by some. 11-hour days is viewed as standard, with acknowledgement that some may work longer (particularly up north) or shorter, but that most workers leave at 7 and return around 6.

 See next page

# Take-away earnings in context: Students

- Tuition fees have steadily risen in most fields in most schools.
- Minimum guaranteed earnings in 2021 (estimated \$8731 before taxes) leaves limited money for living expenses after tuition is paid.
- Tuition expected to continue rising along with rent, and other fees.

Tuition fees 2014-2018 for CANADIAN students  
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710000301>

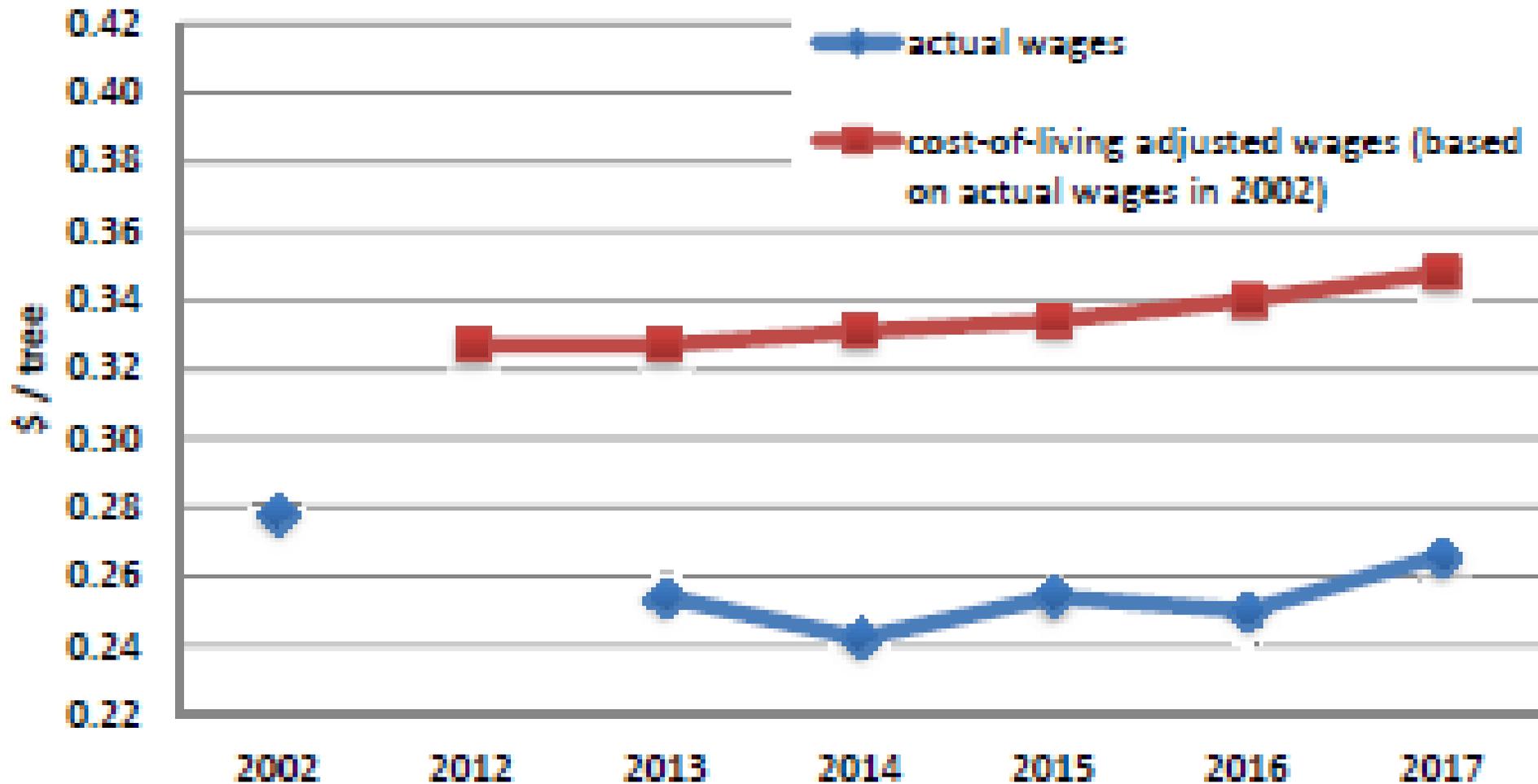
Field of study	2014	2018	% change
	Dollars		
Total, field of study	5,998	6,838	+14%
Education	4,482	4,538	+1%
Visual arts, and communications	5,211	6,034	+16%
Humanities	5,230	5,773	+10%
Social sciences, and legal studies	5,294	5,893	+11%
Law	10,563	13,332	+26%
Business, management, administration	6,366	7,409	+16%
Physical and life sciences a	5,701	6,395	+12%
Mathematics, computer, information sciences	6,565	7,408	+13%
Engineering	7,153	8,466	+18%
Architecture	5,985	6,881	+15%
Agriculture, natural resources, conservation	5,371	5,846	+9%
Dentistry	18,118	23,474	+30%
Medicine	12,987	14,780	+10%
Nursing	5,308	5,788	+9%
Pharmacy	11,273	10,746	-5%
Veterinary medicine	6,917	7,924	+15%
Other health, parks, recreation and fitness	5,757	6,478	+14%

# Tree planting wages 2002-2017 (inflation adjusted)

year	payroll (in millions)	sowing requests (in millions)	wages (per tree)	BC consumer price index	cost-of-living adjusted wages	effect of inflation		combined effect of wage fluctuation and inflation	
						\$	% loss	\$	% loss
2002	\$59,791.41	215,219.00	0.278	100	0.278	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012	\$59,014			117.8	0.327	-0.049	-17.63%		
2013	\$60,388	237,670	0.254	117.7	0.327	-0.049	-17.63%	-0.073	-26.26%
2014	\$63,150	260,918	0.242	118.9	0.331	-0.053	-19.06%	-0.089	-32.01%
2015	\$65,101	256,792	0.254	120.2	0.334	-0.056	-20.14%	-0.08	-28.78%
2016	\$64,928	260,221	0.25	122.4	0.34	-0.062	-22.30%	-0.09	-32.37%
2017	\$69,975	263,050	0.266	125	0.348	-0.07	-25.18%	-0.082	-29.50%

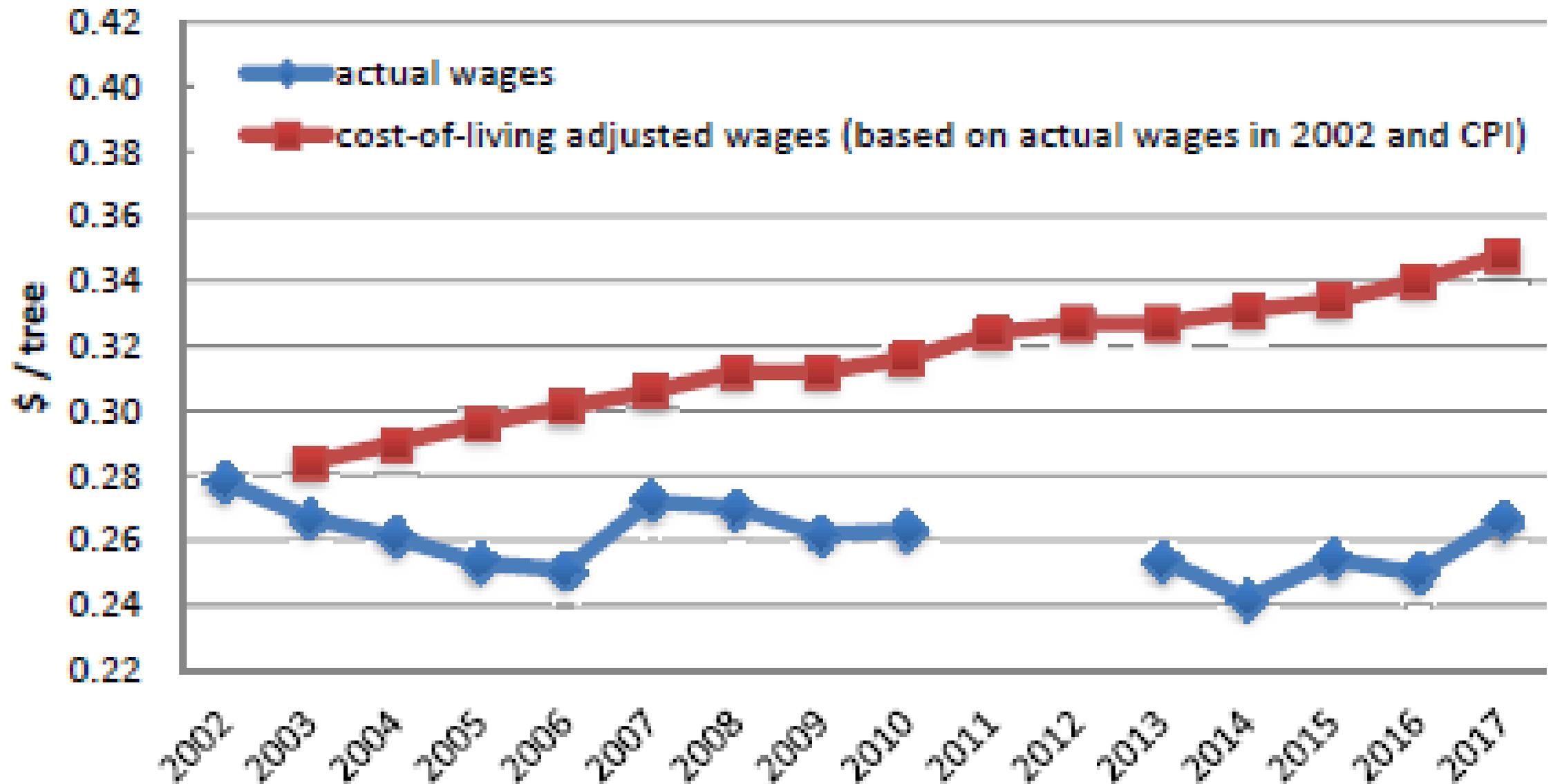
**Yellow** indicates total industry payroll/total trees. **Green** indicates what wages WOULD be if they followed inflation index. Thus, final column indicates gap between actual wages and what wages would be if they had increased in step with inflation. Numbers are anecdotal, and do not provide full context. However, the data do provide clear indicator of industry earnings not keeping up with economy. 2002 is used as base point based on that being the starting point for BC consumer price index calculations.

# Tree Planting Wage Rates



Previous table mapped out to show persisting gap between estimated actual wages (blue) and what wages WOULD be if they had followed inflation rate

# Tree Planting Wage Rates



# Other Parts of the Labour Market

- Business Development Bank of Canada – 45% employers lacking staff
- Aging population, with help still 10 years away in the form of demographic bump of more young workers.
- 90% of construction and trades to face shortages – these are key trades competing for existing staff and recruits in planting. Opportunities to pursue trades instead of starting planting increasingly attractive.
- Government intervention in other sectors includes increased support for apprenticeship in the trades.
- Service, recreation, and care industries also hurting for workers – these are key competitors for demographic groups key to planting.
- Organized industries are responding – some are modifying recruitment campaigns to focus on embracing diversity and various economic and social factors to increase attractiveness of their sector – public and labour pool outreach strategies now mobilizing.
- Rising cost of living in the west – forcing economic decisions to be made on what jobs provide the greatest security.
- Complex hydraulics between labour pools and outcomes unclear = risk

“The Victoria Plumbing union pays ~80 grand a year + benefits and pension for work that is chiller by a large margin. It's hard to see where planting and forestry could even build into a career that paid 60k/year, with travel costs and increased externalities over a city life.”

“It costs a lot to go planting. Travel, equipment, and then food. Nobody factors that in but our grocery bill triples when planting. I've become a heavy equipment operator. I make \$300/day for 9 hrs. Planting I make \$450/day average but after the math is done I make about the same as I do now but I'm home every night.”

# New-Economy Implications

## Consider ALL potential costs to your operations:

- Aforementioned increases in “top-up” for low-production planters. Many camps already spend +\$30k per season for top-up....FOR ONE CAMP at current min. wage.
- Further increases in fuel costs
- Employer Health Tax starting January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019
- Accommodation costs – service workers pay rising – costs to hotel and motel users.
- Competition for kitchen staff in camps as restaurant earnings rise.
- Food costs for both camps and for workers.
- Retraining of staff pending labour pool currents
- Injury Management (alternate work) pay rates must rise to reflect minimal wage

**WEP – Wage Equivalent Production: When the number of trees planted (on average over a pay period) meets or surpasses the hourly wages guaranteed by regulation.**

- **How much does it take to motivate workers to reach beyond WEP?** Workers have estimated \$230-300 as what they think ANY PLANTER (rookie or otherwise) needs to be able to make on average to work as hard as they can, to be productive, and to reach beyond WEP.
- Cost of rookie-reliance increasing - value of veterans increasing
- Workers know where the money comes from – veterans unhappy with subsidizing rookies if “top-up” is coming from the tree price.
- Training systems critical to adaptation – rookies and veterans alike recognize need for better training in many operations. KEY POINT is that the rookies recruited for 2019 will be the veterans that carry the load in 2021- they NEED TO BE trained properly, and they need to experience sufficient rewards to return. In this they are like the salmon in the Fraser River.

“There should be a minimum level of training for rookies so they know exactly what the foresters want and an effective way to do it.”

“Last place I want to plant is where 2 cents of each tree goes toward flailing rookies.”

“Formal government-mandated training for all new planters before they are allowed to put in their first tree. Teach how WCB works and when to file, and how an employee actually refuses unsafe work. Explain how minimum wage is calculated”

# What do workers want?

## Please more:

- \$ \$ \$ - #1 key issue- above all else. No point in going further if this does not change.
- Security of commitment\*\*\* (see quote >>)
- Seasonal opportunities beyond planting and the ability to work a longer year – for vets, career aspirations in forestry remain vital.
- Good organization
- Safety – driving is a key area workers want a greater feeling of safety.
- Internet, couches, better food, free gloves and flagging, hot tubs, jet packs (last two items offered in jest, but indicate wide ranges of “wants”)

## But let's fix:

- Non-compliance with Labour regs. (37.9) and shorting hours – there are persistent reports of problems here. Even shorting a single hour represents a 10 to 20% impact on minimum wage guarantees. - Compliant operators equally frustrated on this matter.
- Harassment and bullying – good steps taken in this area recently.
- Drugs and alcohol – many workers frustrated with actions of a minority of peers.
- Unpaid labour – i.e. camp set up, reefer unloading, unpaid replanting.
- Crappy access, walk-ins, and roadside decking or slashpiles – same things that contractors hate!!!
- Frozen trees, heavy trees, low-quality prep, long drives, frequent moves

NOTE- Workers are allies to contractors in that they want improvements in many areas contractors also want change!

“I regularly had contractors say 65 days of work, 4 million trees for 40 people at 13 cents, camp average \$300.

100k trees each, \$13000 wages each, at \$300 days, is 43 days. There were regularly job advertisements on replant where the math didn't add up.

But worse, I saw companies say "work until august", drag people to small towns, then abruptly lay everyone off mid-June. "Oh, you planted faster than expected." or "Our summer bids weren't finalized."

That shit should be illegal.”

# What is being done – What can be done?

- Exit surveys, winter updates, early hiring – many companies already moving on these fronts.
  - Educating workers on entitlements – compliant employers trumpet their policies to attract staff, dispel doubts, and to encourage workers to report problems with non-compliant competitors.
  - Better coaching – incremental training improvement here, but much room for improvement, especially with ergonomics.
  - That camp cost issue – some employers already contemplating eliminating this cost (see comments). This move is somewhat controversial if workers perceive camp cost elimination simply reducing tree prices – it must ACCOMPANY price increases. Most are in favor.
  - Scholarship and bursary contributions – RRSPs/RESPs – there may be options available to offer tax advantages to key groups, and to re-introduce “bonus” systems that actually amount to a true “extra”.
  - Camp conditions – contractors are increasingly looking at what each other is offering, and updating their shower trailers, entertainment options, and special meals.
- “Every single other bush job I've done has paid me a per diem for being away from home.....camp cost has got go....”
  - “Removing camp costs, outrageous how silviculture companies charge their employees for accommodation, other industries pay their employees a per diem to work away from home...
  - “The practise of charging planters camp costs needs to go.”
  - “Re: camp cost, wouldn't it just come out of the tree price?”

# Physiotherapy and others supports

- Physical breakdown cited as a common reason for leaving the industry
  - Vets that lay down the shovel
  - Rookies that cannot manage the strain
  - Major leaps made in preventing many accidents – but physical demands of the job remain EXTREME, and may in fact be greater than ever with f-layer and increase in average productivity. Less screening does not necessarily mean lesser physical demands when you are dealing with an more motivated workforce.
- Lack of benefits compared to other jobs – reliant on what is provided by company and available in the field.
- Preseason fitness in focus –incentives for workers to be prepared, complete programs, and pass assessments upon arrival. Many new recruits quit because of inability to meet physical demands.
- Extended care outside work – new ideas – new partners? – Recent Athletic Therapist has moved to Williams Lake with hope of connecting better with silviculture and forestry clientele.
- Explore other modalities – CAT, RMT... Total Physio has been incredibly successful, and universally embraced by workers. Rep-strain injuries down from 34% to 18%, 2017 to 2018, after introduction of Total Physio systems. Much to be gained from other para-medical fields such as Canadian Athletic Therapists (CAT) Registered Massage Therapists (RMT) and others if we can replicate the Total Physio effect.
- Focus needs to be on improving health of workers not simply mitigating impacts of the job or providing means to drive higher production.



# How do you recruit workers?

Nobody wants to know what lays at the bottom of the labour pool



- Poor recruitment can leave you scrambling to accept poor-quality recruits. Consequences include high likelihood of early quitting, high likelihood of injury or alternate duties, and introduction of behaviors that you don't want in your workspace.
- Word of mouth – a fallible option – employers report problems with this approach. Interviews and qualification checking are under-utilized in some instances.
- Fitness requirements are used increasingly – similar to firefighting.
- Campus recruitment – some companies focus on specific universities. This is like “cluster-recruitment” that targets set groups. This is different than word-of-mouth in that the criteria is not association, but instead membership in a said group (i.e. UBC student body). It can increase efficiency of recruitment campaigns, and foster shared-bonds among recruits that may strengthen workplace relationships and increase desire to return- it is easier to quit when you don't know anyone at the job.
- Worker bounties- some companies consider payment for bringing in high-quality recruits.
- Looking for outside help
  - Interprovincial hiring – Eastern planters sometimes helpful. However, if conditions in Ontario/Quebec improve for planters – they may choose not to come west. On the other hand, if conditions do NOT improve, they may simply choose not to plant. Unpredictable outcomes, but high risk for those dependent on eastern recruits.
  - International hiring – some southern hemisphere (Aussie and Kiwi) and Euro (Uk and Scotland) companies looking to form better relationships with Canadian companies to share workers and offer longer season.
- Over-hiring and its limits – it costs in training. It may look horrible in public eyes (and valuation of recruits) if workers are discarded for not meeting production. It could be a public relations disaster if not managed appropriately. It also generates resentment among workers if season does not last as long as expected.

# Planting Then and Now

There has been a cultural change in the both the values of workers, and the experience offered by the industry. This assertion is not supported in a quantified manner, but is based on in-depth engagement with the workforce over 25+ years. In short, workers come increasingly for economic purposes, and are increasingly disappointed with the results. Simultaneously, the industry has become more formalized and organized- much of this with necessary adaptations to improve safety and workplace relationships. However, this has meant a perception of less freedom for some workers. These are admittedly crude generalizations, but the industry has not deeply or widely considered the nature of the experience the offer as a cultural product, in context with changes in wider society and their worker pool.

Then: Came to find myself, and I made enough money to stick around.

Now: Came for the money, and all I got was this lousy t-shirt

- Has planting really kept up with the times? With inflation?
- More regulated and reliable – but what has that done to the culture?
- Young workers today face a steeper climb – the experience and expectations of today’s young workers are simply different than those of 10,20, or 30 years ago. The experiences of today’s contractors (back in the day) no longer provide as accurate of reference points for what workers want or need.
- Culture of young workers has changed – tastes have changed – this is reflected in needs for access to resources (physical comforts and contact with others and social media)- this can affect preferences for WHERE they may want to work.
- Recruitment strategies may need to adapt to new cultural norms, and changing appraisals of what the industry has to offer.

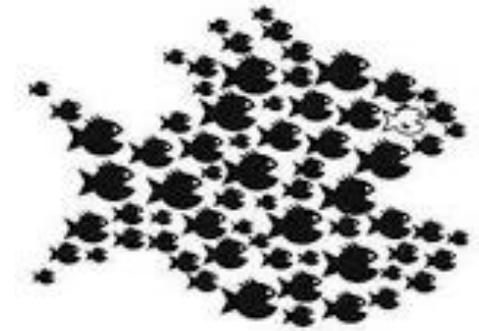
# The Planting Experience – What can be offered?

- Risk and adventure - Seeing new areas – this is still essential and needs to work with the emphasis on safety we now demand.
- Relationships– meeting new people – this is also still important- it must work with new expectations around safe and inclusive spaces.
- Engaging workers – lack of representation – I received over 270 responses to a SINGLE Facebook post. That speaks of an informed and engaged workforce. Yet the industry has not tapped into this engagement in a meaningful way to strengthen the relationship between industry and workers. A union is not a likely or likely viable option for worker engagement – but some level of association outreach may be a helpful tool - IT IS SOMEWHAT SURPRISING in this day and age, that our industry lacks a cohesive social media strategy for worker engagement when we depend so heavily on YOUNG people. Look at WSBC for examples of savvy adaptation .
- Pride in what they do vs. production model – the increasing focus on production affects the regard some workers hold for the job- they do perform an important service, and the industry can better control the frame or image of this to attract recruits, and to increase the profile of the job to other viewers.
- Relationships with community – workers take pride in recent steps to support local causes in communities they work in – parties and other initiatives (i.e. Tree planters ball) to raise funds have seen playground contributions in Clearwater, youth and women’s groups contributions in Merritt= this affects the image workers have of themselves, and what communities think of workers. It also strips away enduring negative stereotypes of tree planters that unfortunately persist.
- Resume and skill-building – can we offer more in this area.
- Representations in media - 6 billionth tree as an positive example – Khaira as a negative- the association has a key role to play in controlling/influencing this- it matters to potential recruits and to their parents.
- Job-branding - Celebrating our progress - we have done much to improve this industry, and can do more to catalogue and celebrate improvements and achievements.



# What can the Association do? What can you do?

- Obstacles to membership – real and perceived- HIGH NEED to have association that is both welcoming and respectful to different business models – and which works to incorporate different needs into their mandate.
- Old grudges – these can be overcome – their persistence is characteristic of competitive culture, pride in work, and personal investments.
- Cynicism from past experiences – past bidding strategies let down by association and non-association members engaging in what were perceived as predatory bidding tactics– this has made the current task more difficult – lack of trust persists.



- Interdependency of different business models is poorly understood. Persisting assumptions of “good” and “bad” companies needs to be stripped down and replaced with awareness of different business models, and appreciation of what they bring to the industry and (directly or indirectly) to each other. High-turnover and low-turnover, large and small, distinctions remain important.....but “good” and “bad” does a disservice to the experience each offers, and the work invested in each.
- Uneven load of training – more work needed to recognize how northern companies do bulk of initial training, and supply labour to others. Low-turnover companies provide important coastal opportunities for vets, and niche jobs, but can do more to contribute to the recruitment and training of workers in the industry. Low-turnover companies have also made important contribution to training programs, new safety initiatives, and other endeavors, but more can be done to help share these more widely.
- Representing the industry – potentially critical to have a body to represent positive image of industry to both regulators, clients, and recruits as future challenges unfold.