

IT firm looks across the pond for software developers

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SAINT JOHN - When Chris Boudreau couldn't source software developers for his startup technology company in New Brunswick, he didn't scan other provinces or the increasingly tech-savvy India.

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Photo: Kâté Braydon/Telegraph-Journal

Chris Boudreau, CEO of Clinic Server, recently returned from an eight-day fact-finding trip to Ireland and the United Kingdom looking for software developers.

The CEO of Saint John's Clinic Server instead eyed a part of the world that looks and feels a lot like the Maritimes, but where qualified developers are hungry for work - Ireland and the United Kingdom.

"The unemployment rate in Ireland is running at 13.4 per cent," Boudreau pointed out in an interview, shortly after returning from a whirlwind, eight-day fact-finding trip to the region.

Boudreau has long been searching for developers to take on projects for his growing company, which has created a system that allows health clinics to manage their businesses online.

But - like others in the province's information and communications technology space - he can't find experienced talent; those coming out of university need guidance.

"It would be much easier to bring in juniors if we had more seniors to be mentoring to help these younger teams fresh out of school," Boudreau said.

The executive's trip comes as the New Brunswick Information Technology Council is set to submit a comprehensive report to the province next week, asking for government help to fix a labour shortage that has long plagued the sector.

Attracting workers from Ontario and other parts of Canada is problematic. They expect higher wages than those in New Brunswick, despite the fact that the cost of living in the Maritimes is somewhat lower, Boudreau said.

And bringing in people from Asian communities doesn't always work, he said - many migrate to larger urban centres, such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

"When you look at Indian and Asian communities, the retention rate is below 40 per cent of those who come to the region," Boudreau said.

"When you look at England, Ireland and the Eastern Bloc, retention data is 90 per cent and above," he said, citing numbers from New Brunswick's Population Growth Secretariat.

Last December, Boudreau approached the government department and economic development agency Enterprise Saint John to collect brochures to entice people across the pond to work in Saint John and the province at large.

"That blossomed into some much larger conversations with the IT community in general," he said.

What Boudreau learned from recruiting agencies in London, a business development agency in Belfast - Invest Northern Ireland - and others, is that qualified software developers overseas are looking for work.

In London, there are the highly-skilled Java server developers and those specialized in user interface design and development and mobile application and development - the kind of people Boudreau is looking for.

Invest Northern Ireland offered to help him outsource projects to Belfast, where Canadian tech firms including Ottawa's BTI Systems Inc., have set up shop, a tempting option.

"To meet short-term goals, we may have to outsource," Boudreau said. "Long-term we're looking to build here," he said, noting he'd like to work with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) to try to get some sort of "blanket" labour market opinion form for bringing in workers from Ireland and the U.K., versus having to complete the time-consuming and expensive process for each employee.

Gina O'Rourke-McKay, workforce co-ordinator at Enterprise Saint John, met with Boudreau on Thursday afternoon to learn about his trip.

She said IT firms in the region share Clinic Server's labour struggles.

"The buzz words around here are, 'Do you know anybody who has Java?'" O'Rourke-McKay said.

Larry Sampson, executive director of the New Brunswick Information Technology Council, cited numbers from HRDC, the Maritimes Provinces Higher Education Commission and Statistics Canada to show demand for workers is growing as supply is shrinking.

The unemployment rate in the ICT sector is about three per cent across Canada, but university enrolment in computer science programs is down this year by two per cent nationally and 16 per cent in the province, Sampson said.

"The computer science faculty at UNB could probably handle close to double the number of students it has in the undergraduate program."