

BUSINESS



ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

David Grove, owner of Royal Bay Bakery, and employee Rosalind Wilkinson, display the business's work schedule. It operates on flexibility as staff such as Wilkinson take breaks during her shift to drive her children home from school. Victoria last month again had the country's lowest unemployment rate among cities as employers are finding new ways to locate, hire and retain workers.

EMPLOYMENT

Job flexibility helps Victoria claim Canada's work capital

CARLA WILSON
Times Colonist

When Rosalind Wilkinson wants time off work to attend her children's special events, it's not a problem.

When she needed to leave work to meet her youngest child after school on a regular basis, no problem.

And when Wilkinson's shift at Royal Bay Bakery on Metchosin Road is over, she doesn't walk out the door until all the customers have been served. "You just work until the job's done," she said.

This kind of flexibility by Royal Bay owners Gwen Snyder and David Grove and their staff is an example of what labour market advisers say is a tool to attract and keep workers at a time when Greater Victoria's unemployment rate continues to be the lowest in Canada.

Victoria's unemployment rate moved to 3.2 per cent in July, a slight change from three per cent in June, Statistics Canada said yesterday. Calgary is in second place among Canadian cities at 3.3 per cent.

A total of 192,200 people are working out of a Greater Victoria labour force of 198,700. In the past year, 9,000 jobs have been added to the local economy, although in July the number of local jobs edged down by 500, Statistics Canada said.

At the bakery, Wilkinson, 36,

BENDING SCHEDULES

Tips on how employers can become more flexible with staff shifts:

- Accept schedule changes, with notice.
- Agree to shift swapping and try to schedule desired shifts.
- Allow part-time schedules, job-sharing or voluntary cuts in hours and, therefore, salary.
- Permit telecommuting.
- Grant flex time.
- Prepare schedules in advance.
- Give notice of any changes.
- Use a scheduling system employees can use to line up own shifts, ees can use to line up own shifts.
- Let workers use vacation time in days, not just in weeks.
- Create sick-leave banks for staff to use for themselves, family members who are ill, and for medical appointments.
- Understand unpaid short and long-term leave, with short notice, may be needed at times.
- Cross-train staff and use temporary workers to fill in for absentees.
- Give workers more control over how work is completed.

Source: Labour Market Dialogues, Phase 2 Report, from the Community Council of Greater Victoria

said she "doesn't have any plans to leave" her job of nearly five years. Her employers' flexibility made a "huge" difference, relieving her of the stress

of trying to arrange transportation for her youngest child.

"You like being here and you want to come in.... You always want to do your best because they are so flexible."

Being flexible is part of Snyder and Grove's business ethic. The couple operated a restaurant and bakery in Ontario under the same principles before buying the bakery in 1995. Including themselves, the bakery has a staff of 15.

"It is really a matter of being sympathetic to other people's situation," Grove said. "It seems to be the right thing to do."

Business benefits make it easier to hire and retain staff. In the bakery where products are made from scratch, a stable workforce leads to a group of workers with consistent skills, he said. Customer relations benefits because employees are typically local and rooted in the community.

Denise van der Pijl, 25, started at the bakery when she was in Grade 11. In May, she graduated from UVic with a degree in elementary education. As a teacher-on-call in the Sooke district in the fall, she still plans to work Saturdays at the bakery. She worked there part-time while studying and full-time during summers. It was a "big relief" not to face an annual summer job hunt, she said.

Staff substitute for each other when needed. "Everyone

kind of fills in here for one another," van der Pijl said.

Pilot projects examining ways to tap into the hidden labour market are planned under the third stage of an initiative spearheaded by the Community Council of Greater Victoria.

Barriers to work include being homeless, substance-abuse issues, a criminal record, being a newcomer to Canada, not speaking English, illiteracy and more, a Community Council report said. This report focuses on helping employers support people as they start working and on ways to be flexible in hiring and retaining staff. It is being distributed now in Greater Victoria.

The goal is to "encourage employers to have a look at what other employers are doing," said project manager Alvaro Moreno.

Business Victoria CEO Ken Stratford agrees that flexibility by employers is one way to keep workers. "It's expensive to find new people and it's hard to find new people."

This labour shortage is expected to continue in the long term. "Employers that understand the situation are more and more providing a really happy, healthy workplace environment where employees feel valued. I think those that do have little to worry about."

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