

A competitive edge in tough times

FINANCIAL GAINS | Going back to school can tip scales in your favour in a tight job market, BCIT counsellor says

BY TIM LAI
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In good economic times or uncertain ones – such as the present – education is always a safe bet, says a B.C. Institute of Technology counsellor.

Education is the foundation for anyone doing anything, according to Ray deVries. And as economic conditions change, going back to school can create opportunities for new employment, especially when there are layoffs or there is little chance for advancement.

"If there's a higher competition for jobs, well, then not everybody is going to get a job," said deVries, who has spent 15 years advising a variety of people on their educational and career pathways.

"The people who are going to get those jobs are the ones who are trained, skilled and have the education."

Everyone's situation is going to be different, he said, so it's important for each individual to decide carefully whether going back to school is the best option.

"We often see enrolment at post-secondary correlate with economic times," deVries said, adding that some forgo university or college for the lure of big and easy money during a bullish economy. "There's an opportunity through this time to re-clarify career goals."

In a way, that's what Burnaby resident Michelle von Schilling did. At the end of every June for 10 years, she faced uncertainty as a teacher with school closures and dwindling class sizes looming in advance of September in the Vancouver Island North school district. The 42-year-old began upgrading her science foundation with classes to teach at higher grades.

That led to a newfound adoration for sciences, so she decided to explore her options in that field and leave teaching.

Now, she's in her second year at BCIT in a chemical sciences diploma program and she's excited and expecting to be back into the workforce next spring when she graduates. She said the great majority who graduated from program this year had a job lined up months before getting their diploma.

"In the end, it's going to be more beneficial for me," von Schilling said. "As far as financial gain, I'm going to come out with debt, but the debt won't last long. It's a good investment as far as I'm concerned."

Rebecca Bennett, a 22-year-old West Vancouverite, is using this time to upgrade her skills for a career change after she felt stuck in her position as a receptionist for a day spa.

Bennett didn't finish her university degree and has been in the workforce for two and a half years.

Making the decision

Going back to school isn't an option for everyone. It may be the right time for some, but not for others, according to BCIT counsellor Ray deVries. He said the process of making such a decision is probably more important that the decision itself. Here are some questions he suggests considering to determine whether going back to school is the best option.

1. What are my goals, both for the big picture and small picture?
2. What options for work exist right now?
3. Will these options exist in six months, one

She researched her options earlier this year, consulted friends and family, and decided to enroll in BCIT's two-year human resources management program, a decision she wouldn't change.

Bennett admits her decision coincided with slowdown, but she's optimistic that by going back to school, she'll have put herself in a good position in two years when the economy is expected to turn around.

That feeling of being stuck often prompts middle managers to upgrade their skills, according to deVries. In a competition for a promotion between two people, the person with a better education is usually selected.

While getting support from friends and family on such a big decision is important, deVries says getting advice should be left to

year, two years, etc.?

4. Would a return to school increase my opportunities in the future?
5. What are the pros and cons to attending post-secondary institutions or upgrading your education at this time?
6. What are the costs of going back to school at this time, and will they increase or decrease over time?
7. Can I live with the costs knowing what the benefits of working toward my goals will be?
8. Make some decisions and plans.

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the professionals, as family may be too biased. Go to career counsellors or academic advisers.

For von Schilling and Bennett, selecting a shorter program was important to get back into the workforce sooner. That's what attracted the pair to BCIT.

DeVries said BCIT has a good reputation for preparing its students for real jobs, and many find jobs are waiting for them even before they complete their studies.

For those pondering such decisions, BCIT offers two-week and four-week career/education/professional development courses to explore the options.

"Going back to school is always an option," deVries said.

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