

Alberta engineers pin job hopes on European firms

For the thousands who have been laid off, foreign companies that are hiring locally are proving their best chance

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CALGARY — The line at the Telus Convention Centre started to form at 7:30 a.m., an hour and a half before the job fair was set to begin.

Three hours later, it had swelled to several hundred people, many nervously clutching résumés as they surveyed Calgary's bleak new reality.

The sudden reversal in oil prices, and the devastation it has brought to oil sands projects, has brought layoffs to thousands of Calgary's engineers, construction managers and other professionals. Now virtually the only firms hiring are large European companies, which are using the downturn to expand their foothold in the province.

So when Chasity Druhan learned that Snamprogetti Canada, the local arm of Spanish-headquartered engineering and construction giant Saipem SpA, was holding a job fair on the same day she was laid off, she came, desperate for a chance. She has already sent out 100 résumés to firms all over the world, but this was a rare shot at a job closer to home.

Then she saw the line, and the sheer number of people she would be up against. Snamprogetti expected thousands of applicants for an undisclosed number of jobs.

It was enough to make her want to "cry in my car."

"This is deathly scary," said Ms. Druhan, who is looking for work in contracts administration. "This is like phone mom and cry kind of scary."

But if there is any glimmer of hope for those who most acutely feel the pain of Alberta's ugly hangover, it is that Snamprogetti, Paris-headquartered Technip and Netherlands-based Fugro are hiring.

Snamprogetti, whose parent company has 23,000 employees worldwide, is establishing what it has called a "major engineering centre" in Canada. Project management and engineering firm Technip is looking for about 40 additional people - it currently has just 10 - for its Calgary office, and more if it is successful in securing contracts. And Fugro, which has 900 people in Rio de Janeiro and 600 in Houston, is working to boost its current contingent of 145 through hiring and acquisitions.

Why now?

For Fugro, it was partly chance. The specialist in earth data had already identified Canada as a target for growth when last year's economic crisis swept through Calgary. With

13,500 employees in 60 countries, and fleets of data-acquiring aircraft and ships, the company had largely ignored Canada in the past.

"Canada's always existed in the shadow of its bigger brother down south. But given the fact it has the second-largest oil reserves after Saudi Arabia, it's now definitely becoming its own person," said Fugro business development manager Ian Davies. "As such, it is getting a lot more attention."

Now the rapid downturn has provided a rare chance to get in on the cheap. Valuations are down at some cash-strapped Calgary companies, and experienced labour is available in a way it has not been for years.

"Technip believes that Canada's and Alberta's market will recover soon and we intend to position ourselves to be a part of the next growth phase," said Marcello Tarantini, the company's Canadian vice-president.

Though some in Calgary worry the European firms will import a lot of their own staff, others are just happy someone is finally hiring.

"For the last month, this is the first time I've seen something like that, a job fair," said Ulises Blanco, a Venezuelan electrical engineer who drove from Edmonton to the Snamprogetti recruiting spree with six friends and family. He was laid off two months ago and figures he can survive for three more months in Canada before he is forced to return home.

Of 100 résumés he has sent out, none have produced any fruit. Snamprogetti is, for now, the best chance he and Ms. Druhan have.

"A year ago, everyone was flying high - credit and vacations and jobs," Ms. Druhan said as she waited for her chance to apply.

"I didn't think this would ever happen. Call it naive, I guess. I really had no idea."