

FINANCIAL POST

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

Scientists, engineers are key to a city's growth

Matter Of Degrees

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Published: Wednesday, January 30, 2008



Residents with university degrees are key to a city's employment growth, but having scientists and engineers matters most, a new study reveals.

According to a new Statistics Canada assessment released this month, scientists and engineers contribute to more job growth than fellow grads in cultural fields.

The study also found employment in science and engineering fields increased more rapidly in cities that had large populations with university degrees -- even if those degrees were in other fields.

Based on 20 years of Canadian and U.S. census statistics ending in 2000, the study found the workforce in 242 cities with populations of 100,000 increased at an annual average pace of 1.8%.

According to the data, if a city had a "higher proportion" of university-educated employees, the annual average growth was 2%. Those cities with lower concentrations of university-educated workers grew at an annual average rate of 1.6%.

While the difference appears to be small compounded over 20 years, the study said the city with the workforce that grew at 2% would experience a total job growth of 49%. The city with a 1.6% annual average growth would see a 37% total job growth.

The Statistics Canada study adds to a larger body of research linking the importance of human capital with the growth of cities.

According to urban thinker Richard Florida, widely cited in the Statistics Canada research, the competitiveness of cities is closely linked to the skills of its residents and attracting those residents depends on the types of amenities a city can offer.

Defined loosely, amenities can include several quality of life factors including climate, the homicide rate, or in Mr. Florida's research -- the number of gay people who live in a city.

Building on Mr. Florida's research, the Statistics Canada study said a city's amenities play a central role in shaping

urban dynamics but found less evidence that the growth of science and engineering workers alone was influenced by different amenities.

From 1980 to 2000, employment in cities with high amenities increased at an annual average rate of 2.1% versus 1.4% for those cities with low amenities.

Remy Tremblay, a professor at the University of Quebec who studies the social dimension of high-tech cities, said while having a balance of skilled workers in a city is important, amenities is a misleading marker of a good city.

"I don't agree with the idea that if you have more gays or more bohemians they will attract more people or be a more diverse city," said Mr. Tremblay. "When a high-tech firm in Laval is attracting people they show them the lab, the cost of living and where the nearest bus stop is."

Dr. Kevin Stolarick, associate director of the Martin Prosperity Institute who works closely with Mr. Florida, said the importance of amenities cannot be underestimated.

"What you're going to attract depends on the type of bait you are using," said Dr. Stolarick. "When you start saying amenities don't attract scientists and engineers that is wrong."

"A lot of the time what is going to attract them is not the same amenities that attract an artist or an English graduate, but they are still important factors."