

# On the job hunt: 'I need the opportunity'

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SAINT JOHN • Leandro Oviedo has worked in more countries than most people will travel in their entire lives.

But it was education that brought him to New Brunswick, and it's work that may force him out. Oviedo moved to Canada in September of 2017 to enter into the one-year intensive MBA program at the University of New Brunswick Saint John. The program, which recruits experienced international workers from around the globe, is being tagged by labour watchdogs as a potential streamline for high-level workers into a New Brunswick economy struggling to meet labour demands.

A recent report by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, or CFIB, found that New Brunswick has a labour shortage of 6,300 across all sectors. Meanwhile, economists across the province are projecting that New Brunswick needs at least 150,000 immigrants over the next 20 years to maintain a balanced, healthy economy.

Inserted across the Saint John business landscape, a growing contingent of UNBSJ MBA graduates have entered the job scene. From J.D. Irving, Limited to HSBC Canada to Port Saint John, graduates from the program are finding meaningful employment.

"We're not in the business of immigration, we're in the business of education. But that is a by-product, and it's one that I think deserves more recognition than it's getting," said Shelley Rinehart, director of the UNBSJ MBA program. "I think we have a great target market for our government officials who are working on immigration to pay a little bit more attention to."

### **On the job hunt**

In 2017, Oviedo found himself working in a management role in the west African country of Angola for Weatherford International, one of the world's largest multinational oil and natural gas service companies. He took the management job after two years at their headquarters in Houston, Texas, and a 10-year career in the industry.

A desire to bridge professional ambitions and his family's stability brought him to the MBA program in Saint John, and now to the Canadian job market.

And he's not alone.

Franco Rayo Mendoza started his career in the Nicaragua Minister of Foreign Affairs office, working primarily with three countries: Mexico, U.S. and Canada. He then took a job in his family's company, working to prove his worth introducing new lines in the tech industry. He came to the MBA program to increase his business knowledge, and is now attempting to translate that to a New Brunswick career.

Three months removed from their last day of classes, it's been a winter of online applications, job fairs and various private and public workshops.

"I just want to prove myself," said Oviedo, who has a seven-year-old son at home. "I'll work for free if I have to. Give me a case that I can work on, let me prove that I'm able to adapt to the Canadian environment, and then make a decision. But I need the opportunity."

Now, both are taking a "networking" approach, looking for any chance to meet the decision-makers in the province. They pitched themselves at the Stay and Grow program in Saint John and entered into Opportunities NB Connect – a program to match business people with job-ready graduates. So far, it hasn't yielded the results they are looking for, but they're hopeful.

"Everyone here is very helpful," said Mendoza. "They're kind, they listen. But this process could be better managed."

At job fairs, Oviedo explains the vast majority of vendors, whether it's in Saint John, Fredericton or Moncton, are for entry-level jobs.

"There's this perception here that if you aren't from Canada than you are looking for entry-level work," he said. "There's no understanding that you might be a professional with experience, and capable of doing more."

### **Retention rates**

Mendoza said the goal is to stay in New Brunswick because it's what he knows. He said he likes Saint John, but eventually, he has to go where the work is.

"I have a commitment to Canada," he said. "I don't have a commitment to New Brunswick."

The province had a retention rate of 48 per cent from 2011-15, according to Statistics Canada data. That's slightly below Newfoundland at 53 per cent and Nova Scotia at 65 per cent, but a

far cry from the province's in the west who range from 78 per cent in Saskatchewan to 91 per cent in Ontario.

"We don't want to have a legacy of being a landing pad," said Enterprise Saint John CEO Ron Gaudet. "We know that other parts of Canada and the U.S. are being very aggressive about immigration and retaining its workforce. I'm pleased we recognize it, but we have to recognize we're well behind many others."

### **Change is coming**

David Dobblestyn is the population growth manager for the City of Saint John, and said the city is going through a similar industrial change to when ship building converted from wood to iron. That, topped off with an aging workforce, and a 2016 census result showing a declining population, comes with challenges.

It's still a blue collar town, he said, but it's also in transition to the new economy. And while companies are trying to come to terms with this, he said employers are slowly starting to realize that what worked before won't necessarily work moving forward.

"If employers get more exposure to the imported talent living at home, they'll see this as a real opportunity, and hopefully we can keep even more of them here."

Gaudet said that part of Enterprise Saint John's new three-year plan, yet to be released, is focusing specifically on the MBA program to connect businesses directly to the students.

That plan will expand to NBCC as well, he said.

It means more opportunities may be coming Oviedo and Mendoza's way. The question is whether companies in Ontario or Alberta don't come knocking first.

"I don't want to leave," said Oviedo. "My son goes to school here. We like it here. But this is the reality."