

Degree gives edge in the workplace

Leadership and experience also invaluable

DEREK SANKEY

October 3rd, 2011

The market value of a bachelor's degree is something students -- and their parents -- want to know as they rack up expensive tuition bills and loans. It turns out it may not fully prepare them for the labour market as much as they thought.

It has been well-established that the higher the level of education of a job seeker, the more money they generally command in the workplace. There's also evidence, however, that a degree alone is by no means a guarantee of a job or more money.

About one in five undergraduate students -- 18.5 per cent -- can expect to earn less than the median income of an average Canadian worker, according to a report released this week from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

"Many people do go to school because they want to be successful in a career," says Ranil Herath, president of the DeVry Institute of Technology in Calgary. "Either directly or indirectly, they have that thought behind them."

Forty-two per cent of Calgarians believe students attend post-secondary school to gain the skills needed to start a career, according to a Leger Marketing study carried out for DeVry. Another 54 per cent believe students should ideally be attending to broaden their learning horizons.

In a surprising result, only one per cent believed a bachelor's degree alone fully prepares graduates for the labour market.

"Academics is the theory, but if you can apply common sense to that through your own learning experience and make that common practice then I think the (employer) sees value in those types of (job candidates)," says Sid Mark, president of Calgary-based FRIDAY Professional Group Inc.

What's often over-looked is the value of an education in broader terms. Trades schools, private technical colleges, diplomas, certificates and on-the-job training are all valid ways to seek and obtain a good

living.

What is clear that is that the vast majority of people with post-secondary education out-earn people with high school diplomas significantly, on average.

"The majority of people would think that one who has some post-secondary education behind you positions you better to obtain employment," says Mark.

Other factors that are most likely to influence a job candidate's prospects for getting hired include skills such as leadership, communication, enthusiasm, work ethic, respectfulness and experience -- in life, in the workplace and through volunteer work.

One of the reasons that so many universities and colleges place such a strong emphasis on internships and co-op work terms is that they provide the tangible, practical application of the degree knowledge into the real world.

Herath says that DeVry, which caters largely to adult learners who are very career-oriented and who are often working while trying to upgrade and earn a bachelor's degree, has tried to maintain a strong job focus that combines the theory and prepares graduates for employment. No matter the motivation is for learning, the goal is ultimately the same: landing a job.

Herath adds people often misunderstand the point of a degree: "It gives the fundamental critical-thinking and conceptual understanding - - problem-solving -- and a very broad set of skills on which a graduate could build on to go into research or work with a very general kind of education," he says.

He also points out that with the way bachelor's degrees are designed and regulated in Alberta, landing a job is not one of the key criteria evaluated when degrees are granted. DeVry has evolved over its 30-year history in Calgary from being focused more on technical job training in electronics to a broader technology focus and has now expanded into degree-granting status.

It has been a strategic move, he says, meant to better reflect the desire among students -- at any age -- to better align their education with careers and landing that dream job.

Traditional bachelor's degrees are also meant to ensure undergraduates can pursue further education -- a move that would, by the numbers, increase their likelihood to earn even more money -- through masters research and work in postgraduate studies.

Herath says his institution's recent survey shows a large number of people want to know they will be focused on building a specific career when they graduate and will be more ready and more likely to land a well-paying job.

"This is a fair indication that our ultimate customer -- the people of Alberta and in this case Calgary -- are more and more looking at a degree giving them an edge in the workplace," he says.

derek.sankey@telus.net

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald

Read more:

<http://www.calgaryherald.com/business/Degree+gives+edge+workplace/5488367/story.html#ixzz1aUqpAGUr>