

SUMMARY

Final Report – Stakeholder Consultation and Qualitative Research Study

by William Roberts and Mechthild (Mecki) Facundo,
Leadership Sea-to-Sky

The following points are excerpts from '*Final Report – Stakeholder Consultation and Qualitative Research Study*' produced by Leadership Sea-to-Sky. These are the key emerging themes that came from the feedback in the various research activities. The full report contains additional recommendations by the consultants that the Steering Committee will take into consideration as the final HR strategy is being produced.

1. Development of a recruitment and HR strategy that encompasses the whole corridor

Based on consultation with the stakeholders and the community an emerging view is that the responsibility for finding solutions is a shared one and that collaboration across the region and across the industry is urgently required. Driving some of this cooperative attitude is the sense that the real competition is from other resorts and regions. To be successful in the Sea-to-Sky will entail the working together of major employers with mom and pop shops, of Whistler with Squamish and Pemberton, and of course with the active involvement of First Nations.

2. Reinvigorating the Whistler image and aggressively promoting the Sea-To-Sky lifestyle/benefits to target labour pool markets

Many participants cited the general malaise by tour operators, businesses, the local media and the community of four successive seasons of poor and flat numbers of visitors particularly from the coveted U.S. market. These numbers, compounded by increasing competition from other resorts for labour at all skill levels, is a biting reality that employers are facing with increasing anxiety. Many felt that the Whistler image is wearing thin and that the traditional image of Whistler needs to be reinvigorated given these realities.

Many felt that the lifestyle advantages are still the primary motivator for coming here. There is still a strong appeal of non-monetary benefits, social advantages and adventurous outdoor healthy living trumps the congested and sterile rat race of urban and suburban work.

3. Lobbying/Advocating by stakeholders and the public of government at all levels

There was also widespread agreement that concerted and urgent action is required to send strong messages to the federal government on extending visas for foreign workers. There is a costly and cumulative loss of many who have come to the region, who want to stay but who have had to leave because of expired visas. As an international tourist destination there needs to be a corresponding openness to international workers, students and guests to work and live here with far fewer restrictions.

4. Creative approaches to enhancing lifestyle benefits, incentives and perks

With mounting evidence of the draw of the unique and coveted lifestyle advantages of the Sea-to-Sky, the range of incentives and perks offered make a significant and competitive difference. A recurring theme emerged that there was much room for growth in enhancing the range, value and creativity of perks available.

These perks, bonuses and incentives are not to replace solid HR principles and practices in the workplace but are extremely valuable ways of retaining and affirming employees. A corridor-wide Spirit program with a range of year-round perks was often cited. In addition to the coveted ski pass, there are opportunities for developing cross-sectoral experiences such as golf and cooking lessons for retail salespeople, etc. Imagination and creativity that builds on a collaborative and cooperative spirit is a low cost way to build benefits and bridges within the corridor.

5. Fostering a network of support for human resources

Another recurring theme relates to the growing concerns that many are promoted through tourism industry ranks to HR and managerial level without the required HR training, experience and support. Some reported that there are disincentives to move into management positions because those at management levels have more stress and hassle than many on the front lines who work with tips, commissions and less stress.

The demands placed upon HR managers in tourism (e.g. younger, foreign workers, seasonality, lower wages, high attrition, labour standards, labour unions, change of ownership and out of corridor ownership, etc.) many felt need more support. The role of go2 and others in meeting these challenges is welcome but there emerged a desire for HR professionals themselves to meet for mutual support, sharing lessons and problem solving.

The development of an “Employer of Choice” program also emerged where HR standards would be identified, monitored, exceeded and recognized by employers. In the development of tourism training opportunities, the need to focus on how to best manage the human resources of this labour intensive and sensitive industry was a recurring theme.

6. Twinning Recreational Excellence With Educational/Training Excellence

Many participants noted that with the growth in the corridor of Capilano College, BCTLI, the Chambers and a range of other educational/training schools and programs from SD #48 to Quest University, we need to seize opportunities to feed both tourism and educational sectors with mutual planning, collaboration, benefits, and employees/students.

To combat the prevailing view of tourism as a temporary, dead end, career poor option, the development of a consortium of high quality, high profile training and education program would go a long way.

As these discussions and solutions kept recurring and building on one another, it also became the vision of some that to develop and twin excellence in recreation with excellence in education could become an integral part of our corridor brand and with the spotlight of the Olympics, and provide many solutions to recruitment, retention and training problems.

7. Enhancing community/regional role in meeting employee social needs

The November “Welcome Week” in Whistler is a primary example of the effective and meaningful role the community plays in supporting new employees. Discussions in the public sessions particularly centred on this theme. The recurring message is that there is much room to expand, enhance and develop this role year-round and corridor-wide

The Sea-to-Sky and Whistler Community Social Services, Village Host program, and the many non-profit and service community groups can be tapped for development of a community “Employee Experience” program.

Housing, health and transportation needs, festival and event planning, recreational and environment groups can expand beyond “locals” to involve and engage “transients”. The possibility of exploring these community connections regionally with Squamish, Pemberton, the First Nations and remote back country communities in the view of many has a lot of potential to build the “social capital” many vibrant communities and resilient regions need to survive and thrive in a global and fast-changing environment.

8. Empowering an implementing agency (ies) to act with urgency on the HR Plan

Recommend the empowering of “Implementing Agency (ies)” to be responsible for driving, coordinating, implementing, and evaluating the Tourism HR plan that

- i) strategically competes in bringing the requisite employees to the tourism sector in the Sea-to-Sky and,
- ii) improves employer HR practices, and employee retention, training and development.

From the public sessions and particularly in the focus group sessions there was discussion about both the range of possible solutions and the organization(s) most likely to successfully implement the best solutions. While there was no consensus on the ideal implementation agency, there was a growing consensus that collaboration and urgency is required to compete successfully in this challenging and tightening labour market. While respecting the recruitment and retention efforts of tourism operators and employers that already exist, the initiatives and activities of a five-year Tourism HR Plan require that an implementing agency or agencies be charged with both strategic and operational responsibilities. Whistler-Blackcomb, Tourism Whistler, the Chambers of Commerce, Capilano College and others can all play a role in the Sea-to-Sky, and governments, go2 and destination marketing companies all have expertise that can be brought to bear. It was felt that the expertise required for the HR Plan to be successful exists both within and out of the corridor and should be harnessed to produce the best results.