

EMPLOYER Labour Market News

CALGARY AND AREA

Government
of Alberta ■



Interviewing for the right employee

A RESUMÉ CAN tell you who is qualified for the job, but it's the interview that will help you decide whether that person is the right fit within your organization. That's why it's important for employers to plan before they sit down with a candidate. .

"You can't go in to an interview unprepared, you have to know exactly what you want," says Chris Massie, a hiring solutions provider with About Staffing. "As an interviewer you need to have clear expectations of what you are looking for. You need a clear job description and a clear understanding of the role."

If you understand what you want you will be able to ask better questions during the interview and you will also be able to make better choices when you sit down and compare notes on applicants. You will not only be able to ask about the hard skills needed for the job, you will be able to look for the all-important soft skills. In fact, assessing soft skills is one of the most important goals of any interview.

"Interviews are more about the stuff that's not in the resumé," says



Being able to sift through resumé and then interview candidates for a job can help you find exactly what you are looking for, even in a forest of choices.

Massie. "You're looking for things like initiative and the personality needed for the job, and whether their work style fits the company culture."

By preparing for the interview and knowing what questions to ask, employers can get better results from the hiring process. It is after all, an extremely important decision. A new hire can be with the company for years. "Interviews are meant to determine the best possible fit for your organization," says Massie. "They are worth spending some time on."

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How to start? Do your research

The first advice anyone gives a candidate before going into an interview is to do some research. Employers want candidates to be prepared and know something about the company, so why shouldn't the same apply to the person doing the hiring?

"You have to know the job you are offering before you can find the right person for the position," says Massie. The best way to do that is by doing a job analysis.

A job analysis is a comprehensive review of the position, and it should rely on a variety of perspectives. There is, of course, the employer's own knowledge of the job. But don't stop there. Ask the frontline workers what the job is like and how it has changed. Even research practices at other companies. The more viewpoints you have, the better.

The end result of a job analysis is a job description that includes the duties and responsibilities of the position, expected outcomes, required qualifications of candidates, and the desirable qualifications of an applicant. It can also include information like who is in charge of the position.

Another important step to take before an interview is to quickly review the candidate's resumé. "I spend no more than five minutes looking over a resumé before an interview," says Massie. "I've already reviewed the resumé in the prescreening process, but it's a good idea to refresh."



A good interview takes preparation. Choose the right location, have all the facts, and dress appropriately and professionally.

Be prepared

Professionalism is an important foundation for a working relationship, so it pays to take the time to prepare for an interview.

For starters, choose a professional and private location for interviews. "There's no strict standard for where it must be," says Massie. "But a professional environment helps the candidate feel as comfortable as possible, and you will have a better chance of seeing the real person. Definitely don't do it out in the reception area—that's a no-no."

While some employers conduct interviews in coffee shops, Massie's experience mixing business and lattes has been poor. "Sometimes the candidate relaxes too much," she says. "They get too casual and you don't end up with a good impression of what they can do professionally."

A professional environment should also be matched by professional clothes. You don't necessarily have to put on a tie and business suit, but do wear appropriate clothes that represent your company and fit in with where the interview is taking place.

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Think conversation, not inquisition

Interviews should be professional but also conversational. One common rule of thumb is that the candidate should be speaking about half the time during the interview. “Talking too much is a common problem. You don’t want to take over the conversation,” says Massie. “I look at it like a moderator for a conversation. You point the direction where you want the conversation to go, but it has its own flow.”



Group interviews and second opinions

The more perspective you get on the candidate, the smarter your decision will be. Why? Because you won’t catch everything, and different perspectives can help. You can get other people involved in the process either as part of a panel interview, or with multiple interviews—a common practice for high-level positions.

And don’t forget to practice

Like any skill, most employers need to learn interview skills, and it’s better to practice on someone else before the candidate.

“Try role-playing, or practicing in front of a mirror,” says Massie. “I would even recommend sitting down with friends and colleagues and doing a mock interview with people you trust who can give you constructive criticism.”

Objective criteria

From preparation through to the actual interview, an employer’s goal is very simple: get the best possible person for the job. But it is easier said than done. There are plenty of mistakes that can distract you (see page 5), and after all the interviews it may not be clear who is the best person for the job.

One good way to evaluate candidates is by going back to the start, the job analysis. “With your understanding of what you were looking for in the candidates you can set up objective evaluation criteria,” says Massie. “With evaluation criteria you can grade candidates with a point scale on each criteria and see how they match up.”

Having a set of objective evaluation criteria based on the job analysis is also useful for group interviews.

At the same time, Massie has nothing against a little intuition. “A lot of people go with their gut feeling, and it’s fine—your subconscious has probably done a good job of evaluating the candidates. But you also have to use your brain. Be sure to think before making a final decision.”

Well worth the effort

Interviews are time-consuming but they are important. An employer will depend on the successful candidate for a long time to come. With so much hanging on interviews, it pays to do them well.

“Interviews are just the beginning and you want to establish a rapport from the start,” says Massie. “You want to establish the beginnings of a relationship right off the bat, because hopefully it will go on to a productive partnership.”

Take notes!

Every good interviewer takes notes either on computer or by hand, and a few record interviews on tape.

Good notes are essential to jogging your memory.

What to ask in an interview

There is whole school of thought that has developed in recent years on the question of questions.

In traditional interviews the questions are mostly historic and factual:

- What types of work have you done before?
- What are your qualifications?
- Where have you worked?

But in the past few years a new interview style has emerged focusing on behaviour (for more on this trend see the March edition of the Labour Market News).

The essence of a behavioural interview is to find out what a candidate did (or would do) in certain situations. So an interviewer might ask, “When have you had the greatest success building team spirit?” One of the reasons for behavioural interviews is the idea that how a person behaved in the past is a good indicator of how they will behave in the future. Behavioural questions are also one of the few ways of finding out about soft skills like communication and leadership. “Everyone says they have great communication skills, but it’s hard to know unless they demonstrate it,” says Massie.

Behavioural questions are usually part of a mix of interview questions. “I start out focusing on (an interviewee’s) past history, asking about what’s on their job resumé—things like who they worked for and what they did,” says Massie. “Then I work towards the soft skills, perhaps with a few behavioural questions. I finish off with questions about outside interests, because you can glean a lot from that.”

Choosing the right mix of questions is dependent on your style and the position you want to fill.

“Personally, I don’t emphasize behavioral questions, and don’t always use behavioural questions,” says Massie. “It will depend on the position, and the candidates. If the candidate has fairly limited experience, their behavioural answers will be of limited use. If the position is within a team-based environment, then I will definitely use behavioural questions because they are very good at revealing a candidate’s interpersonal abilities. I’ll also add behavioural questions if I don’t have a clear picture of the candidate.”

“Challenging the candidate is a helpful tool in interviews. When you are asking questions, don’t be afraid to throw in something unexpected, like “What was the latest book you read?”



Mixing traditional and behavioural interview questions can be a good way to find out more about your candidate.

In fact, challenging the candidate is a helpful tool in interviews. When you are asking questions, don’t be afraid to throw in something unexpected, like “What was the latest book you read?” And ask the hard questions. “Sometimes you need clarification, or the information is conflicting, or you want to see how they react. You need to ask difficult questions,” says Massie.

Ask the same questions every time

Whether you ask traditional questions about work history or force the candidate to talk through a challenging hypothetical situation, employers should always have a core of identical questions they ask every candidate.

“Every interview is different with its own natural flow and you end up jumping around,” says Massie.

“But I always have a plan with an order of questions that I fall back to when that conversation is over. You need that structure to make sure you have covered all your bases, and so you measure all the candidates by the same standards.”

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What **NOT** to do in an interview

1. Do not break the law. It's always a bad start to an interview when you ask a candidate an illegal question. Most often this comes up when an employer asks about things that aren't relevant. "You can't ask anything discriminatory," says Massie. "If it's not related directly to the job or the company, just don't ask the question. If you have a preference for non-smokers, you can't ask the candidate if they are a smoker. It is not relevant."

The second area where employers can get into trouble is on privacy issues. And much the same rule applies: if it isn't relevant, don't ask the question. Restrict information requests to data you will need to manage the employee-employer relationship. "I'll never ask someone what their personal finances are like," says Massie. For information on the privacy issues faced by employers, see the [March 2009 issue of Calgary Employer Labour Market News \(employment.alberta.ca/calgary\)](#).

- 2. Do not get subjective.** A first impression can be decisive, but don't pre-judge an interview. "A lot of people think first impressions are all that really matter," says Massie. "That's not true. You can't let your own personal emotions cloud your judgment. You have to take a step back from the situation and analyze what information you're getting and how it's being given. This is where the importance of the questions you select comes in. They will help you keep on track."
- 3. Do not fall in love with your own voice.** A common mistake in interviews is talking too much. If you find yourself going on about the virtues of the company and why the job is brilliant, slow down, and remember the conversation should be a sharing of ideas.
- 4. Do not cut it short.** A quick interview is not enough time to get a good impression. Interviews that last 45 minutes to an hour give you a much better chance of finding out about the candidate's potential. Scheduling more time for interviews also means there's less likelihood of wasting a candidate's time by being unprofessionally late for their interview.
- 5. Do not comparison shop on the spot.** If one candidate is a dud, the next candidate will inevitably look a whole lot better. But don't let the comparison sway your judgment. Keep careful and factual notes

There are certain things employers should ask during an interview and there are a few subjects to avoid.



and then evaluate all your candidates on the criteria you laid out in the beginning.

- 6. Do not short change preparation time.** Interviewing for a new position can wipe whole days off your calendar. They are time consuming. But being prepared can help make the whole process a lot faster and easier. The investment made in job analysis and writing down questions will fast-track every interview and keep you on subject and on target, even when you are tired.
- 7. Do not expect perfection.** Ideal employees are rare, so don't expect perfection in the interview. "It's unreasonable to expect an applicant to know everything about the job, the work environment and the company, without being given that information," says Massie. "Candidates can also be a little bit nervous and uncomfortable." Take the time to make the candidate comfortable and discuss enough background information about the job and company to enable them to frame their answers.
- 8. Do not be impressed by yourself.** Interviewers, like everyone, will naturally gravitate to someone who is like them. But don't. "You need to know what your weaknesses are and bring someone in to complement them," says Karen Hawitt, a partner at Knightsbridge Human Capital Management. "That's one thing a lot of organizations aren't able to do or see."

Confidence in business

Making sense of confidence indexes

STATISTICS LIKE INFLATION rate, unemployment and GDP do a great job of telling economists what happened last month or last quarter. But they reveal next to nothing about what might happen next month.

“Unfortunately, there aren’t very many leading indicators out there,” says Todd Hirsch, senior economist with ATB Financial.

“Most of the official statistics, like the labour force survey, are lagging indicators—they give a snapshot of what happened in the past month or so. Building permits are one leading indicator we have (for more about building permits see the [September edition](#)). Business confidence indexes are another.”

What are business confidence indexes?

In a nutshell, a business confidence index, or a business sentiment index, is a poll that asks business leaders what they expect to see in the future. The main point of a business confidence index such as ATB’s is to forecast major trends in the economy like growth and employment, and predict the direction of change in business activity.

Often the questions asked are incredibly simple, like, “Do you expect your business to increase, stay the same, or decrease in the next quarter?” The questions may even seem subjective, and a bit soft. But that’s actually the point of confidence indexes.

“The questions are purposefully fluffy,” says Hirsch. “These aren’t hard numbers. We’re looking for the sentiment that’s out there, and a suggestion of what businesses are thinking.”

By pulling together hundreds of responses, a confidence index can give an impression of how businesses in a sector, a city, a province or a country are doing, and what they expect from the future. “They are not a solid indication of the future, but they are another piece of the puzzle,” says Hirsch.

Do confidence indexes work?

Looking into the future is a dangerous business for businesses—even the brightest get it wrong. Still, employers and business leaders are the first to feel the pain of increased inflation and labour costs. They are the first to see new orders come in. And they have a pretty good idea of what’s going on in their business. They may not be able to see the whole picture, but then that’s what the index can do, and it seems to work pretty well.



The Bank of Canada (BoC) has its own index and has kept results since 1997. Like all good banks, BoC wants a return on its investments and makes sure its index is delivering useful numbers. In an analysis of its survey, BoC found a strong correlation between business confidence and the actual rate of economic growth. In other words, when businesses said they expected to grow over the next year, the economy ended up growing too.

When it came to more specific questions however, the correlation was far from perfect. While business leaders seem to be pretty good at predicting inflation, sales projections from business were only weakly correlated with business growth.

Still, BoC continues to collect and use this type of information for a variety of reasons:

- **Indexes are forward looking.** By asking business leaders what they expect, a survey looks to the future, not the past.
- **Survey data can clear the air.** When other sources are telling conflicting stories, calling up and talking to business leaders can help determine what is actually going on.

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- **Confidence indexes are flexible.** The main point of confidence indexes is to assess confidence. But it doesn't have to be the only point. *The Calgary & Area Labour Market Report*, for example, deals nearly exclusively with trends in the labour market and routinely changes the questions it asks in order to answer pressing concerns specific to the labour market. For example, in the first quarter of 2009, employers were asked about their hiring plans for new graduates. Only 19 per cent said they plan to hire new graduates, something many young new entrants to the job market found out in the summer of 2009.

- **The data is timely.** Unlike cumbersome data such as GDP growth or employment, survey data can be compiled and presented within weeks.

How to use business confidence indexes

In spite of a few inevitable failings that come with predicting the future, Hirsch sees confidence indexes as an important source of information, with limits. "They track well with the economy, but they should be used on top of other data. They are like salt and pepper—they help flavour the more objective information you have."


For the average employer, confidence indexes can help predict wage pressure, inflation and business opportunities. But sometimes the most important information is in the stories. Surveys like the one for the quarterly *Calgary & Area Labour Market Report* (employment.alberta.ca) include quotes from the frontline of business, often with advice and tips.


Survey reveals rising optimism for fourth quarter

Optimism seems to be infecting Alberta's executives. At least according to the latest ATB Financial Business Sentiments Index. Expectations for the fourth quarter of 2009 rose to 114.9, up from a third-quarter return of 107.0. Since an index value of more than 100 indicates optimism, and lower than 100 indicates pessimism, the poll of business leaders is fairly cheerful with the notable exception of construction. Below are the results from




Where to find them: Canadian business confidence surveys

 **Canadian Federation of Independent Business:** *Quarterly Business Barometer* (cfib-fcei.ca). A quarterly survey of CFIB members (predominantly small businesses).

 **Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters:** *Issues Survey* (cme-mec.ca). Annual survey of 400–500 small and medium-sized manufacturing and exporting firms.

 **ATB:** *Business Sentiment Index*. Compiled by the Western Centre for Economic Research at the University of Alberta School of Business (business.ualberta.ca): Quarterly confidence index surveying 400 Alberta businesses across different sectors.

 **Conference Board of Canada:** *Index of Business Confidence* (conferenceboard.ca). Quarterly survey of a cross-section of Canadian firms that is mailed to approximately 2,000 businesses.

 **Export Development Canada:** *Trade Confidence Index* (edc.ca). Semi-annual survey based on a random sample of approximately 1,000 Canadian businesses.

 **Richard Ivey School of Business/Purchasing Management Association of Canada:** *Ivey Purchasing Managers' Index* (pmac.ca). Monthly survey of a panel of 175 purchasing managers.

BIG IDEAS from small business

The Getaway

Calgary's unique men's club

ANNETTE BURWASH OWNS a very unique company, and with it comes its own unique set of challenges.

The company is called The Getaway Spa, a full-service spa, esthetic medical centre and image consulting company solely for male clientele in Calgary. But it's not *that* kind of spa, Burwash assures, a stigma she's fought against since the beginning.

"Overcoming the negative stereotype that comes along with it being a 'men's only' place has been a challenge," Burwash says. "I've gotten to the point where I don't care what anyone thinks. We're a reputable, avant-garde type of place and our customers know that."

Making the switch

In the spa's 10 years of business, seven of those years have been spent catering to male clientele. It was a move Burwash decided to make after witnessing the kind of clientele that would come into her spa.

"I thought I'd be getting lots of (female) clients, but mostly men would come in," she says.

Whether it's society's increasing acceptance of men who want to look good and feel good, or the businessman's need to relax and unwind, the demand for male-focused services was apparent. Burwash started out offering the basics—massage, manicures, pedicures and facials—but slowly continued to add more services to the list.

Today, the spa offers the basics and then some. Haircuts and styles, hot razor shaves, scalp massages and glycolic peels have joined the service roster, along with esthetic medical treatments such as laser hair rejuvenation and wrinkle reduction treatments. The spa even has a nurse and doctor on staff to deal with male-specific medical issues, from hormone imbalance to prostate cancer. A special image and fashion consulting division rounds out the list.

Growing pains

Growing the business was not an easy task. There were times Burwash was nearly ready to give up. Much of her



Customer service is critical in Burwash's line of work, but technology plays a role too.

frustration stemmed from trying to find the right staff—or any staff at all.

"When the economy started to boom, I had no one to choose from. I hardly even got any applications," she says.

And the few applications she did get didn't fit with what she was looking for. "A lot of people in this industry are very transient," she says. "I needed people who were committed, who were willing and proficient in working with men and who were also licensed. It was like finding a needle in a haystack."

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“I needed people who were committed, who were willing and proficient ... It was like finding a needle in a haystack.”

Burwash put a for-hire sign up outside the spa, and took out ads in the newspaper. She tried word-of-mouth, too, but did not have much success.

At one point, she was doing much of the work herself and thought she might have to shut down her business. But she stuck it out, and as the economic climate changed, so did her hiring options.

Burwash now has six people on staff who are “absolutely fabulous,” she says. It took time to find them, but Burwash says she would rather work on her own than work with those who are not suitable for the job.

They weren’t all found in the most conventional of ways—one was a neighbour who Burwash asked to come work for her, and another was an acquaintance of the spa’s on-staff doctor. A few applied from online job postings, but Burwash has found that you can’t always rely on traditional methods to get the best response.

She may have to start looking again soon, as she’s thinking of opening another location. The demand is there—a fact proven by her continued success and extensive clientele.

She has taken out an ad in the Calgary Sun to promote the spa’s hair rejuvenation services, but for the most part she relies on word-of-mouth and walk-ins to grow her clientele.

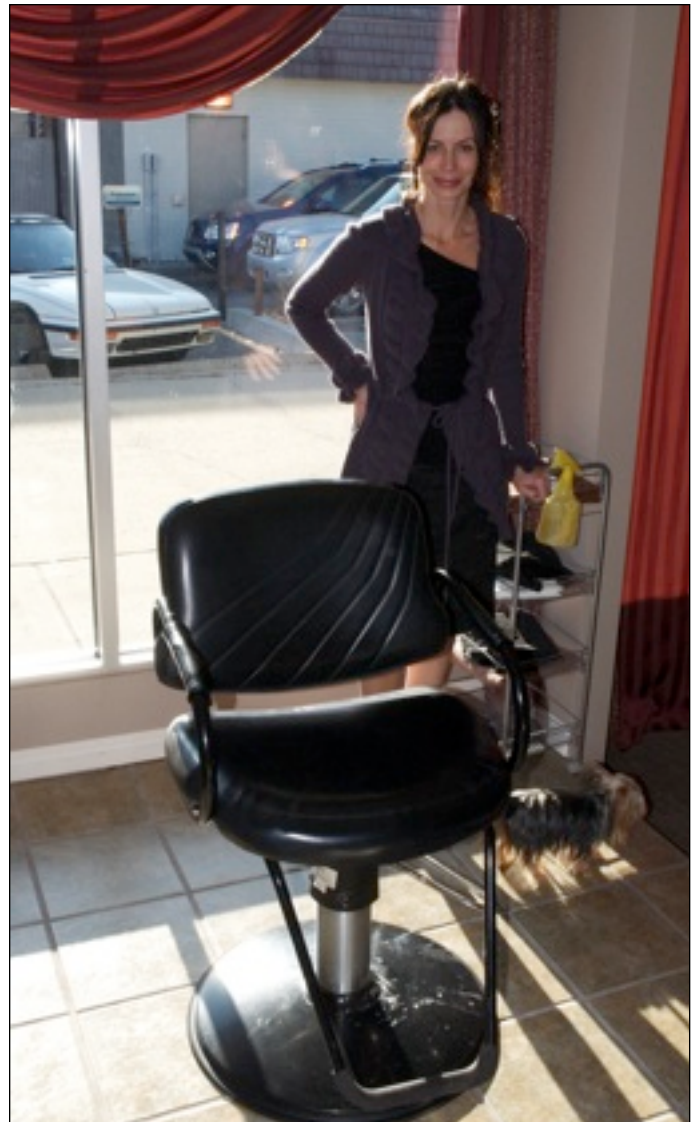
“I’ve never had a problem finding clients,” she says. “They just walk in.”

A learning process

While things are certainly looking up for her, she still has her share of day-to-day challenges.

“There are always challenges when you’re running a small business,” she says. “You want to keep good people and keep them motivated, but you can’t afford to pay them a lot.”

Burwash says dealing with the issues that arise is all part of a learning process. As a certified esthetician, a licensed and registered massage therapist and a university English graduate, Burwash has the technical



Burwash has faced many challenges as a small business owner, and one of them is finding and keeping talented and committed employees.

know-how but she hasn’t had any formal business training.

“I just learned it as I went,” she says.

Burwash had worked in esthetics for several years, training new estheticians in the years leading up to her spa opening. She’d been through the interviewing and hiring process, so she drew on her real-life experience when starting her own business.

Her knowledge, along with her business, grew with time. 10 years later, Burwash has figured out what works for her—that includes ignoring what the naysayers may think, as she’s become a success in her own right and on her own terms.

Need to learn more? Take online courses about employment standards!

Learning more about employment standards can be as easy as a click of the mouse!

The Alberta government's Employment and Immigration department offers [eLearning programs](#).

These stand-alone, interactive, web-based awareness programs are designed to provide Alberta employers and employees with an opportunity to learn more about minimum employment standards in the workplace.

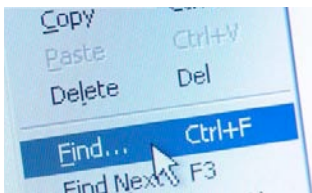
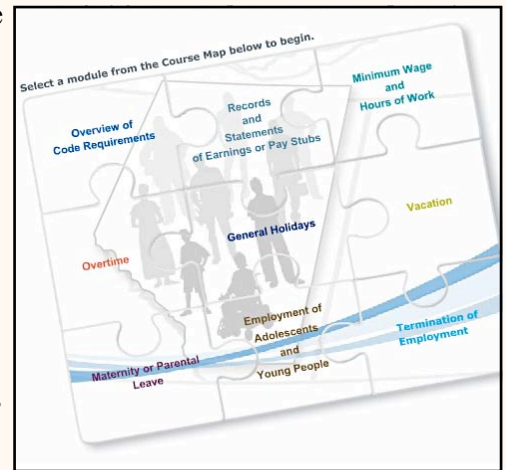
The following online courses are now available:

Dispute Resolution

Provides basic information and options to help address disputes in the workplace relating to payment of earnings, leaves, etc.

Basics of Employment Standards

This eLearning program will help you gain a basic understanding of the main topics of Employment Standards legislation.



Whether it is for workplace support or general knowledge, there are many places employers can turn for information.

Health and Safety

Work Safe Alberta

An organization committed to preventing work-related injuries.

employment.alberta.ca/whs-wsa

Canadian Safety Council—Occupational Safety and Health

Provides information on how to encourage safety in the workplace and deal with mishaps.

safety-council.org/info/OSH/OSH.html

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)

Gives direction to employers regarding what to do if employees suffer from substance abuse problems.

ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/substance.html

General Links

Calgary Chamber of Commerce

An organization for businesses in Calgary to network and learn business practices. calgarychamber.com

Where to find us

This publication and other labour market information products can be found at

employment.alberta.ca/calgary.

We welcome your feedback! Send comments or suggestions to ei.webmaster@gov.ab.ca.

Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce

Alberta government's 10-year labour force strategy. employment.alberta.ca/betw

Calgary Economic Development

Connects businesses to information and networks in the Calgary region and promotes the city.

calgaryeconomicdevelopment.com

Economic development in Alberta

Provides support and assistance to Alberta businesses and also compiles information on the Alberta economy.

alberta-canada.com

Employee Relations

Alberta Employment and Immigration Mediation Services

Helps resolve disputes in the workplace through collective bargaining agreements.

employment.alberta.ca/mediationservices

Human Resources

Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations (CCHRA)

The human resources body combining efforts of 10 provincial and specialist human resources associations.

cchra-ccarh.ca

Alberta Employment Standards

Information on everything from minimum wage to maternity and parental leave.

employment.alberta.ca/employmentstandards

Alberta Labour Relations Board

Employment standards information for trade unions, labour law and more. alrb.gov.ab.ca/index.html