cities compete for tech sector talent

Just how wide is the digital literacy gap in Canada?

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A Vancouver-based learn-to-code workshop called The HTML500 promoted in-demand digital literacy skills when it took place in London last weekend, but participants who attended the post-event career fair also saw first hand the battleground where economic development agencies from across the country are competing for Canadian talent.

An email to the Londoner from communications firm FleishmanHillard (who are representing the Vancouver Economic Commission) proclaimed in the subject line Feb. 2: "Vancouver tech sector coming to woo London talent—Feb. 7th."

Ian McKay, Vancouver Economic Commission (VEC) CEO, downplayed the wording in a phone interview Feb. 4 — it was only meant to be an "attention-getter," he said — but it does say something about the Canadian tech sector, where there seems to be jobs to be had across the country and not enough qualified workers to fill them.

"I think there's always some sort of healthy competition (among economic development agencies)," McKay continued. "We have a responsibility to build Vancouver's brand through a number of platforms and we know other cities do it all the time in various different markets.

"So apart from the very good and noble objectives of promoting digital literacy and giving people the tools and breaking down the stigma of technology as a career, yeah, we're very clear that we are committed

to enhancing the brand of Vancouver. We try to showcase London in a manner that is lucrative for talent to locate here."

The VEC threw support behind The HTML500 when Vancouver's Lighthouse Labs pitched the first event last year and have tagged along as Lighthouse brings the workshop to other Canadian cities this year including Calgary, London and Toronto.

Kapil Lakotia, CEO of the London Economic Development Corporation, one of three local organizers behind The HTML500's London event, didn't seem irked about his west coast counterparts pitching their growing tech sector to Londoners in an interview Feb. 5.

"This is certainly not unusual for us," he said, adding that tech talent is in high demand from coast to coast. "At every job fair that we attend there's a very strong mix of companies … from all across Canada. We also attend job fairs in Toronto, Waterloo

and Vancouver. We try to showcase London in a manner that is lucrative for talent to locate here."

That means playing up the lower cost of living, access to educational institutions like Western University and Fanshawe College and the shorter commute times, Lakotia said.

Right now, there are about 500 tech-related job ads posted to the LEDC's website. McKay estimated Vancouver's demand at around 3,000 jobs.

The HTML500 has also been attracting a lot of interest, including from Canadians with no prior coding experience. Over 1,000 people applied to the first workshop and that number shot up to 2,200 in some co-operative initiatives too, such as the Ontario Technology Corridor Alliance, which includes the Greater Toronto Area, Ottawa region, Waterloo region, City of London and Niagara

region.

Lakotia also mentioned discussions at the federal government-level for programs that promote Canada's need for tech talent overseas.

"I certainly think more collaborative work needs to be taking place to fill the talent gap," he said.

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competing for each other's tech talent — "We kid each other quite frequently about initiatives we're doing in different markets around the country," McKay said — Lakotia pointed out

Although Canadian economic development agencies are currently