



Larry Epp poses for a photo at The Chang School at Toronto's Ryerson University on Thursday, January 29, 2009. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Chris Young

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Job losses, downsizing lead workers back to books in pursuit of new careers

TORONTO — He had all the comforts and perks one would expect after nearly two decades on the job: a reliable income, benefits and five weeks vacation.

There was only one problem: Larry Epp wasn't enjoying the work.

He had studied theatre arts many years ago and tried to make it as an actor but the absence of a steady paycheck lost its allure.

What started as a temporary assignment with an insurance company ended up lasting 18 years as Epp took on different roles over time - first as an entry-level data input clerk and eventually moving on to desktop publishing and graphic design.

But a couple of years ago, the cuts started. After twice dodging the axe, it eventually fell, bringing Epp's longtime career with the company to a close.

Epp saw it as a blessing in disguise.

"To be honest, when I received my layoff or my termination notice, it was a godsend," said Epp, 46, who was let go in April 2006. "My manager was in tears as she told me and I was ready to do my (Lotto) 6/49 happy dance because I was given a second chance and it was exciting."

Part of that second chance came wrapped up in the form of a \$5,000 educational allowance included in his severance package. Epp decided to take his longtime passion for gardening and put it into professional practice.

With unemployment levels expected to rise in the face of the economic downturn, workers who have lost their jobs might consider charting a course like the one Epp followed: returning to school to bolster academic credentials or forge an entirely new career path.

"It's fairly well-documented and referenced certainly recently that university and post-secondary enrolments do increase in times of economic downturn, and so we don't expect this to be any different," said Shari Sekel, director of graduate programs for the faculty of business at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont.

Janet Hercz, director of strategic development and operations at Ryerson University's G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, said the last time there were comparable economic circumstances in the early 1990s, overall enrolment was up more than 12 per cent over that period.

"I think that's consistent with what people have seen happen within the educational category when the economy is going through a difficult time is that people look at what skills they have, what skills they might need to update or what new skills they might need to acquire to make sure that they are employable through the period of time."

They have seen a "modest" two per cent increase in enrolment for the winter term, but Hercz said it's difficult to say what exactly was behind the rise.

Epp began studying landscape design at Ryerson in fall 2006 taking part-time courses. He completed his certificate last December, but has returned to take one extra course to further broaden his knowledge base.

He credits his newly minted education with helping him to land seasonal work with the City of Toronto as a gardener - which he calls "a joy" - a position he first learned about through instructors.

Much of what he was studying pertained to the three-hour exam to get the job, and he was among just five of 60 people who wrote that day and passed.

He now hopes to either one day join a partnership or start his own company as a landscape designer.

Hercz said feedback from students makes it apparent they are no longer thinking about education in fixed terms but rather as a lifelong pursuit.

"If they're going to be marketable throughout the various careers and through their whole future employment, people are really thinking about 'I'm going to do this, go back to school for a couple of years, invest in this particular area,' not that they're then going to be done and can sit back," she said. "They know they'll have to continue to look at ways to keep themselves current."

But education and retraining comes at a cost. While Epp was able to benefit from an educational allowance, that subsidy at his old company was cut shortly after he was laid off. Meanwhile, his former department of 32 employees has now been whittled down to one.

The recently unveiled federal budget earmarked \$8.3 billion for skills and training, including \$1.5 billion in new cash to retrain workers.

Tom Snell, president of Columbia College in Calgary, said until it becomes clear how the federal funds will be doled out, it's hard to tell how much additional money will be forthcoming to support disadvantaged learners and laid-off workers.

"If governments say, 'Well, you know, sorry, we don't have any additional money,' well then those institutions have to restrict the number of people they can enrol and you're caught in a quagmire now."

Still, educational inquiries are on the rise at his school, and Snell maintains it's a wise decision and opportune time for those currently out of work to go back to the books.

"The reality is we have an aging workforce in our society, we have a considerable amount of baby boomers in all kinds of professional occupations who are retiring and scheduled to retire in the next few years," he said.

"Quite frankly, we have been short of highly skilled, trained people in this country for a fair bit of time. Maybe the only saving grace about a recession is that it will give us a chance to get more of our population trained to take over the positions as professionals leave them."