

Lamphier: Edmonton CEOs praise their early experience in manual labour and McJobs

By Gary Lamphier, Edmonton Journal July 10, 2014

EDMONTON - Like most baby boomers, I worked at lots of menial jobs while I was a high school and university student.

I stocked shelves at a paint store, worked at an auto assembly plant, at a summer camp for inner-city kids, and as an office clerk at a trucking company.

My worst experience? Getting fired from a \$2.15-an-hour job at a metal stamping plant because I lacked “manual dexterity,” in the immortal words of my boss. It hurt my pride, but it likely saved me from injury.

That aside, I learned some big lessons about the real world from those early jobs. Unfortunately, many of today’s students (and even some parents) see manual labour as a waste of their talents and disdain burger-flipping “McJobs” as beneath them.

In my view, they couldn’t be more wrong. Such jobs build character, a strong work ethic, time management and interpersonal communication skills.

But don’t take it from me. Consider the results of a new study from the University of British Columbia’s Sauder School of Business.

After reviewing data on the work histories of nearly 250,000 Canadian teens aged 15 and up, Professor Marc-David Seidel and his co-authors found that teens who work summer or evening jobs gain key skills and are more likely to enjoy successful careers later in life.

“That’s kind of the core argument we’re making — that it does provide developmental and educational benefits,” says Seidel.

“The big one is time management, and being able to balance work and school, especially if you have a job during the school year. The other lesson is learning how to deal with people in a professional manner, be it customers, co-workers or managers.”

Learning about networking and understanding one’s job preferences are other major benefits, he notes. With that in mind, the Journal asked five of Edmonton’s top CEOs about their own summer job experiences, and what they learned from them. Here’s what PCL Construction’s President & CEO, Paul Douglas, had to say.

PAUL DOUGLAS

Paul Douglas has served as CEO of PCL Construction since 2009.

As the chief executive of Canada's largest construction company, with billions of dollars in annual revenues and thousands of employees, Douglas steers a very big corporate ship.

Douglas worked every summer as a teenager, starting in the shipping and receiving department of a clothing store. He later gravitated to the sales floor, selling men's clothing at Tip Top Tailors, in Toronto's Yorkdale Shopping Centre.

That's where he learned some big lessons that he still applies today, he says.



“Most of the things you do in life involve sales, whether you’re selling a position in business or you’re selling a product. And if you’re in the service business like PCL is, you’re always trying to sell that product or sell that service, and figure out how to meet customers’ needs,” he says.

“So I think that’s a life skill that everybody should have some exposure to, somewhere along the line.”

While studying engineering at university, Douglas moved into construction work. “I was hoping to get a field engineering job, but they hired me as a labourer. We were in the bottom of a hole and it was wet and muddy and I was shovelling dirt and pouring concrete,” he recalls.

“But you know, I really enjoyed it. And I said to myself, construction is the career I want for me. It was just such a tangible business. And I loved the teamwork, since I’d grown up playing team sports. It taught me great respect for tradesmen and what they know and how hard they work every day.”

Before long, Douglas was being groomed for a project management job, and within five years, he was promoted to vice-president and district manager.

Douglas’s advice to newcomers to the construction industry today: “Don’t just jump into an office job and expect to know and understand a business and do well at it. Get out in the field and really learn and understand what it takes out there to build something.”

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