



Where Marijuana & Employment Meet

Weed, herb, ganja ... no matter what you call it or how you feel about its legalization, it is creating much-needed employment opportunities across a range of sectors.



BY PATRICK MORLEY

THE SOUND IN Michael Pascoe's voice veers from surprise and shock to pure excitement.

"Well, horticulture has never been the most cool thing to study," says Pascoe, Fanshawe College's guru and head administrator of everything horticulture. "But we are in the middle of a huge cultural shift. We're going to graduate the largest class in the history of Fanshawe horticulture!"

Horticulture, the art of garden cultivation and management, finds itself the epicenter of a massive cultural revolution – the legalization of recreational marijuana and its estimated \$31 billion marketplace valuation.

Pascoe, though firmly embracing the cultural shift of legal weed, is still surprised by the intense interest in his horticultural programs.

"At the end of the day, cannabis is a plant like any other, but this intense interest is all so different. I've never seen it before," Pascoe explains. "The feeling is that legalization is drawing a lot of students who may not have thought about horticulture as a viable career option."

This is not your grandmother's horticulture. It's all about big bucks, management skills, marketing fundamentals and high-tech, automated greenhouses.

"Higher level horticulture management is really in demand right now and we need to adapt to meet this," says Pascoe. "Because of retirements and the growth of the cannabis industry, we need to train the next

generation of horticultural managers with modern skills."

However, the production side of the cannabis industry is just part of a much larger segment of exciting employment opportunities. Skilled marketing, communications, human resource management, security and a myriad of tech experts are also badly needed as production ramps up to meet the demand of recreational legalization.

Josephine DesLauriers, the VP of People at WeedMD, which has production facilities in Aylmer and Strathroy, believes that as legalization approaches, the demands of the industry will begin to focus on business fundamentals and white-collar knowledge.

"The focus is now more on the idea of 'seed to sale,'" explains DesLauriers. "This industry moves fast and pivots quickly. With recreational legalization, we're looking through a consumer goods lens, which leads to many employment opportunities."

Currently, DesLauriers says her priorities are identifying transferable skills from other industries to help fill positions in the exploding weed market. The trick is letting already skilled, white-collar employees know what opportunities are available in cannabis, showing them that cannabis is much more than an agricultural product.

Keith Merker, WeedMD's CEO, almost doesn't know where to start when describing the ideal employee. The industry is so multifaceted – from extraction techs, engineers, HR experts to chocolatiers and bakers – that his advice to those interested in a cannabis career is to "find some-

thing you love about the industry and go after it."

He also says that advances in horticulture tech, gleaned from decades of experience in South Western Ontario greenhouses, have created elaborate and limitless cannabis spin-off opportunities – opportunities for people to switch careers.

"Right now," says Merker, "we're at a point where we're reinventing the wheel almost daily. The point is, as far as the industry is concerned, the sky is the limit."

Partnering with post-secondary institutions and creating professional networks across Canada is something Merker and DesLauriers are also focused on. Thought leadership in partnership with higher-education, just like any industry, is key in creating a pan-national community of pot producers.

Merker says WeedMD is in talks with Western's Ivey Business School and the social sciences departments to prepare for the explosive growth in student interest in all things pot. He estimates that almost 30 per cent of WeedMD employees come from Pascoe's programs at Fanshawe College.

Niagara College offers a post-secondary credential in the production of commercial cannabis. The graduate certificate program launched this fall and will train students to work in the production of cannabis.

As well, Fanshawe already offers a course on the history and administrative opportunities of medicinal marijuana. He says the college is looking to expand into horticultural management bachelor degrees and has begun investing almost \$150,000 to upgrade their greenhouse technology.

All of this to meet the demand of the 90 publicly listed cannabis production companies in Canada who are pining for skilled employees. Master growers, technicians and extraction specialists are some of the most in-demand jobs in the weed industry, according to Alberta-based, Cannabis at Work.

Another valuable cannabis industry spin-off has exploded in a few of the

states south of the border where recreational weed is legal. Wall Street style analytics and big data mining companies are jumping on the opportunity to analyze the marketplace as legalization finds its footing.

American companies such as Tetratrak and New Leaf Data Services are helping potential investors understand the marketplace and are guiding production companies when they decide to scale up. American data mining companies agree that we've only seen the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the valuations of the cannabis industry.

Currently in Canada, 4.2 million or 14% of Canadians aged 15 years and older reported some use of cannabis products for medical or non-medical use in the past three months. More than half (56%) of the users indicated that they used some form of cannabis "daily" or "weekly." As well, almost one in four cannabis users reported spending more than \$250 over the past three months.

Who knows how many new consumers are awaiting legalization before taking the cannabis plunge?

One the analytics industry's big-players, Gordon Fagras of the lab Trace Analytics, has said that the real money from big-time investors is waiting in the shadows and that the true potential of the industry will reveal itself once it's known how many new users legalization will generate.

As recreational weed hits the market, the industry is also in the process of creating official alliances and professional associations. Currently, DesLauriers and a few of her colleagues are creating a strategic cannabis advisory committee, similar to the Ontario wine growers authority, VQA, which identify wines on the basis of the area where the grapes are grown, the methods used in making the wine and other quality standards. The goal is to professionalize the industry, generate consumer trust and growing share prices.

"Sure, we (cannabis producers) care in competition with one another, but we are also aligned with the same goals and interests."

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