

# The London Free Press

## Worker shortage denied

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**Bestselling author David Foot says youths must be pushed to fill needs in the job force.**

**By NORMAN DE BONO, SUN MEDIA**

Reports of worker shortages have been greatly exaggerated, but youths must be pushed to work where there is a need, a health-care conference in London heard yesterday.

David Foot, economics professor at the University of Toronto and author of the bestseller *Boom Bust and Echo*, delivered an upbeat message, saying London and Southwestern Ontario have a strong demographic profile to remain economically competitive.



Demographer David Foot speaks yesterday morning at the Lamplighter Inn. (Mike Hensen, Sun Media)

"There should not be a worker shortage, there are lots of teenagers. We cannot have exploding university and college enrolment with a worker shortage," said Foot, speaking at the Lamplighter Inn for the Ontario Community Support Association (OCSA), a health-care agency discussing the impact the aging population is having on health care.

"You are in pretty good shape in Southwestern Ontario. There will be a huge impact on young people," Foot said.

The number of young people -- the boomer echo generation -- is getting a boost in London from students at the University of Western Ontario and Fanshawe College. While the bulk of those will leave the city, many may return when it's time to raise a family.

"The fact they have been here gives London a leg up," he said. "Let them go, but try to bring them back when they are their 30s and ready to raise a family."

As for forecasts of a labour shortage, they ignore the fact baby boomers -- those born from 1947 to 1966 -- are staying on the job longer and their children, the echo boomers born from 1980 to 1996, will swell the employment ranks again, he said.

"Now is the time to get the kids of boomers into the workforce," Foot said. "They are the future."

But efforts must be made to get them into construction, skilled trades and health care, especially nursing, all of which have an aging workforce.

Catherine Brookman, director of special projects for the OCSA and a conference organizer, agreed, saying a crisis awaits in the health-care field as workers age and studies show few are entering the field.

"We do not have enough health-care workers. We are not attracting young people," she said, citing low pay in areas other than for nurses and doctors. "We need to look at how we are compensating these people. Wages for personal care workers are abhorrent."

As for London, the demographic trend will be similar to the national model, which sees slow population growth until 2030, then a population decline. The good news is more older workers will remain healthier, longer and want to stay in the workplace -- but only on their terms and employers must accommodate them.

"Life expectancy is increasing two years per decade and people are a lot healthier. There is a huge opportunity for people to work through their 60s, but not full-time, and workplaces have to be flexible. These people will want to play golf and travel half the time," Foot said.

In Canada, the average couple is having 1.5 children while in the U.S. there are two children per household.

"A balance is two to 2 1/2 kids per couple." Foot said.

"Anything higher than three children and less than 1.5 is courting disaster down the road."