



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

JD Smith president Scott Smith is concerned about what the future holds for the aging truck driver workforce.

Knowledge economy driving York's future

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With an educated, skilled workforce and a solid base of established small and large businesses, York Region should be able to look forward to a healthy economic future.

After all, if you were trying to guess what kind of jobs would be around today back in 1971, your projections would likely miss the mark.

It's unlikely you could have anticipated the existence of your workplace's information technology department. Similarly, as many as 40 per cent of job titles in 2051 don't exist yet, points out Rick Miner.

The former Seneca College president now works as a workforce consultant, who says while there's a lot we can't know about the economy of 2051, there's no question York's landscape will be undergo significant changes.

Tough decisions will have to be made to stem a major labour shortage, Mr. Miner said. The problem will persist over the next 20 years as boomers' retire and by 2051, the "echo" (the boomers' children) will

be retiring.

Mr. Miner delivered a keynote address in February at an event heralding the culmination of York Region's study of the economic effects of the coming retirement wave.

He praised the region for getting ahead of the curve, anticipating a trend many have yet to confront.

Larger companies, with human resources staff, are starting to brace for change. But small and medium-sized businesses are in a more precarious position, Mr. Miner says.

He expects larger, wealthier firms to snap up talent, putting small companies in a double-bind.

"It's been a front-burner issue for our industry for a number of years," JD Smith president Scott Smith says.

The regional trucking and warehouse operator paid close attention to the region's work, given the high average age of truckers and the difficulties the industry faces in attracting younger workers, Mr. Smith says.

"We hope to be a place of choice if it's a competitive market," he says, noting while there will certainly be changes in the future, trucking isn't going anywhere.

But he's concerned about the increasing congestion faced by his

drivers and the sprawl behind it.

While York's economy continues to evolve and there's increased environmental awareness, it remains to be seen how business will be impacted.

For instance, manufacturing has lost ground in the regional economy. York's economy has diversified, leaving manufacturing with 16 per cent of the regional pie in 2010, compared to 23.5 per cent in 2001.

Businesses and personal services, such as landscaping and hair and beauty, each employ about the same number and retail is not far behind. Health care, trade and construction are among the other increasingly important businesses in the region.

Diversification is here to stay and Mr. Miner expects knowledge-based jobs to become increasingly important as manufacturing declines.

But the business climate is incredibly fertile in York Region, VentureLab executive director Jeremy Laurin says.

The high-tech incubator is part of a provincial network helping entrepreneurs bring state-of-the-art ideas to the marketplace, giving Mr. Laurin a bird's-eye-view of where things are heading.

Despite concerns about the decline of manufacturing, he thinks there will be a renaissance as the region's skilled workforce and rising fuel costs trump factors that resulted in industry moving to developing countries. Innovations in robotics, for example, will bring a new kind of advanced manufacturing for which York is perfectly suited, he says.

Mr. Miner notes entrepreneurial activities — the kind VentureLab aims to promote — are likely to increase as the trend toward shifting careers, rather than staying in one place, continues to evolve.

Having big hitters, such as AMD and IBM, helps.

"The great thing about the big guys is they lay the fertile ground for the next generation," Mr. Laurin says.

From where he sits, the region is ahead of oft-touted high-tech centres, such as Waterloo and Ottawa.

VentureLab deals mostly with life science and medical device concepts and the latter is poised for explosive growth, thanks largely to mechatronics, a cross-disciplinary approach to engineering.

It's now offered as a degree at the University of Waterloo and York Uni-

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versity and a critical mass of high-tech companies and established manufacturing mean it's another wave the region is well-poised to ride, according to Mr. Laurin.

"We either get on the bus as it's leaving the station, or miss the opportunity to go for the ride," he says.

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