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## Scoring that summer job

By GILLIAN SHAW, Vancouver Sun May 14, 2010

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# Theo Birkner found a summer job that combines his passion for motorcycles with his skills in marketing.

## Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, PNG

VANCOUVER — Patrick Switzer has a dream summer job.

He'll be packing up his longboard as soon as exams are over at the B.C. Institute of Technology, and leaving for a worldwide skateboarding race tour.

But before you dismiss a dream summer job as only within reach of world-class skateboarders and other pros, consider that it's a job Switzer made happen thanks to an entrepreneurial outlook — one that students and employers alike say is crucial as we come into a summer facing a fairly bleak employment outlook for students.

Last summer, student unemployment reached almost 21 per cent, the highest since Statistics Canada first started monitoring youth job numbers in 1977. The most recent stats show that, despite employment that grew by 23,000 jobs in April for those aged 15 to 24, youth employment still remains six per cent lower than the job peak in October 2008.

And in the Lower Mainland, the summer job season comes as the 2010 Olympic workforce is back on the market, increasing the competition for work.

"I'm a pretty entrepreneurial guy," said Switzer, who is finishing his second year in engineering. "It takes a bit of luck, perseverance and taking the initiative to make my passion my job."

Switzer spent last summer on the race circuit, with sponsorship from BCIT and Orangatang Wheels helping finance his travels, which ended with the start of school in September, when Switzer left the race circuit with a ranking of number 1 in the world. With the circuit still going on until December, he since dropped to number three, but this summer, with \$25,000 so far in sponsorships, he plans to stick with the entire racing tour, returning to school for the term starting in January.

"My current sponsors are helping me and I have gained other sponsors, so I'll have seven months to push the sport and enjoy my amazing job all over the world," said Switzer.

Theo Birkner is another BCIT student who didn't wait for a job to arrive — he went out and created his own opportunity. It started when Birkner, a tourism marketing student and avid motorcyclist who is interested in adventure tourism, sent an e-mail to Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays asking if he could meet with someone from the company to learn more about what it did and how the company works.

"We met for an hour, I asked a bunch of questions, and they figured out I had some skill sets they needed leading up to the season," said Birkner, who is going into his second summer with the company.

"I'm sort of an assistant guide — I've been doing a little marketing, some graphic design, working on brochure material, website optimization, as well as some guiding with them.

"I went on a 12-day tour with them last summer all around B.C."

It's that kind of initiative employers say they are looking for. And in a tough job market, networking is becoming even more important.

Mike Jagger, founder and chief executive of Provident Security, said while his company is hiring for the summer, both for security and marketing jobs, it doesn't advertise. Rather, Jagger relies on recommendations and word of mouth.

"We're trying to do it the same way we get our clients, which is through referrals," said Jagger. "The challenge is there are people out there, but getting the quality people is tough."

"You put an ad on Craigslist or whatever and you get a lot of people who are not a good fit."

Simon Fraser University is seeing some encouraging trends in its online job postings, according to Adam Brayford, communications and marketing coordinator with the university's Work Integrated Learning career services.

"In the online database with job postings for SFU students, we have seen a 50-per-cent increase from the fall of 2009, and we anticipate this trend will continue as the summer goes on," he said.

Brayford said students should start early and be well prepared in their job hunt.

"Given the likely higher competition this summer, it is important students combine an online with a face-to-face approach to looking for jobs," he said. "Gone are the days when students could hit the mall with a stack of resumes."

"They can look for opportunities online, but if they have an employer in mind, they should attempt to engage them, to make contact early. Someone who visits in person is more likely to be remembered, so when they follow up with an online application, they already have an in with a potential employer."

Retail and customer-service jobs are traditional areas for summer student employment, although they are not among the better paying jobs. A search on summer jobs at working.com, part of the Canada.com network and The Vancouver Sun's job listings, shows customer service, retail and summer marketing jobs leading the listing numbers.

At Workopolis, listings so far this year are lower than the same period last year, but Andrea Garson, vice-president of human resources, is hopeful that will change.

"We are hoping to see an increase over the next little while as employers start to consider what their summer needs will be," she said. "No question, it will be a little more challenging for students to find summer work this year."

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Read Gillian Shaw's blog at [www.vancouversun.com/digitallife](http://www.vancouversun.com/digitallife)

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