ONWARD AND UPWARD

Heading back to school might not just be crucial to advancing your career. It might be crucial to keeping it.

By Kathryn Sutton

It may once have been enough to possess a firm handshake and a prize-winning barbecue sauce at the company picnic in order to advance up the career ladder, but with the rapid advancement of technology, even the most seasoned professionals are returning to the classroom to upgrade their skills.

At Langara College, nearly 10 per cent of the student body is over the age of 31. Daniel Thorpe, computer-technology coordinator at the college, says the majority of continuing-education students who study technology have been in the workforce for many years and are looking to push their careers to the next level. “Most students are either looking to move up in their workplace or thinking of starting their own business,” he says. "New-media courses are quite popular, especially those in our Web Publisher Certificate program.”

Vancouver Community College reports that 64 per cent of its career-program students have previous post-secondary education. The college provides more than 40 certificate and diploma programs for students looking to gain accreditation in their chosen field. “It’s not unusual for people to come to us to get certified in a field they’ve been working in for years,” says Rhyon Caldwell, Program Coordinator for Continuing Studies at VCC. “Often, employers — especially in the case of large companies — will bring in a new policy that requires employees to be certified, and so students are coming to us in order to keep their existing job.”

Caldwell actually found himself in that exact position in the late 1990s, when he was forced to return to school to get a certificate in Novell’s network operating systems. “It feels bureaucratic, but there’s a real satisfaction in getting certified, and it provides the skills [about being outpaced by technology] to rest,” he says. “When you get on the job training, you’re training you for very specific skills, but [in continuing education] you learn about a broader range of topics, which you can transfer to another job.”

But the approximately 14 per cent of Canadian workers enrolled in adult education aren’t just helping to ensure they’ll keep their jobs; they’re also improving their chances of getting a raise. Statistics Canada reports that workers who upgrade their skills through adult education can expect an hourly wage increase of eight to 15 per cent. “Many students are able to parlay their certification into a promotion or a better-paying job,” Caldwell says. “The IT fields — computer hardware, web design, applications — that’s where the jobs are. If you take a look on Craigslist, you’ll see a dozen or so jobs like that are posted every day.”

Recognizing the need for programs that keep pace with rapidly advancing technology, UBC has paired up with BCIT to offer joint technology programs such as the Network Administration and Security Professional program, which won the 2008 Program Award of Excellence from the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE). “It’s a really interesting venture that allows students to benefit from the strengths of both institutions,” says Dr. Judith Plessis, executive director of UBC Continuing Studies.

Dr. Plessis says one of the biggest challenges of providing education for adult students is accommodating their often hectic schedules. The university sees about 18,000 continuing-studies enrollments every year, and faculty expects continued growth.

“We try to say, If you want to be transformed by education, we want to be there when you need us,” says Dr. Plessis. “We offer classes that are face-to-face, online, and mix mode courses, as well as weekend and evening classes. We have a lot of classes that are self-paced, too, so that students can work at the pace that their personal lives allow.”

With the slowing global economy, colleges are bracing for higher-than-usual enrollment, since the economic rule of thumb has it that when jobs are scarce, more people return to school to seek marketable skills.

"No one can future-proof their career," says VCC’s Caldwell, "but if you keep the door open to education, you can always keep pace.”