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New Statscan survey aims to pinpoint where the jobs are

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Details on Canadian job-seekers are abundant, ranging from where they live to their age and gender to how long they've been out of work. But relatively little is known about the demand side of the equation - the employers with current job openings.

That's about to change. Statistics Canada plans to launch a new monthly job-vacancy survey this fall, a move that will shed light on a key aspect of the labour market that has long puzzled economists and policy makers: where the jobs are.

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The agency will start an official index in the autumn that will track vacancies by province and industry and, eventually, how that changes over time, The Globe and Mail has learned. Statscan has also just completed a pilot project that gathered detailed data on job openings and, starting in the fall of 2012, plans to release an annual study that explores job vacancies by occupation, labour shortages and hard-to-fill positions.

The move will offer new insights into the state of the labour market. While detailed information exists about the supply side of employment, little is known about the demand side. This indicator - already available in the United States, Scotland and Hong Kong - will show, for example, which regions may be struggling to fill positions and which have few job openings.

These new measures "will complete the picture," said Yves Decady, analyst at Statscan's labour statistics division. "This area has been identified as a data gap in the country's statistical system, so it is a priority."

He expects it will help both job seekers and employers in the job-search process. Also, comparing unemployment on one side and job vacancies on another will give a ratio that will show the degree of tightness in the labour market, he added. The data can be used as indicators of the health of the economy, as well as showing the inflationary pressure on wages.

A better understanding of current needs is also key to analyzing any shifts in the labour market. And having a clearer sense of present conditions should, in turn, help policy makers make more realistic assessments of future needs.

The new analysis should paint a picture of which regions have high unemployment and which have an elevated need for workers, highlighting whether there is a geographic mismatch in the country. It could also help predict more accurately looming labour market needs, a useful development for provincial governments, newcomers to Canada, recent graduates and economists.

The monthly survey will ask employers how many, if any, vacant positions exist and whether they are actively trying to fill those positions from outside the organization. It will be distributed as part of Statscan's mandatory monthly questionnaire on payrolls, which asks about earnings and employment levels.

The new insights represent "an important advance," said Craig Riddell, economics professor at the University of British Columbia.

However, there are challenges in measuring vacancies, he said. Not all employers have a clear handle on their current openings, especially at larger organizations.

This isn't the first time Canada has attempted to track openings. A help-wanted index, based on the number of want ads published on a Saturday in 22 Canadian newspapers, was "remarkably good" at predicting labour market trends and used by the Bank of Canada, Mr. Riddell said. But as use of classified ads declined in favour of online advertising, the index's usefulness diminished and it was discontinued in 2003.

Some employers are skeptical because it can be tough to answer questions on openings. "At an organization like ours, sometimes if there's someone with a scarce skill [like an experienced medical technologist] we'll grab them. So in a way, we're always hiring," said Jane Graydon, director of human resources for BC Biomedical Laboratories, which employs 750 people and is based in Surrey, B.C.

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