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By Richard Hancock

When the issue of workplace opportunities for the young people of Ballarat is considered, the observation is often made that too many continue to fall through the net.

That at least implies that there is a net, and there certainly is.

Ballarat has a well established support network for those people who have not necessarily been advantaged in their education and may be struggling to find their way from school or college to work.

There are those older people, too, who may have been displaced from employment and are faced with the challenge of retraining and changing career direction. There is the risk they also may fall through the cracks.

While this is occurring, there are skill gaps in business and industry across Ballarat and the region which are crying out to be filled.

There is also evidence of a skills drain from the city, with people who might otherwise stay and live in the city leaving for what they believe are better opportunities and, in some cases, better salaries.

It seems extraordinary, then, that we have those who are unable for one reason or another to find their way into meaningful employment in Ballarat while there are employers desperately seeking to employ appropriately skilled people.

Despite the best efforts of all involved in the education, industry, employment and social support agencies, there remains a challenge to link the two scenarios more closely.

If this challenge can be met, the chances of providing an appropriately skilled workforce for industry and business while generating increased employment opportunities will have been enhanced.

That is the foundation for the formation by the Committee for Ballarat of a task team of Workplace Participation and Skills.

Members of the task team, who represent relevant businesses and institutions from around Ballarat are: Richard Hancock (chair), Andrew Rimington, Andrew Rowe, Barbara Hahs, Barry Wright, Chris Cartledge, Fiona Davey, Glen Walker, Jodie O'Keefe, John Fogarty, Kay McCauley, Michael Smith, Michelle Anderson, Rick Robertson, Samantha McIntosh, Scott Hebbard, Suzanne Wallis, Terry Lloyd and Tony Stone.

The early work of the group has involved consultation with a number of organisations.

These have included representatives of industry, the health sector, small to medium enterprises, community support organisations, employment agencies, education and training institutions and tourism and hospitality groups.

These consultations have confirmed that there are a number of programs being run in Ballarat to both address the skills shortage and the employment and training challenge.

One of the issues, however, appears to be that these programs are not well enough understood or recognised, not only by those who might benefit from them, but by others in the city providing similar or complementary services.

This is a matter of concern. The existence of these various services and resources is recognition of the reality that there exists in Ballarat a soft underbelly of distressed families, generational unemployment and a not insignificant low socio-economic element.

This can only be addressed by the most effective promotion and application of those commendable resources and services already available in Ballarat in response to the training and skills challenges of the city.

To this end the task team is developing a communication plan with the assistance of Ballarat creative agency, the Ascet Group.

It is also compiling a strategic plan to address infrastructure issues – other than those which will be covered by the communications plan – including the identification of duplication and gaps in the services and resources on offer.

This is not an exercise in reinventing the wheel. It is a genuine approach to enhance the opportunities for those laudable and committed service providers already working to address these problems.

Everything that can be done must be done to reduce youth unemployment rates, increase the level of participation in the workforce and ease the city's skills shortage. It is fundamental to the future economic prosperity of Ballarat.

\* Richard Hancock is chairman of the Committee for Ballarat's Workplace Participation and Skills task team and Ballarat City CEO.