

## Lessons learned

What history can teach us about the future



Ryan takes time out in Labrador to feed "Whiskey Jack."

The route to my entry into the mineral engineering program at the University of Toronto can best be described as circuitous. I spent four years working for a construction company, three years at a community college and four years in engineering consulting before I began attending classes in 2006. Although I do not claim to be an expert in any particular field, the experiences I have had on that winding road have provided me with some valuable insights into how the mining industry — and industry in general — works.

by Ryan Clarke

We tend to measure the value of mining and exploration companies in terms of resources and reserves, but I have discovered that the best measure of any company is the quality of the personnel that it recruits and retains. We have recently entered a time of economic uncertainty, which has caused many companies to take a step back and re-evaluate their business practices, including their hiring

policies. Many companies may not be in a position to hire new graduates as readily to fill expected openings in accordance with forecasted ramping up of production, as exploration and production projects come to a halt.

The mining industry has historically followed a cyclical pattern; recessions in the 1980s and 1990s also exhibited periods of reduced hiring and tough times for new mining graduates as well as industry veterans. This pattern can be expected to repeat itself, indicating the likelihood of a future boon in the mining and energy sectors to offset the current downturn. This sentiment is echoed in a recent Ernst and Young report that suggested that an additional 70,000 workers would be required in the mining and energy sectors in the next ten years.

I think that it is crucial that the industry as a whole take the time during this current economic downturn to reflect on its business prac-

tices over the last five years and determine the best approach for proceeding to a promising future. Slashing expenditures and laying off employees may be an immediate way to combat a tumultuous market, but care must be taken to ensure companies are equipped for the future.

To my fellow students, I would suggest that you not give up hope of obtaining jobs within the mining industry. The aging demographics suggest that as experienced workers retire in the coming years, there will be increased hiring at all levels. This being said, the industry is still small and the best way to obtain

employment is through the recommendation of industry representatives. Many of its current leaders have been working in this sector for longer than some of us have been alive; the companies that they have helped to build are their legacies. It is up to us to prove to them that we are capable and responsible enough to justify becoming a part of those legacies and contributing to their growth. The industry desperately needs ambitious young people to assert themselves as leaders of tomorrow.

It is actually quite easy to meet industry representatives — including those at higher levels. An important first step? Become involved in CIM. Membership is free for students and limited spaces are reserved for students at many monthly luncheons — spaces that unfortunately often remain unused due to lack of response. Also, I urge students to remain accessible to mining companies. A number of



Ryan (left) with his security guard at the Dornod uranium property, Mongolia, during a stope design investigation for an abandoned Russian uranium project.

valuable opportunities exist. Job fairs are held at all universities and provide direct interaction between students and industry representatives. Faculty departments are more than willing to work with industry to provide further access to their students.

To the mining companies, I implore you to reconsider putting a halt to hiring. This economic slowdown has created a unique opportunity for you to take your time in choosing the best employees for your company. Without the pressure to just fill vacancies, potential employees can be measured according to how they meet the company's strategic goals, rather than representing a mere cog in a production machine. Decreased market certainty has also given mining companies the opportunity to invest time and effort into currently employed junior staff. Mentor them now and you will cultivate the intermediate and senior leaders of tomorrow. Also, by supporting the staff that you currently employ through

difficult times, they are more likely to stick by you in boom times, when other industries may be vying for their participation.

One of the drawbacks of the recent commodities boon was that companies often had to hire indiscriminately in order to maintain the growth necessary to compete in the market; little was known about new graduates at the time of issuing job offers. The interview process became rushed and each graduate would typically receive up to five job offers. Now is the time to get to know potential hires better and choose the individuals who will be best suited to your particular company.

Many opportunities exist for student-industry interaction. Most significantly, CIM hosts a student-industry luncheon at the annual CIM Conference and Exhibition, which allows students and industry representatives direct access to each other. This year, the luncheon will take place on May 12 in Toronto. The CIM annual general meeting, to be held on May 10 at the conference, also provides an opportunity for student-industry interaction.

The bottom line is times are tough — for the mining industry and for the economy in general. We in the mining industry are at a slight advantage in dealing with this situation, as we are tight-knit and have a history of being supportive. By banding together in uncertain times, we can assure the success of the industry as a whole for future generations. **CIM**



#### About the author

Ryan Clarke is a third-year student in the Lassonde Mineral Engineering program at the University of Toronto and co-chair of the 2009 Canadian Mining Games. His work on engineering projects has taken him across Canada as well as to the United States, Mongolia, Portugal and Ecuador.