

## Youth drive

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Ian Ball doubled his money on his first investment in a junior mining company. That wouldn't be noteworthy except for the fact that he was only 5 years old at the time.

"I made the money picking rocks off the lawn and putting them back on to the gravel driveway," recalls Ball.

"A good friend of the family told us about a penny mining stock so I got my parents to put the \$100 I saved into it and made a \$100 profit. I was shocked." The resourceful 24-year-old still lives in Bowmanville and continues to earn money from rocks and related stocks except he's making bigger bucks now as an executive at Toronto-based U.S. Gold Corp. working for bullion tycoon and Goldcorp Inc. founder Rob McEwen.



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR  
Ian Ball, a cherubic 24-year-old from Bowmanville, is an executive at Toronto-based U.S. Gold Corp. He was hired fresh out of Ryerson University with a commerce degree.

Hired fresh out of Ryerson University with a degree in commerce two years ago, the young investment relations manager is bullish on bullion and belongs to the rare batch of new blood that the industry desperately seeks to keep it alive in the critical coming decade.

Global demand for metals and minerals is skyrocketing and the mining industry has quietly become a driver of the Canadian economy, outpacing national Gross Domestic Product growth by two to one, according to a recent federal government-funded report by the Mining Industry Human Resources Council.

Continued high commodity prices have forecasters predicting extended boom times for the mining sector that could last years longer than the typical cyclical upswing. But everyone is wondering: Now that times are good, where are all the kids hiding? More than half of the people who work in the mining industry are over 40. A recurring theme at last week's convention of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada was the looming shortage of qualified new people to pick up the slack as an estimated 40 per cent of the industry retires by 2014.

The conference provided a bird's eye view of the growing age gap in the industry. The annual gathering enjoyed a record crowd of 14,500 people — a jump of more than 20 per cent over last year — and most of them were older white men.

The Metro Toronto Convention Centre was awash in a sea of white hair while anyone under 30 strolling by the booths was hounded for a resumé or even offered a job on the spot.

"Last year was the first time I went to the conference and that's where I got my job," says Scott Conley, 26, an exploration geologist who works at Barrick Gold Corp.'s Musselwhite mine in northern Ontario, formerly owned by Placer Dome Inc. until the Barrick takeover.

In fact, he left Queen's University a year shy of finishing his Masters degree in mining engineering because the offers were too good to pass up.

"Tons of people were coming up to me. I couldn't shake them," he recalls of the flurry of interest in youth hiring.

He notes the industry is so fast-paced lately that "yesterday I was a Placer Dome employee, today I work for Barrick and at the end of the month I'll work for Goldcorp," since the old Placer mines will be scooped up by Goldcorp as the final step in the gold mining merger deal.

Though he works in the gold business, Conley was intrigued by the Canadian diamond mining displays and with what the brass at various exploration companies had to say since there are a lot of opportunities for young people these days.

"It doesn't hurt to keep your options open. You never know where it could take you," he shrugs.

Weekly earnings in the industry in 2003 averaged \$1,085, second only to the super-charged oil and gas sector. Coal and metal-ore miners were the highest earners. But rapid industry growth and generous starting salaries don't seem to be enough to attract much-needed youth into the business.

In 2004, only 204 students graduated with mining-related undergraduate engineering degrees. The total mining workforce in Canada today is 87,700 people.

The government study found that even at a presumed low-growth scenario the Canadian mining industry will require a workforce of 90,000 by 2014. Meanwhile the 57,000 people retiring in that time will greatly outstrip the number of younger workers heading into the industry to replace them, which is now estimated at 9,800 people.

So stepping up recruitment is one of the biggest issues faced by the mining industry. Part of the problem is spinning it beyond the stereotype of an ancient pick and shovel industry to a technologically advanced and challenging career with plenty of room to move up.

"There's a perception that if you get into mining, you're going to be digging rocks. A lot of people don't associate mining with wealth creation," notes the fresh-faced and upbeat Ball, who looks more like someone running for student council than an executive responsible for technical reports and dealing with shareholders.

McEwen wouldn't have it any other way at his U.S. Gold headquarters. In fact, the company's new digs at George and Adelaide Streets look like a playpen for the mid-20s set since McEwen is keen on investing in both gold and youth as the way of the future.

On the other end of the spectrum is Don Black, one of the true old-time prospectors who has been attending the Toronto convention since 1968.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. It's a lot of fun," says the 84-year-old, who takes the train in every year from his Bathurst, N.B., home to see old friends and keep tabs on the industry.

"I was a claim staker and a camp cook for 50 years all over Canada and the high Arctic," says Black, 84, who just got a Meritorious Service award for his many years in mining from the New Brunswick government.

"We'd run compass lines, put in posts and record the information," he explains. Technology has evolved so much compared to when he started out that miners are able to stake claims today by computer with aerial site photographs, something known as armchair staking.

He says he has no idea why more young people aren't trying to scoop up a mining job since they have so many options open to them from the bush to the boardroom. "As for me, I love the bush. I even staked a claim last year. I'm always looking for the mother lode," adds Black, who spent most of his career prospecting for base metals. While the industry loves the old characters, the 74th annual prospectors convention made a concerted effort to get more students involved in the event, including tours and a special networking session for university students to meet mining company recruiters.

"Everyone is taking the age-gap issue seriously," says Patricia Dillon, manager of corporate relations at base metals miner Teck Cominco Ltd. and the new president of the prospectors association.

"We're trying to get more youth to consider a career in this industry. People don't understand that we are a very high-tech sector and a very high-paying industry," she says.

The looming workforce shortage means there is great career potential not just for the hard-rock miners but for skilled trade workers such as engineers and geoscientists, says Dillon.

Someone heading into the industry today is just as likely to have their engineering degree as their MBA since jobs at every level are up for grabs. The labour crisis also means attracting groups of people who aren't traditionally associated with the mining business, including women, new Canadians and the Aboriginal community, she says.

All kinds of recruitment methods are being attempted, from offering college and university students field trips to mine sites to providing information about the importance of rocks and minerals at the elementary school level.

"When you think about it, what does a Grade 4 teacher know about the materials of our industry? But you couldn't get to work or school without metals or minerals, from your alarm clock, to toothpaste to transportation," says Dillon.

"The mining business is an unconventional and interesting life. And there are lots of opportunities for travel," she adds.

The Lassonde Institute of Engineering Geoscience at the University of Toronto has about 80 students enrolled across the four years of the undergraduate program. It's one of a handful of Canadian universities that offer a mining-related engineering program, and a lot of mining companies help with funding programs to ensure they have first dibs on the best and brightest.

One of the recent graduates just landed a job at Rio Tinto in Australia. "The industry is desperate for people. But high school students don't perceive mining as high-tech and sexy," says Lassonde's administration director Laurelle LeVert. "All of my graduates have their pick of places to work. We can't turn out enough of them to satisfy the industry," she says.

One of those U of T graduates is Eliza Ngai, 26, who recently landed a job as a mineral processing engineer with Toronto firm Aker Kvaerner Canada Inc.  
"It seems like less and less people are interested in mining as a career, but I'm quite happy with the job," she says.