

Construction industry battles biases to attract workers

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Imagine someone telling you about this well-paying work: There are many openings, for young people too, and the pay is between \$60,000 and \$100,000 a year, depending on your motivation and whether you join the union, with full benefits. The work contributes greatly to the community. It takes skill and can be physically and logistically challenging, and you won't be stuck behind a desk.

The job? Concrete finisher, the person who patches the sidewalk or pours the cement for someone's new porch.

If your heart sinks at this point, you may be buying into a larger problem.

It's what behavioural economists describe as the influence of societal and personal biases on decision-making, specific in this case to the line of work we choose.

The Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON), which represents residential builders, says stigma and biases get in the way of understanding the opportunities in trade work, and it is making its case with two research papers and a new series of short videos aimed at young people about construction jobs.

One paper surveyed more than 400 construction workers in the Greater Toronto Area and found that 96 per cent felt that stigma and negative parental influences are causing a shortage of workers. Many perceived a bias among the public against jobs that are seen as physically challenging or involve working with your hands. A majority of trade workers surveyed felt that the public ultimately lacked knowledge about what construction work truly entails.

“There is a stigma against skilled trades that was strongly reflected in the research. We need to change that narrative,” said Richard Lyall, the organization's president.

But how?

The organization is looking to behavioural economics for help.

“The thing that's puzzling to us is that with careers in construction, which are evolving rapidly with technology, satisfaction rates are high,” Mr. Lyall said. Nearly two-thirds of the construction workers surveyed in the GTA their level of job satisfaction between 8 and 10 on a scale of 1 to 10, and 81 per cent reported a sense of financial security.

“Yet, we have a shortage. Now why is that?” Mr. Lyall said. The construction industry’s ongoing need to find new, skilled workers is expected to worsen over the next 10 years, as nearly 91,000 skilled construction workers are expected to retire in Ontario alone over the coming decade. More than 40,500 will retire in the GTA. Yet the demand for skilled workers will only continue as infrastructure projects ramp up, RESCON warns.

The average age of an apprentice is 27. “People are lost in the wilderness for a while before they finally discover a skilled trade,” he said, pointing out that a skilled worker who begins at 27 has lost a decade of wages and benefits compared with one who starts right out of high school.

Not enough information about construction jobs (both the pros and the cons) is reaching young people, he said. Seventy-three per cent of the GTA construction workers surveyed said they were influenced by friends or family to pursue a skilled trade in construction, yet only 8 per cent said they were positively influenced by a school guidance counselor, according to one of the research papers.

With the current emphasis on STEM learning (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) for young people, guidance counselors and educators may not realize how technologically advanced trade careers can be, sometimes involving the use of digital modelling.

“We’re going to have people walking around with virtual reality helmets on, so they can see where exactly things are supposed to go according to a drawing based on a building-information modelling platform,” Mr. Lyall said, adding that many outside the trades don’t know what the work entails.

Yet, 70 per cent felt that people have limited knowledge about trade work. “I’m not saying construction jobs are perfect,” said James Stewart, an economist who co-authored the other of the two research papers. There is the physical side of construction work and the seasonality of some jobs, which may attract some but dissuade others, as with any line of work, he said.

At the same time, he said people’s perceptions and community views of the work (“the mental models”) need to be addressed. More contact with trade jobs is necessary so that young people can judge for themselves, he argued. Schools, the public sector, but especially the construction industry itself need to present more positive stories about young people succeeding in the industry, he said.

But collective biases are hard to fight. Behavioural economists note that people are learn socially. For example, picture two pubs on a street. One has a lineup outside, the other is empty. Even if the empty one comes recommended by a friend, some will assume that the pub with the long line is better. So what do you do? Many would be inclined to join the queue (or at least wonder what they are missing while sitting in the empty bar).

Such assumptions and social learning guide economic choices, behavioural economists say. You may see an entrepreneurial, well-coiffed young hopeful in the tech industry and think they have a solid future, but the skilled worker wearing a safety vest may have greater job security and income stability.

That's the message RESCON wants to get across, not merely that hard-hat work incorporates cutting-edge technology such as augmented reality, Mr. Lyall said. "That whole narrative, that whole picture is changing dramatically. If you want a job in technology now, go into construction," he said.