

## **Industry Perspectives Op-Ed: The ABCs of selling the skilled trades to generations Y and Z**

Patrick McManus April 5, 2019



The alarm bells have been sounding for a long time.

We've all heard the warnings about Ontario's skilled trades shortage. However, it's one thing to acknowledge the threat to our companies and economy and quite another to know what to do about it. That's changing. Government leadership and new research are helping Ontario employers do their part to solve a decades old dilemma: how to persuade young people that the skilled trades are a top career choice.

The threat is real. There simply aren't enough skilled workers to meet the growing demands of industry and our economy. When employers can't find people with the right skills, it costs Ontario's economy about \$24 billion annually in lost economic opportunity, according to the Conference Board of Canada. And every year it gets worse.

Demand for skilled tradespeople is on the rise while interest is waning. Skills Canada says nearly 40 per cent of the jobs created in Canada this decade will be in the skilled trades, yet only about 26 per cent of young people aged 13 to 24 are even considering that career path.

So how do we convince generations Y and Z that the trades are worthy as a first, not fall-back, career choice?

The Ontario government is on the right track. Recently it announced plans to reform education curriculum and refocus on skills training and promoting the skilled trades. The goal is to expose more students as well as their parents to the positives of the trades. This is where employers come in.

With support from the province, the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario and the Ontario Residential Council of Construction Associations** commissioned two new reports on attracting and retaining skilled trades workers. Both make it clear that employers should do more to shape perceptions about the skilled trades.

A Behavioural Economics Approach to Recruitment in Skilled Construction Trades found too little time is spent on career guidance in schools. It suggests key influencers, including employers, engage directly with students, their parents and guidance counsellors to share information about career options in the skilled trades. The report confirms the greater the awareness about all of the career possibilities, the more likely it is that young people will choose to make their living in the skilled trades.

Equipping young people with the right information also includes timely information about how the skilled trades are changing. They're evolving as technology advances, opening up hundreds of career possibilities from servicing driverless vehicles to drone manager and construction manager. That's why the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance is a big supporter of the new Job Talks video series. It's helping to raise awareness about lesser known construction careers, from excavator operator to site supervisor, by profiling young people who are "walking the walk" and thriving in the industry.

The reality is that employers need to do a far better job of selling the skilled trades. Part of that involves a more co-ordinated effort so that career information is centralized and easy to access.

The other part involves zeroing in and promoting those career attributes that matter to the next generation. The report, *Retaining Employees in the Skilled Trades*, sends a clear message that industry employers should be better communicating all of the benefits of a skilled trades career, especially opportunities for advancement. It seems to me that office work is often glorified, while the perks of working in the skilled trades barely seem to register.

The trades offer the flexibility to spend more time with friends and family, no huge school debt, plus the opportunity to work for yourself.

And unlike many jobs, skilled tradespeople get to leave their work behind at the end of the day. It's no wonder a survey of more than 400 GTA construction workers found that the vast majority believe they have the ideal career.

This decade, Ontario will need to recruit more than 100,000 skilled trades workers, and that's just in construction. Government and educators alone can't fill those jobs.

Employers have a role too, and a much better understanding now about how to get past stereotypes and convince young people, parents and guidance counsellors that the top jobs in the future, are in the skilled trades.

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