

## Attracting young people to skilled trades

Addressing labour shortages in Ontario's construction industry

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By Zandile Chiwanza



*Photo courtesy of Aonghus Kealy, director of communications, RESCON.*

As the demand grows for skilled labour throughout Ontario, recruiting and retaining young people in the trades is a topic at the forefront of key stakeholders' minds. Earlier this month the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON)** and the Ontario Residential Council of Construction Associations (ORCCA) hosted an event in downtown Toronto to examine the issue of the skills shortage in the construction industry.

Setting the tone for the event, Ontario's Education Minister Lisa Thompson reinforced the government's commitment to supporting students and guiding them into successful careers in the trades sector.

"We need to build a foundation for guidance counsellors and students so that they know there are opportunities ahead when they embrace construction," Thompson said in her keynote speech.

## **Promoting a culture shift**

“What I hear from our members in the construction sector is that the number one challenge that they have is a shortage of talent,” Janet De Silva, Toronto Region Board of Trade president and CEO said in the panel discussion.

In order to harness the full potential of skilled trades, Northumberland-Peterborough South MPP David Piccini told attendees that key players in the industry need to have the courage to implement a real “culture shift.”

“If we don’t act we’ll have over 5,000 jobs that will go unfilled by 2021,” Piccini warned.

According to a report [\*Retaining Employees In The Skilled Trades \(REST\)\*](#), prepared by Job Talks and Q.I Value Systems Inc., the trades boast high job satisfaction levels. Yet, recruitment remains a challenge. The research finds that many construction workers and industry stakeholders agree that the industry has a marketing problem.

Here are some of the recommendations highlighted in the REST report to attract young people to the skilled trades industry:

- Leverage the industry’s massive network in recruitment;
- Integrate construction early in the education system;
- Invest in high-quality media production; and
- Mobilize companies and associations to address retention.

The panellists added to these suggestions when Janet McFarland, a *Globe and Mail* reporter who served as moderator of the panel discussion, polled them on how the industry can overcome the stigma that trades are not for straight A students or the academically inclined.

“Challenge the ingrained bias against the trades from a grassroots level,” De Silva urged.

Lindsay McCardle co-author of [\*The Behavioral Economics \(BE\) approach to recruitment\*](#) report, agreed. Aside from stigma, negative parental influence is a major deterrent for young people considering a career in skilled trades.

“Having the general public including parents have a better understanding of what is involved in these jobs can change the misconceptions that employees in the trades industries lack intelligence or problem-solving skills,” said McCardle.

Co-written by James Stewart, this report highlights steps guidance counsellors, career development organizations and training institutions can implement to attract young people to the skilled trades through eight best-practice examples.

McCardle said BE principles can be applied to recruitment in construction in a tangible way by getting the community to think “trades first”. This kind of pre-commitment will have a big impact on students.

“Get into schools as early as the elementary stage to enhance access to information,” agreed Patrick McManus, director of government relations and communications at Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association and chair of Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance. “And put more direct information into the hands of guidance counsellors.

“There are more options than plumbing, carpentry and electrical. There are hundreds of trades and were not advertising them well enough,” he added.

### **The next steps in closing the skills gap in the trades industry**

“The crux of the skilled trades gap issue is that we’ve lived with the mantra that wage will draw growth in our sector,” McManus said.

In his opinion, the industry needs to find more innovative approaches to attract young people to skilled trades.

“I’m sure most people in this room go home and continue to work; that’s become more common,” he pointed out. “Promote that there is true work-life balance in the construction industry.”

McManus also emphasized the importance of moving towards stackable and modular training and competency-based training to continue to remove barriers of entry into the trades.

McCardle noted that guidance counsellors are strapped for time and don’t get to do a lot of career guidance because they’re focused on supporting mental health and handling crises for example. She calls for a distinct type of guidance counsellor, solely focused on careers.

“Separating those two roles and responsibilities could help to place more emphasis on professional development,” she said.

The youngest panellist, Julia Zahreddine, site supervisor, Bridgecon Construction Ltd, recalled that the careers class in her high school didn’t highlight any skilled trades. She was drawn to the industry when the Heavy Construction Association of Toronto came to her class for a school visit.

“I’m here because I had the opportunity to apply for a scholarship,” Zahreddine said.

As a recent graduate and a young person who has worked in the heavy civil construction industry for more than a year now, she insisted investment in scholarships, co-op programs and active marketing will influence and attract a diverse group of young people to the industry. As one example, she cited an [interview series](#) profiling careers in the skilled construction trades, produced by Job Talks, in which she appears.

Currently, the average age of an apprentice is 27. As a wave of retirements looms, it’s important to help people interested in the trades find the applicable career pathways much sooner, at 18 or 19 years old.

Panellists explored several ideas on how to continue to introduce trades to young people as a viable career option. As a final thought, they all agreed that pathways into the industry need to be improved and simplified by focusing and centralizing information in order to successfully target millennials and ensure a future workforce.