

## Panel examines how to improve pathways to the skilled trades

Angela Gismondi April 3, 2019



ANGELA GISMONDI—A panel discussion on recruitment in the skilled trades at a recent event hosted by the Residential Construction Council of Ontario and the Ontario Residential Council of Construction Associations in Toronto featured Janet De Silva, president and CEO of the Toronto Board of Trade; Patrick McManus, director of government relations and communications for the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association and chairperson of the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance; Lindsay McCardle, co-author of the behavioural economics report; and Julia Zahreddine, site supervisor for Bridgecon Construction Ltd.

Breaking down barriers for people to enter the skilled trades was the topic of discussion at a recent event focused on retaining employees hosted by the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario and the Ontario Residential Council of Construction Associations.**

The event launched the Retaining Employees in the Skilled Trades (REST) program which includes the Job Talks report and video series and a recruitment report using behavioural economics.

Members on the panel included Janet De Silva, president and CEO of the Toronto Board of Trade; Patrick McManus, director of government relations and communications for the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association and chairperson of the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance; Lindsay McCardle, co-author of the behavioural economics report; and Julia Zahreddine, site supervisor for Bridgecon Construction Ltd. who was featured in the video series.

“As someone new in the industry and the field I am interested in seeing what we can do to attract more young people, a more diverse group of people, more women into the field and understanding what the board of trade and other professionals are doing ,” said Zahreddine.

“I’m here because I had the opportunity to apply for a scholarship. Having the Heavy Construction Association come to my school and allowing us to apply and go through an interview process and be selected actually helped me realize what I wanted to do and gave me the opportunity. Otherwise, I’m not sure if I would be working in construction.”

De Silva said although she applauds what the provincial government is doing from a policy standpoint to try and bring more people into the trades, more needs to be done.

“The challenge from a policy perspective is there is not a single thing you can be asking for, it’s multiple things you need to solve it. When you bring a laundry list to government it’s not going to get solved,” said De Silva, pointing out that the board is focused on expanding capacity in the college system in areas where there are projects coming on stream, such as the Woodbine Entertainment expansion, the Finch LRT and the Union Station West expansion.

“It’s something we’re spending a lot of time thinking about right now and talking to City Hall and Queen’s Park about.

“There is a generation of jobs that will be created so how do we help residents in that area take advantage of the construction opportunities?”

The government has a role to play but it’s only a small piece of the puzzle, McManus noted. He views the government’s role as two-fold, starting with continuing to remove barriers to entry into the skilled trades.

“They started doing this by dissolving the College of Trades, that was an important first step. We need to keep that momentum rolling forward,” he stated.

“Two next important steps are stackable, modular training to allow transitioning between trades and we need to move to competency-based certification. We need to understand that not everybody can follow the same path to get a career.”

Another important measure, panellists agreed, is targeting guidance counsellors and giving them what they need to promote a career in the trades, not just college or university, as a viable option for students.

The private sector also needs to get involved, collaborate and streamline information about how to get a job in the trades.

“We need to look at programs like Skills Ontario and make it a one stop shop for people interested in information about all the skilled trades,” said McManus.

“We need to also focus less on our individual sectors. We need to take a whole trades approach to how we are bringing people in to the trades. I worked in the trades, I work for a construction association now and people ask me how do I get a job in the trades and I don’t know. The best advice I can give somebody is show up to a jobsite with work boots and a hard hat on and hopefully you can get hired. That’s ridiculous and it needs to change.”

Tactics that have been used to address the skills gap for years are not working. Wage growth is not enough to drive growth in the sector, McManus noted.

“Work-life balance is what we need to start pressing with this industry because it is a huge selling feature that we just don’t exploit right now,” he said.

Zahreddine said there are young people who want to get into the industry but they need to have the knowledge and the opportunities.

“When I came back from my first internship and I spoke to people and even when I show people this video, they never knew that was an option for them and they are interested,” she said.

“Having a scholarship for three people a year is great but having more co-op opportunities or other opportunities for students and young people would be great. They are willing to do it.”