

Trades shortage looms large in construction industry

by Richard Lyall on 29 Mar 2021

A report released by the Ontario Construction Secretariat has confirmed what homebuilding contractors have been saying for some time—that it is becoming more difficult to access skilled labour.

This is obviously a concern for the residential construction industry, as we can't afford to slow down. But getting more people into the trades is also vital to the economic health of our province. If Ontario is to recover from the effects of COVID-19, we need a construction industry firing on all cylinders.

A shortage of trades would set our industry back and have disastrous effects on our economy. Our province is in desperate need of housing and we must keep building it.

Within the next decade, Ontario's construction and maintenance industry will need to hire and train nearly 104,000 additional workers just to keep pace with increased demand and retirements.

So how do we solve the skilled trades problem? The Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON) is suggesting four approaches.

First, there must be a focus on educating and exposing youth to the trades early on in life. Young people aren't exposed to the trades in school as much as they were in the past when shop classes were part of the regular curriculum. That must change if we are to get more youth into the system.

Technology could also be used to assess the skills and aptitudes of students and direct those with applicable abilities into the trades.

Labour, Training and Skills Development Minister Monte McNaughton is taking steps to fix the system by investing in apprenticeship programs and working to break the stigma attached to the trades. He's also simplifying the apprenticeship program to make it easier for trainees to navigate the system.

Second, the federal government should expand the Red Seal program and make it easier for qualified skilled trades workers to fill jobs in provinces that need them. Trades such as tower crane operators, elevator installers and mechanics are presently missing from the Red Seal program.

Bringing these trades under the Red Seal umbrella would allow more mobility. Granting the elevator trade Red Seal status, for example, would result in greater inter-provincial mobility of installers and mechanics to Ontario.

Third, immigration needs to be expanded to make it easier for skilled trades to enter and work in Canada. We have always relied on immigration as a means of bringing in the skilled trades workers, but many European countries are also in need of their services, so fewer are opting to come to Canada.

Carpentry-related trades, including low- and high-rise forming, concrete and drain, sewer and watermain and bricklaying are dependent on skilled immigrants. We must ensure that the pipeline continues, but the federal government also must facilitate a pathway into the trades through temporary foreign worker programs.

RESCON has asked the federal government to increase the allocation number for Ontario's Immigration Nominee Program (OINP) to allow the province the flexibility to recruit for specific skilled trades occupations such as those in the construction industry who do low- and high-rise forming, concrete and drain, and sewer and watermain installation work.

A modified OINP system is needed to consider the transient nature of the construction industry. The requirement that the applicant be sponsored and tied to one employer, for example, needs to be removed to reflect the fact that workers move around for work.

We have also suggested that a "trusted employer program" be started within the Temporary Foreign Workers Program, which would reward compliant businesses with a streamlined process to hire workers.

Fourth, we must also find a way to get more women into the skilled trades. Women presently make up about 7% of trades in Ontario, so clearly more must be done to raise awareness of opportunities.

We are hopeful that our ideas gain traction, as there is no better time to take up a career in the trades.

Richard Lyall, president of RESCON, has represented the building industry in Ontario since 1991. Contact him at media@rescon.com.