

Hot job! Put on that hard (or soft) hat and build some much-needed homes

Canada is facing a high demand for construction workers, with 20% of the current labour force expected to retire in 10 years

Nicholas Sokic - Aug 31, 2021



The building construction industry had been dealing with a pre-pandemic worker shortage that has only continued. Photo by Jason Alden/Bloomberg

Take last year. Despite the pandemic, the industry's workforce totalled [1.24 million on- and off-site jobs](#) in new home construction, renovation and repair. Divided out: 58 per cent of those jobs were in renovation and 42 per cent were in new home construction.

Home building expected to stay strong

All this work translated into \$81.1 billion in wages, which, while impressive, could have been much higher given that the industry had been dealing with a pre-pandemic worker shortage that has only continued.

For one thing, Kevin Lee, president of the Canadian Home Builders' Association (CHBA), points out that 130,000 workers, or 20 per cent, of the industry's current labour force will retire in the next decade, with forecasts showing a need for 140,000 more workers in the coming years.

What's it pay?

Like most industries, it's impractical to list an average salary, since the roles range from labourer to manager. But this is even more true for construction, since you could easily end up running your own business.

That said, according to [Statistics Canada](#), the average hourly wage for construction workers in 2020 was \$44.49. Assuming a 40-hour work week, that translates to about \$92,000 a year.

Who's it for?

Many roles in construction don't require a formal education and can be undertaken fresh out of high school or even as a summer job. For those looking at the skilled trades, such as a carpenter or electrician, a post-secondary education or apprenticeship program will be necessary.

Unsurprisingly, the kinds of people best suited to construction work are those who like to work with their hands.

"It tends to be for ... people who like to create physical things, people who like to be outside, certainly for people who don't like being stuck behind a desk," Lee said. "But some mathematical inclination is helpful."



An electrician apprentice wiring lights. Photo by Mike Hensen/The London Free Press/Postmedia Network files

Leadership abilities are also crucial for managerial roles, but Lee also highlighted opportunities for those who "have entrepreneurship in their blood." Much of the industry is propped up by independent contractors or small businesses. People can start as a mere labourer and then later create their own business if that's the sort of career they ultimately want.

Given the number of small family-run businesses in construction, the CHBA has been helping its members with succession planning since keeping them running is key.

Lee also said the industry is working on getting more women into both on- and off-site roles. Currently, he said, women only account for five per cent of the on-site workforce, and 41 per cent of the office jobs.

Across all [forms of construction](#), British Columbia and Alberta lead the nation in percentage of female tradespeople in the industry, at 6.4 per cent and 6.8 per cent, respectively.

In 2019, the Canadian Building Trades Unions (CBTU) launched provincial Offices to Advance Women Apprentices (OAWA) in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, which at the time was expected to boost the number of women in trade roles by 30 per cent.

But more workers are needed in general, since the industry's outlook is solid. Manufactured construction and net-zero homes are two industry areas that Lee said are expected to grow in the coming years.

The former involves building homes in a controlled factory environment, an area that he said has many productivity benefits. The latter, of course, might interest people who are more environmentally conscious and sustainability-minded.

CHBA has a net-zero-homes program that has, as of last Friday, certified 663 homes across Canada as net-zero, meaning they annually produce as much clean energy as they consume.

Where are the jobs?

Canada needs houses everywhere. Although the seasonally adjusted annualized rate of housing starts in July fell 3.2 per cent to 272,176 units from a revised 281,200 in June, Lee noted that CHBA's five- and 10-year forecasts all predict a need for more labour in every single province to meet the growing population's need for housing.

“Governments are recognizing that one of the challenges with housing affordability and escalating house prices is lack of supply,” he said. “If we are successful as a country in building more homes of all types, which we do need to properly house our population and get prices under control, that would mean more activity and even more jobs.”