

How is construction responding to growing employment demand?

Ian Harvey July 27, 2018



The long-predicted exodus of baby boomers from the construction trades is well underway and there's an ever growing demand for skilled workers to fill their boots.

According to the Pre-Apprenticeship Training Institute (a CLAC Union, Merit Ontario, Ontario Electrical League and Progressive Contractors Association training organization with campuses in Toronto and Cambridge, Ont.) there are five key areas where apprentices are needed:

- construction and maintenance electrician
- HVAC mechanic
- plumber
- carpenter
- construction office manager

However, the prognosis in recruiting apprentices isn't rosy with Statistics Canada reporting 417,300 people were registered for apprenticeship programs in Canada in 2016, down from 455,900 in 2015. Of these, 72,000 registrations in 2016 were new, while 337,450 were previously registered in an apprenticeship program before 2016.

In some provinces like Alberta and Newfoundland, the drop in oil prices and the slowdown in the energy patch is directly linked to the drop in new apprenticeship registration.

There are signs, however, that the trend is shifting to a more positive flow.

The Ontario College of Trades says since it opened its doors in April 2013 their top trades are the same, with the exception of sheet metal worker being their fifth since they don't certify construction management.

However, for every entrant in HVAC or sheet metal, two enter into plumbing, three as carpenters and four as electricians.

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— Cristina Selva

Carpenters' Local 27 Training Centre

Every skilled trade and industry associations and organizations are prioritizing recruitment to stream people into specific training programs, either through the colleges and other training centres or through a unions own training centre.

“Remember all those demographic studies we did 20 years ago about massive retirements in specific demographics?” says Cristina Selva, executive director, Carpenters' Local 27 Training Centre. “It's happening.”

She says of Local 27's 7,000 or so members, about 40 per cent are apprentices and that's up from 17 per cent from just a couple of years ago.

“And we're still recruiting like crazy,” she says. “There are going to be continuing retirements over the next few years. There's no pool of candidates waiting, it's just constant recruitment.”

Her colleague, Paul Daly, vice-president of Local 27, says the push is to convince young people that becoming a carpenter is a career path that goes beyond swinging a hammer for the rest of their working life.

“I look at the people I came through with years ago and they are site superintendents and managers,” he says noting the average age of a member is now about 47 compared to 60 in other trades. “And so young people are moving up quickly too.”

The Carpenters, like all construction trade unions, are working at the high school level to attract candidate and through other government programs such as the Ontario Youth Employment Program.

“We want the right people because it’s not just about showing up on the job, you have to have the right attitude,” he says. “If they get three lates in training, they’re kicked out of the program. It’s about developing a culture and instilling the right attitude.”

It’s important because most of the employers are private contractors and they work on tight margins, says Daley. As a result, productivity is key and those workers with poor attitudes, who show up late or take long breaks, cut into the profit and, ultimately, the viability of the company and that hurts members when jobs are cut.

He says the attraction of being a Local 27 carpenter is almost full employment year around.

“We’re at 1.8 per cent unemployed in the local,” he says. “And then there are the pension and benefits. So we also need to bring more members to support the existing members when they retire.”

Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON) has already been actively working to fill demand for construction supervisors, site supervisors and project managers.

“Technology is driving all this and we’ve partnered with George Brown College to focus on estimating and construction supers where there’s a demand for qualified people,” he says. “This is the construction management program and there’s an architectural element to it as well.”

He says the industry will lose about one-third of experienced construction managers in the next five to 10 years as well as one-third of the municipal building officials.

“That’s a massive amount of experience going by the wayside,” he says. “I’m sure they’ve got replacements coming but looking at other data in other jurisdictions, such as the U.S., it is clear those people who run construction jobs are going to be in short supply.”

He says both George Brown and Durham College have set up programs to meet the need for training and RESCON is working with them.

It’s important to get the training programs in place and move candidates through, he says, because technology is starting to play a much stronger role in construction. Building Information Modeling will be here in the not too distant future as a standard, he says, and those running the show will be depending on their technology to stay on top of the details, especially with tall building design where RESCON is working with the University of Toronto.

RESCON is looking to get ahead of the curve because “we just can’t wait for the system to respond.”

“We’re doing the research ourselves,” he says. “There are two elements. There’s a four-year degree program in construction management, there’s a three years diploma program. With the three-year program they can apply for a bursary and then go into our special high-rise or low-rise

program where they are guaranteed a paid placement for four months, which can lead to full time employment and there's a 95 per cent success rate"

Kevin Baker, dean and principal of Durham College's Whitby campus says interest in trades education is booming

"We offer 12 different trades and the demand has increase significantly to the point we filled all the programs last year for the first time," he says. "That's about 800 students across the board. We had a small intake in January and again, that was also filled."

The subtrade most in demand program is elevating devices since they are the only school in Canada offering the program, he says, but there's also demand for millwright training and welding is also creeping up.

The one area where there are issues is attracting more women to the programs and other under represented groups such as indigenous students.

"Trades are still male dominated," he says. "It's starting to change but still not enough. More women are going into automotive, for example, but it's still small."

The college is also working with groups such as OPG which has a big footprint in Durham and the Weston Foundation to encourage more women to look at the skilled trades as are organizations like OCOT.

One of the barriers, he says, is mobility for women.

"Some of the trades require they have to travel to job and be away from home longer and in traditional families with children, women are the anchor," he says. "And that may be one of the big issues. Really, there's a knowledge gap, and we don't know why women are not coming into the trades more."

Another reason may be that most trades require math and science skills out of high school and that's traditionally been an area women shy away from.

"Those women who are strong in STEM subjects tend to get snapped up by engineering schools, so we're competing against them in a way," he says.