

Report examines skilled trades recruitment through behavioural economics

Angela Gismondi March 29, 2019



ANGELA GISMONDI — Jason Stewart discussed the findings of the report he authored entitled *A Behavioural Economics Approach to Recruitment in Skilled Construction Trades* at an event in Toronto hosted by the Residential Construction Council of Ontario and the Ontario Residential Council of Construction Associations.

A new report examines the recruitment of young people into the skilled trades through the lens of behavioural economics.

The report, *A Behavioural Economics (BE) Approach to Recruitment in Skilled Construction Trades*, was presented at an event hosted by the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario and the Ontario Residential Council of Construction** Associations in Toronto.

“We have four main recommendations. First, using BE to improve mental models; second, increasing collaboration and improving influencers’ last mile; third, embracing BE testing of influencer programs and tactics; and fourth, collecting and assessing longitudinal metrics of career paths,” explained Jason Stewart, president of Pol-Econ Canada Research Inc., who

authored the report. “We focused on the supply side and on recruitment. We did not focus on demand. We did not focus on retention even though these are crucial.”

The 124-page report includes primary research, literature review and empirical studies as well as 36 interviews with educators, administrators, parents, millennials, non-profit associations, labour unions and various industry experts.

“All of us in this room are aware there has been years of shortages in the skilled construction trades, especially in residential construction,” said Stewart. “This has occurred despite the fact of above average pay. It has occurred despite the fact of high levels of job satisfaction. So it’s clear that the traditional approach is not working. What our research helps to show is that behavioural economics can provide a number of insights in terms of how to approach this.

“First, behavioural economics offers a scientific framework that is based on many decades of rigorous research and testing. Second, it’s practical. It offers insights and tested applications to look at problems and help to solve them. Third, there is a huge emphasis on testing and experimentation.”

He also discussed the importance of adopting the EAST (easy, attractive, social, timely) framework.

“It’s key to changing young peoples behaviour as well as improving influencer impacts,” said Stewart.

Lindsay McCardle, who co-authored the report, talked about BE in the career decision journey.

“Even though we might think of that as being a decision that occurs at one point in time, we really tried to understand this as a process that unfolds over one’s life, so the career decision really begins as early as primary school,” she said.

“The experiences that we have through primary and secondary school really build that career-related mental model that helps them understand what is a career, what should it be, what could it be. It’s really important that those experiences expose them to a broad range of career options.”

McCardle also talked about the BE barriers to career choices, the things that inhibit young people from paying attention to positively interpreting and taking action towards a career in the skilled construction trades.

“There is an additional layer and that is the influencers, those people who impact the decision-making process of young people,” explained McCardle. “These people include educators, guidance counsellors and teachers, parents, extended family, peers and friends.”

Another BE barrier for young people identified in the research is narrow mental models.

“There are two particular elements to the mental model that young people and many influencers hold that make them narrow in relation to skilled trades,” said McCardle.

“The first is that young people often think that university is the only path to a successful career. The other part of that is they think that skilled trades are for less academically inclined students. When you hold these beliefs it can really influence the way they pay attention to information about the skilled trades and the way they interpret that information if they actually pay attention to it.”

The report suggests one way to counter that is more regular exposure to a variety of careers including construction and the skilled trades.

“That is really important to have from primary school all the way through to secondary school, every single year,” said McCardle.

“Those exposures need to be regular, very consistent and positive so they can get a good understanding of what those kind of opportunities are. This is of course more of a long-term investment. That Grade 6 student is not going to be an employee next week. But it’s really important that we invest time in that so those mental models shift and when those Grade 6 students get to Grade 12 they are making choices to go in the skilled trades direction.”

Another recommendation was to focus on educators, especially guidance counsellors.

“Guidance counsellors often have inadequate information and resources about skilled construction trades,” said McCardle. “Most of them come from an academic background and have had little exposure or experience to the trades so they maybe don’t feel comfortable telling young people about those kinds of options. We want to make sure they get more information. But it’s not just about giving them that information, it’s about how can we make the presentation of that information as effective as possible.”

She also touched on some of the barriers that organizations face, focusing specifically on digital connections, the online channels that they have as this might be their first way to connect with young people. It is important that they have visual appeal and a clear call to action, McCardle pointed out.

“When that first step is not clear, if it’s difficult, if there is a high hassle cost, young people are very likely to either defer that decision or perhaps avoid it all together,” she said. “We know that as humans we tend to take the default path and right now in schools the default path is university.

“We need to make getting into the skilled trades just as easy or easier so those barriers, those hassle costs to taking that first step, need to be removed.”