

## **The future of skilled trades in Ontario Part 1: Why did OCOT fail? What should come next?**

**Don Wall** October 16, 2020



Stakeholders believe the future of skilled trades in Ontario's construction sector lies in responsiveness to changes in the industry as the demands for a skilled workforce and spaces for apprentices to learn their crafts continue to grow.

It should not be stuck in the past with a cumbersome regulatory body attempting to fulfill numerous dubious mandates, with enforcement efforts fuelling divisions between unions and non-union sectors and health and safety not necessarily the top priority.

Those are some of the views of executives representing diverse construction sector interests, asked by the Daily Commercial News to offer opinions on how the industry should nurture the skilled trades the province needs to ensure a prosperous and productive future.

The recent announcement by Ontario's Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development Monte McNaughton of the establishment of a five-member Skilled Trades Panel represents the closing of a chapter in the province's regulatory history, with the panel asked to provide advice to the minister on the replacement to the Ontario College of Trades (OCOT).

Eleven stakeholders responded to the following questions: What lessons can we learn from the demise of the College? What system should replace it? How should the skilled trades evolve? What are the priorities as we aim to develop a robust and relevant system?

This is the first in a series of articles featuring industry feedback.

### **Richard Lyall, president, Residential Construction Council of Ontario**

**“While we applauded the proposed purpose of the College, which was to promote the skilled trades, the College was never able to live up to its potential as it was overly focused on rigid enforcement of outdated scopes of practice and compulsory trades and did not prioritize the promotion of skilled trades, removal of stigmas or breaking down of barriers facing young people wanting to enter the trades.**

**It also did not recognize the pivotal role played by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) and the importance of past practice and jurisprudence related to jurisdictional disputes.**

**The construction industry, government and new system must be nimble and adapt to technological change. The training and apprenticeship system must reflect how industry operates today and in the future.**

**There are 144 skilled trades in Ontario, spread across four sectors. The goal should be the creation of a system that will work for Ontario employers and workers.**

**This will require new skill sets to match employer needs with appropriate training. Arguably, protected and antiquated scopes of practices and systemic restrictions have stifled innovation and skilled trades supply. Health and safety must also remain a top priority.”**

### **Patrick McManus, chair of the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance**

**“The most important takeaway from the failed College of Trades experiment is that construction is a very diverse industry. There is much more to it than registered apprenticeships as a starting point. The College left the majority of trades and tradespeople without a real voice.**

**A new system needs to focus on making it easier to get more people into the industry and then filter them towards the ‘in demand’ trades. There needs to be more focus on gathering regionally based employment data and establishing regionally based training opportunities. We need greater accountability out of our training delivery agents.**

**It is my opinion that the government does not want to wade into the compulsory/non-compulsory trades issue. The OLRB has long been the independent arbiter of decisions around trade jurisdiction and it is a function that needs to remain. There are too many variables in trade jurisdiction, the decisions are too complex, and they need to be constantly updated as practices evolve.**

Trades need to be allowed to evolve as technology evolves. We need to look at how modular-based training and micro-credentialling can help to address the skills gap over the short- to intermediate term.”

**James Barry, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Construction Council of Ontario executive secretary treasurer**

“The intent behind OCOT was sound. We finally had industry engagement in the future of the trades. Completion rates rose. Enforcement officers were dedicated to ensuring that only qualified individuals were doing the work of compulsory trades.

Unfortunately, there were flaws. A cookie-cutter approach did not work. Journeypersons and apprentices in compulsory trades were required to pay the College’s annual membership fee while those in voluntary trades did not, creating no incentive to join. Enforcement of compulsory trades was assigned in many cases to persons who lacked expertise in enforcement and, quite often, in the trades for which they were responsible.

A new model is needed, one that respects the distinct role of the construction industry. Training standards and training delivery should be under the same umbrella, a unified authority.

What should not change is the importance of oversight to ensure that only certified journeypersons and registered apprentices are doing the work in the compulsory trades. The complete scopes of practice for certain trades like electrician must be maintained and enhanced to ensure work is done safely and reliably.

Worker and public safety must be paramount. The apprenticeship model should focus on completion rates.”