

## Three ways to avoid a skilled trades shortage

by Richard Lyall on 06 Oct 2021



The housing crisis facing our country is finally receiving the attention it deserves, but there is another equally troubling situation that the construction industry must contend with that also threatens our economic recovery.

The construction industry faces a shortage of skilled trades. We need more youth, women and underrepresented people to take up training and pursue careers in the industry to offset anticipated retirements. Without the workers, we will not be able to build that much-needed housing.

Ontario Citizenship and Multiculturalism Minister Parm Gill noted at a recent webinar sponsored by RESCON that over the next decade the province's construction industry will need 100,000 workers to keep pace with growth of the industry and the number of Baby Boomers expected to retire.

Unfortunately, that's almost 22,000 more workers than are likely to enter the industry over the 10-year period. We must get more people into the industry—whether it be in the field or in the office.

Hefty investments in infrastructure such as subway expansions, rail electrification projects in the GTA and a number of large hospital projects will fuel demand for trades on the industrial, commercial, institutional side. On the residential side, an upward swing in housing starts is expected over the coming decade, bolstered by pent-up demand and immigration-driven population growth.

The challenge our industry faces is how to recruit and retain workers, and ensure the province has the talent it needs to build the supply of housing and rental buildings.

RESCON has three solid ideas.

First, we must focus on marketing in-demand careers to youth and immigrants, second, enable jobseekers and workers to easily access information about in-demand careers and industries, and third, provide support for employers who hire and employ skilled trades.

We outlined our plan recently in a submission to the Ontario Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee (OWRAC). The committee was established by Labour, Training and Skills Development Minister Monte McNaughton to provide recommendations to shape the future of work in the province.

To ensure Ontario is the top jurisdiction for talent, it is crucial that greater focus is put on high-growth sectors like construction and the jobs that are in demand.

Construction will continue to drive the economic recovery of Ontario so marketing and promotion of our industry must be aimed at youth and immigrants who are looking to settle in Ontario.

Many of the anticipated jobs, including bricklayers, stucco installers, concrete and drain workers, elevator installers, crane operators and other finishing trades are in the residential construction sector and will require specialized skill sets.

We must recruit individuals who are willing to learn the specialized skill sets needed to have a fulfilling and lucrative career in residential construction.

Ontario needs to go back to what worked before and welcome immigrants interested in specialized careers in the residential sector. In construction, specific voluntary-based trades continue to rely on skilled foreign workers to offset domestic training programs. The current immigration system has trouble recognizing these careers as skilled and therefore has created barriers for immigrants with these skills.

The trade equivalency assessment process should consider skilled immigrants and their contributions to the construction industry.

We must also support workers by ensuring that jobseekers can easily access information publicly about in-demand careers and industries and find out what requirements are needed and where to go for training.

Digital tools and existing marketing materials should continue to be used by industry and government alike. For example, the Job Talks Construction resource is an open-source video series profiling 25 different jobs in the construction skilled trades. These visual tools are a great way to help students learn more about the trades.

I am encouraged that a digital portal will be created through the formation of Skilled Trades Ontario to help ensure that apprentices are progressing through their training and remain on track

to certification. Our hope is that the digital portal will be easy to use, for both apprentices, jobseekers, journeypeople and employers.

Employers must also be fully supported so they can adapt to today's ever-changing environment. The government should consider increasing on-the-job support for employers who hire and employ skilled trades people—specifically graduates of specialized training and college programs.

Most skilled trade workers in the residential construction industry fall under voluntary trades. This means that training is largely done on the job. Employers should be compensated for the training they provide.

Employers with robust mentorship programs should be rewarded and government-funded training programs should have significant mentorship components to ensure that youth are guided through their career pathways. This will ensure youth are kept on track and reduce drop-off rates among new trainees.

Training the next generation for a career in construction needs to be a priority. Our economic future is at stake.

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