



Youth denied careers in construction

By Richard Lyall

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First posted: Thursday, March 12, 2015 02:24 PM EDT



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The building industry is Ontario's economic engine, and we at the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON) are happy to represent it.

RESCON is the voice of the builders for more than 100 members across the GTA. If you are looking for a new home around Toronto or are a regular reader of this terrific section, you'll know many of our members.

In this monthly column, you will read about the technical nitty-gritty of the homebuilding industry. We'll use plain language as we tackle subjects such as six-storey wood-frame construction, glass towers, training, accessibility and net-zero housing.

For today's debut, we want to talk about the barriers faced by young people entering the skilled trades in Ontario. This is a critical time for youth unemployment, which stands at more than 15 per cent.

Our industry is forecasting skilled worker shortages as baby boomers retire over the next decade. This normally would present an opportunity to thousands of motivated young people.

However, the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA) reports that Ontario's current skilled trades system is restrictive and dated, creating a barrier for young workers.

So how can we bridge this gap? The answer: Ontario's apprenticeship regulations must be reformed to provide meaningful opportunities.

First, Ontario's apprenticeship ratios are too onerous. The recently released Dawson report says occupations with higher ratios also tend to have 38-per-cent fewer workers aged 25 to 34.

Apprentice carpenters and sheet metal installers must work for companies with a 3:1 journeyman-to-apprentice ratio; for plumbers, it's 2:1. The ratios for those three trades in Alberta and Saskatchewan are one journeyman for every two apprentices, which is much more favourable for youth trying to break into our industry.

The fact is there is no justification for Ontario's higher ratios: workers from other provinces can easily come here after completing more streamlined but no less effective apprenticeship programs.

Indeed, our system oddly encourages young Ontario apprentices to learn their trades in other provinces. Imagine if we could keep those young people in Ontario so they could build new houses and condominiums for you.

Second, finding apprenticeship positions in Ontario is very difficult. Part of the problem is the way the apprenticeship system is structured. Apprentices should complete their classroom requirements then go to work as an apprentice without having to return to class. To do otherwise is inefficient and a disincentive for employers who would then potentially lose trainees. What trainee, once starting to earn an income, wants to go back to school full time?

The Ontario College of Trades (OCOT), the regulatory body established and mandated to promote opportunities and skilled trades training and certification, is undergoing a provincial review. It is mired in controversy. Properly repurposed, OCOT could play a meaningful role in improving the apprenticeship system.

Currently, we are failing our youth. Hopefully the provincial review focuses on the public interest and guides the college to eliminate barriers for skilled trades rather than perpetuating them.

Ontario's youth deserve better and we will be advocating for nothing less.