

Boom times for skilled trades

As many tradespeople retire, ominous warnings are being sounded because of a dearth of people to work in the construction industry, writes MARK ANDERSON.

Building sites across British Columbia sit idle, with contractors unable to find enough skilled workers to begin construction on existing projects, let alone planned mega-projects such as the expansion of the Richmond airport and Vancouver transit line.

Alberta has already identified \$100 billion of new construction for next decade — provided companies can find enough workers to pour the concrete, build the girders and lay the steel reinforcing rods.

As for home renovation and repair work in places such as Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal, get in line: In many cases, there aren't enough qualified tradespeople available to meet the burgeoning demand.

No one knows for sure how serious the shortage of skilled labour is — 20,000 jobs currently unfilled is a conservative estimate — but virtually everyone agrees shortages exist, and are likely to reach crisis levels within a generation without improvement.

In part, the lack of skilled tradespeople stems from the economic collapse of the late 1980s and early 1990s, says Dennis Ryan, director of Industry Human Resources for the Canadian Construction Association: "That caused a major downturn in the industry, during which opportunities for new trades people were limited. Now, of course, the situation is reversed."

Thanks to decades of unrelenting, government-sponsored rhetoric on the importance of higher education and so-called lifelong learning, young people have been eschewing **college** for university and shunning blue-collar work for white. The result, says Mr. Ryan, is that the average age of skilled tradespeople is increasing at an alarming rate, and as these workers slide into retirement, there's a shortage of new talent to take their place.

Indeed, the message that a university education is paramount has resonated all too well among educators, parents and young people alike, says Rick Miner, who besides his duties as president of Seneca **College** is chairman of the Committee of Presidents of Ontario **colleges**. "High school counsellors are partly to blame. They think **college** is the default, and **college** is not a default." As a result, says Mr. Miner, many students are being streamed into university when they would be better served by learning a skilled trade in a **college** setting.

John-Paul Tapp, dean of the School of Transportation and Building Trades at **Algonquin College**, says the removal of woodworking, welding and automotive "shop" classes from high school curriculums is contributing to the problem.

Absent provincial funding for schools shops, administrators at Seneca and **Algonquin** are discussing ways to allow high school students to make use of **college** facilities, although "there's only so much spare capacity," admits Mr. Miner.

When she was chairwoman of the Canadian Construction Association, Ottawa's Shirley Westeinde travelled across Canada speaking to young people about career opportunities in skilled trades. She says parental expectations are particularly relevant when it comes to women.

"Only four per cent of construction jobs are occupied by women, so it's a huge untapped market," says Ms. Westeinde. "And yet I heard time and again from women who said that even though they wanted to pursue a trade, they were pressured to go to university. Some graduated with university degrees simply to satisfy their parents, before embarking on careers as carpenters or welders."

The good news: The stigma associated with trades work is dissipating, thanks in part to a renewed interest among federal and provincial politicians. The Liberal government has been funding TV ads promoting apprenticeship programs as an alternative to university, and it recently announced an \$8-billion package aimed at boosting participation in the trades.

Not to be outdone, Conservative leader Stephen Harper is promising a \$500 tax credit for

tradespeople who buy their own tools, a \$1,000 annual grant to help new apprentices get started, and a \$2,000 tax credit for businesses that hire apprentices.

Finally, the Ontario government is offering a desperately needed \$87-million cash infusion for Ontario **colleges**. "Before that, we were 10th among provinces in terms of per-capita funding," says Mr. Miner. "We're probably up to eighth now."

The somewhat grubby image of trades work is also getting a makeover from an unlikely source: the sudden plethora of TV home renovation programs, whose photogenic and ever-competent hosts make hammering nails and installing kitchen lighting seem positively glamorous.

"The home renovation programs are having an impact because young people watch a lot of television and are influenced by media," notes Mr. Tapp. "And when their parents have difficulty getting tradespeople to come to their homes, when they see the demand, the income and the job security tradespeople enjoy, they're less likely to object to their kids pursuing that kind of employment."

The image rehabilitation is being helped by the fact that university arts and humanities degrees often leave students with crippling debt and no sure prospects for employment. It's one of the reasons, says Mr. Miner, that 20 per cent of his classes at Seneca **College** are filled by university graduates. "Ironically, **colleges** are increasingly being talked of as finishing schools for university-educated students," he says.

"All the projections say you'd better have 70 to 75 per cent postsecondary training if you want a vibrant economy," says Mr. Miner. "So we have a shortfall, and that shortfall is not going to be made up by Queen's University or the University of Toronto. It has to be made up by the **colleges**."

Despite the best efforts of government, educators and popular media, however, enrolment in skilled trades is still not growing fast enough to keep up with the demands of the economy.

It's one reason why Ms. Westeinde, who co-chairs **Algonquin College's** Board of Governors, says administrators are trying to strike up partnership programs with local employers.

"Contractors and construction firms have to be prepared to take on apprentices, and have them work only three days a week while they take classes so that down the road they'll have the skilled workers they need," she says.

"We have an opportunity in Ontario to try to get ahead of the game. Governments can help, but unless the private sector gives apprentices places to work, and time off to study, the shortages of skilled labour will continue."



CHRIS MIKULA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Ottawa's Shirley Westeinde, immediate past chairwoman of the Canadian Construction Association, encouraged students across the country to consider skilled trades jobs.



ROD MACIVOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

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