Solving Labor SHORTAGES

An aging crop of tradespeople nearing retirement and government agencies quick to ignore funding deficiencies for trades training are among the reasons that Toronto's building industry could be brought to its knees as growing labor shortages paint a gloomy picture of the future. But recent minor victories including partnerships between industry and high schools and the start to expansion of a drywall training center are steps in the right direction to addressing woefully inadequate recruitment efforts.

Hugh Laird, executive director of the Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario, has been knocking on the provincial government's door for four years, hoping to get money to help fund the expansion of the association's apprenticeship training facility. This year the province responded through a program called Strategic Skills Investment by awarding ISCA $1.22 million (all numbers in Canadian funds) toward the $3.7 million expansion.

The additional space will take the pressure off the now crowded center, essentially doubling the teaching capacity from 120 to 240 apprentices annually. That's great news for the 100 or so people now on a waiting list and anyone thinking of a career in the field. The bigger facility will also provide room for skills upgrading courses for 600 tradespeople. Courses on health and safety, blueprint reading, scaffolding, computer skills and estimating are examples. Laird says he also plans to make space at the training center for courses on asbestos abatement and the application of EIF systems.

One of the reasons that ISCA's past applications for government aid for the expansion project likely failed is that the association was asking for a 50/50 split on a project that would cost close to $4 million. "We think they figured we were simply asking for too much money," ISCA's executive director says.

The training center is comprised of ISCA, the Acoustical Association of Ontario, the local carpenter's union and painters and allied trades union. ISCA will fund the lion's share of the project. Construction, from January to June, will
largely be conducted by apprentices in advanced classes at the center.

While such initiatives are vital to the building industry’s growth, associations like ISCA still have a long way to go to curb the labor shortage in the industry. “This is a little more than the proverbial finger in the dike,” points out Laird, “We have to be very aggressive with our recruitment efforts to bring in more apprentices.”

One approach is to get youth before they leave high school as is now being conducted through an ISCA pilot initiative. A pre-apprenticeship program preparing Grade 12 students for a career in drywall trades, it will see 20 or so students spend eight weeks in class at the center, followed by an eight-week practicum with member contractors. Successful students will continue their apprenticeship through the summer. Several school boards in Greater Toronto are taking part in the pilot program, which receives funding from the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program.

Youth Magnets

Drawing youth to a career in the building trades in this high-tech age is a hefty task for educators and the executives of associations like ISCA. “Unfortunately, the prevailing thought out there is a trade is the thing you do when you’re not good enough to do something else,” says Archie McKean, a high school teacher at Timothy Eaton Business and Technical Institute in Toronto.

Some experts say it starts with the parents, suggesting they need to wake up to the idea that a trade can be a viable option to a career in high technology or a traditional profession, he points out.

At ISCA, Laird organized an open house for parents, to give them the opportunity to get a good look at what their children would learn. A high school graduate signing an apprenticeship agreement for the drywall trade can be making $55,000 annually three-and-a-half years later, he points out. But Laird isn’t out to convince parents to enroll their kids. “We just want to show them what we have to offer. Let their kids make the decision.”

McKean says that’s a tough sell because parents and their children have been “brainwashed” into believing the only route to a successful career is through college or university. The provincial government, too, has largely avoided dealing with the subject. "If
you talk to anyone in the ministry of education or anyone in government about what technical education means, they start talking about computers.”

That mentality has to change, and the government purse strings for training and education of tradespeople have to loosen, say many industry experts. Currently anyone out of high school applying for apprenticeship needs enough money to get them through an initial eight-week in-school training period. Most applicants have worked enough weeks to qualify for employment insurance checks before they consider enrolling in a three- or four-year apprenticeship program. The problem is that many young people simply don’t have enough employed weeks behind them to qualify for “pogey” (employment benefits) and therefore can’t afford to cover the costs of apprenticeship, McKean says.

That’s why the concept of pre-apprenticeship makes sense. It allows students to get those first eight weeks of in-school apprenticeship training in while they are still in high school and often still under the financial support of parents or guardians, he adds.

Unfortunately, in Canada, any work that gets your hands dirty is generally seen as a pit stop to a career in high technology or a traditional profession. McKean, who immigrated from Scotland to Canada in 1965 with a carpenter’s ticket under his belt, says there is no such stigma attached to the building trades in the United Kingdom. He spent a year in a pre-apprenticeship program at a Scottish high school at a time when apprenticeship was still a foreign concept in Canada.

Erasing the negative labels surrounding careers in construction in Canada will go a long way toward persuading politicians to fund similar programs, he says.

**Cooperative Credit**

Another approach to recruitment is through co-operative programs between industry and high schools in which students work for credits. While co-op ventures are well-established in traditional trades like carpentry, the idea is still a novel one in trades such as drywall and EIF systems.

That could change soon, however, if the co-op experience of a Grade 12 student working for a major drywall contractor in the Greater Toronto Area proves a success. “We hope to expand in this area,” Laird says. “The industry has to take the bull by the horns at some point and point out that this is a very good way of making a living.”

The student, Ganesh Bahadur, is working for three months for academic credits at Toronto-based Four Seasons Drywall Systems & Acoustic Ltd. He’s the first ever to sign up with a drywall contractor through a high school co-op, a program that most commonly sends students out to more traditional fields. In addition to receiving three credits, Bahadur is paid $130 a
week by Four Seasons to cover expenses such as transportation and meals. The school board covers the cost of his workers' compensation benefits.

Pleased with Bahadur's performance, Four Seasons president Vern Zapfe says the youth is assigned to work on everything from basic cleanup to the more complex job of installing ceiling tiles at the downtown Toronto Eaton Centre where Four Seasons is doing interior renovations to three floors.

McKean says co-ops only first started getting a foothold in the building trades in the late 1990s. For years, unions didn't want unpaid students on construction sites largely because they viewed it as means for employers to get free labor. Over the past few years, however, unions have had to do an about-face due to aging membership and diminishing recruitment prospects.

**Residential Education**

While Bahadur may be the first student to enter the commercial drywall world, other high school students have been installing drywall at residential subdivisions in Toronto for several years now. A venture developed between a major homebuilder, Mattamy Homes, and the York Catholic District School Board is an example. It offers Grade 12 students an opportunity to build houses from the foundation to the roof at two residential subdivisions in suburban Toronto.

"The beauty of the program is that about half the students are sent out to different houses in the subdivision to work with various trades," explains Al Schmidt, education and training, Mattamy Homes. "We've got a whole networking system going."

The on-site semester involves more than just building a house. Students also have in-class sessions where they are taught everything from structural makeup to blueprint reading. Mattamy has assisted with the supply of some tools and equipment, and building materials suppliers have made substantial donations.

Obviously the field work program is working because two of the students have signed on as plumbing apprentices and a number have shown a keen interest in other fields, including drywall. "The way it happens is these kids go out with the tradespeople, and if they work out well, these kids might be offered jobs."

Such co-ops are not new in Ontario—300 or so students have gone through the program last year from 11 high schools in the York Catholic District School Board. In the past four years, Mattamy has built 19 houses in conjunction with students from Toronto area school boards. Annually 20 to 30 students end up in the apprenticeship program, and enrollment numbers are on the increase. Several other major home builders have signed similar agreements with schools.

The program is not a money-maker for Mattamy, and it undoubtedly puts a drain on staff. So why bother? Schmidt says Mattamy sees training today's youth as a vital means of preventing a debilitating skilled trades shortage down the road.

"The psychology of the industry has to shift from getting the product finished now to how we're going to get the product finished five years down the road," Schmidt points out. "With so many tradespeople nearing retirement, how can we expect to get the product finished when they finally do retire? We can't figure out why more builders haven't jumped on the co-op bandwagon."

Laird says while recruitment efforts have a long way to go to slow trades shortages, small victories such as the $1.22 million grant from the provincial government, inroads into pre-apprenticeship and high school co-ops are adding up. "These programs have traditionally been geared to the sexy high-tech industry. Now some politicians are realizing that there are good career opportunities in construction."

Still, the bickering between the federal and provincial governments over who should be responsible for training has hurt the industry, Laird says. "Community colleges don't seem to have any problem getting government money for expansion. The contractors here bought this building (ISCAs administration and training center) and renovated with no government money at all. We're definitely at an unfair advantage."

**About the Author**
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