



Some programs in Alberta are working toward building a more diverse construction workforce, hoping that indigenous, female, and immigrants to Canada will join. PHOTO COURTESY OF WOMEN BUILDING FUTURES.

ON-RAMPS TO INDUSTRY

Programs increasing diversity in Alberta's construction industry

By Rebecca Dahl

The construction workforce is aging, and some educational organizations say that to mitigate attrition, industry needs to look to under-represented demographics to take their places.

Some programs in Alberta are working toward building a more diverse construction workforce, hoping that indigenous, female, and immigrants to Canada will join.

“It’s still predominantly men—it’s still predominantly white men who work in the construction field. There’s no question about it,” says Kristine Morris, project coordinator at Work Ready Pathway in Edmonton.

Work Ready Pathway prepares high school students at Centre High Campus for careers in the construction trade. The campus is a high school in downtown Edmonton for fourth- and fifth-year students wanting to upgrade and explore post-secondary and career pathways. Work Ready Pathway is a relatively new program that initially received funding in July 2015.

Merit Contractors Association of Alberta, who funded Work Ready Pathway, put out a call to schools across the province for proposals for a potential educational initiative, the purpose of which would be to promote careers in the trades, especially among underemployed or underrepresented youth, indigenous youth, and women. Work Ready Pathway received \$400,000 from Merit to start the program.

Students at Work Ready Pathway learn technical trade skills from industry professionals, as well as work readiness components like ethics and resume building.

Morris says some of the lessons Work Ready Pathway teaches seem like common knowledge, but those lessons are the most valuable for underrepresented youth in the workplace.

“The first thing we do is that everybody learns the handshake,” says Morris. “Because depending on where you’re coming from and what your background is, the handshake may not be something that you see as appropriate—



Thirty-four per cent of the women accessing WBF training are of indigenous heritage. Jacqueline Andersen of Women Building Futures says that “women and indigenous people are the largest labour source that’s right here.”



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especially when we have young men coming from different countries where shaking a woman's hand or touching a woman at all would be seen as very inappropriate."

It's difficult for newcomers to learn these skills without understanding their significance and role in Canadian society. At the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Constructing Futures students with engineering degrees and experience in construction project management learn the skills and customs necessary to get them hired.

Constructing Futures offers an 18-week employment skill-building program, which is followed by an eight-week work experience practicum. Participants in the Constructing Futures program often come with international degrees in civil, mechanical, electrical, and chemical engineering.

"Employers are able to harness the brainpower and professional experience newcomers bring to Canada. They have a wealth of experience and the necessary education and skills to perform well in

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In Canada, drastically fewer women hold trade certificates and positions than men. According to Statistics Canada, in 2015, only seven per cent of women in Canada held trade certificates versus 14 per cent for men in the same time frame.

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a project management role,” says Jenny Park, coordinator at Constructing Futures.

“It’s giving someone a chance who might not otherwise have had a chance to enter into their profession.”

Similarly, Morris says the impact that Work Ready Pathway has on the lives of young people is consistently tangible. She says she has seen many young men and women who believed they had no prospects in life turn around and get good jobs in the trades.

“This is real time. This is making a difference in these young peoples’ lives,” says Morris. “And in turn, these young people who’ve embraced it are really going to step in and make a name for themselves and have great careers and contribute to the construction industries. So it goes around.”

In Canada, drastically fewer women hold trade certificates and positions than men. According to Statistics Canada, in 2015, only seven per cent of women in Canada held trade certificates versus 14 per cent for men in the same time frame. The results of the 2015 National Apprenticeship Survey shows that 86 per cent of trades apprentices are male.

Jacqueline Andersen of Women Building Futures (WBF) says that if you remove occupations like hairdressing and baking, the number of women working in the trades drops even more.

Women Building Futures’ mandate is to “empower women’s success through construction trades and construction maintenance,” says Andersen.



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Women Building Futures (WBF) is a leader in trades training for women, with extensive experience recruiting females into the heavy industrial workforce. The women who typically access training at WBF are between 18 and 60 years old. PHOTO COURTESY OF WOMEN BUILDING FUTURES.



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The women who access training at WBF are between 18 and 60 years old, and they're learning to break into the construction industry despite its inherent gender disparity.

Some of the women at WBF are unemployed, but many are just underemployed, working jobs in hospitality and retail, and often feeling unfulfilled. According to Andersen, women simply don't realize or recognize that trades are a viable option for their careers.

"I think certainly there's an issue in society in general around what I like to call the parity of the trades, which is that society doesn't see trades careers as being equal professional careers oftentimes. There's a sub-par idea that it's for the kids that can't make it academically, which is a shame because there's a lot of academic requirements for certain trades."

Thirty-four per cent of the women accessing WBF training are also of indigenous heritage. The average age of trades workers continues to rise into the late 50's, and once those workers retire, Andersen says the industry will need to seek labour elsewhere.

"Women and indigenous people are the largest labour source that's right here," says Andersen. "So instead of bringing in temporary foreign workers when the need arises—which it will again—you've got your labour force right here if you just look at half the population. And indigenous people in Canada are the largest-growing population in Canada."

The Alberta Aboriginal Construction Careers Centres (AACCC) have been working to prepare indigenous job seekers for careers in construction ever since they received their initial \$1 million in funding from the Alberta government in 2015.

Ruby Littlechild is a manager at AACCC, and she says her job since the centres launched has been to bridge the gap between indigenous people and the construction industry.

"A lot of our clients that come to our centres are coming from First Nations

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communities where there's little to no employment and much poverty," says Littlechild.

The barriers preventing indigenous workers from pursuing careers don't stop at poverty and geographic isolation; they continue to burden indigenous job seekers even after they leave the reserves, says Littlechild. Many barriers stem from cultural differences that interfere with communication skills.

What people don't understand, says Littlechild, is that indigenous people do want to be a part of mainstream society. It comes down to education and making companies aware of the cultural differences and barriers that often inhibit indigenous people from finding and keeping jobs.

"A lot of our men and women are humble and shy, so I have to get [companies] to understand where these people are coming from and why," says Littlechild.

At AACCC, indigenous men and women get job coaching support to assess qualifications and skill level, and can ultimately be matched with positions submitted by companies who are registered members of the AACCC.

"I think it's about creating shifts in society and both empowering indigenous people, but also educating industry so we can bridge the gap between the indigenous community and the construction industry and create more inclusive workplaces," says Littlechild.

When it comes to investing in young, underrepresented youth for trades and construction positions, there are benefits for both the job-seeking demographics and the industry.

Kristine Morris of Work Ready Pathway says ignoring the potential in these groups of people is wasting an entire

labour resource. All it takes to tap into it is a little investment in the individuals that compose it.

"That's the other piece," says Morris. "It's working with people who are doing

the hiring and the people who are training these young people and seeing that there are perhaps some different needs and different ways of relating to them than ways we've done in the past." ♦



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