Turning Youth Onto the Trades

With the construction industry facing critical skilled labour shortages, initiatives to promote the trades to our youth have become the focus for action by contractors, associations and users and government. But will these be enough?

Each year, high schools give prizes to their top students. But do these honors ever go to students who excel in carpentry, welding or any other trade-related discipline?

Not likely, but Merit Contractors Association is doing something about it and about the attitudes that undervalue the trades in Alberta's educational system.

The association has rolled out a Youth Employment Program designed to raise the profile of the construction trades as an attractive career choice and to help alleviate the shortage of skilled workers in the construction industry.

"There are huge, huge opportunities ahead in construction in Alberta," says Stephen Kushner, President of the Association. "We're going to have to be importing workers over the next while. But we feel it's preferable to train and hire people right here and we want to let youth know about the tremendous opportunities in the trades."

As part of the youth program, Merit is offering cash awards of $100 for top students in construction-related areas. The awards are available to any high school in Alberta.

The centrepiece of the program is an initiative that places bright young high school students in apprenticeship positions with Merit contractor/employers.

In January 1997, Merit Contractors hired an employment youth coordinator, Jean Nickel, in its Calgary office to coordinate the program throughout Alberta and arrange work opportunities for young apprentices with Merit members. Merit is working closely in this effort with apprenticeship officials, students, parents and schools. A major partner in the program is CAREERS: The Next Generation Foundation, a partnership of employers, educators and government that aims to improve young people's employability through applied workplace learning (see sidebar).

Last spring Nickel and Kushner went on the road with CAREERS: The Next Generation staff to introduce the foundation's RAP PLUS apprenticeship program to Alberta high school students. The program builds upon the Alberta government's RAP (Registered Apprenticeship Program), which allows high school students to work as apprentices while attending school. RAP PLUS pre-screens candidates to ensure they have a 65 per cent or better grade average and no serious behavioral or attendance problems. It also requires potential apprentices to undertake an unpaid summer work experience which serves as worksite orientation and an opportunity for employer and student to make sure they've made the right match.

Students entering the RAP PLUS program with Merit Contractor employers receive the 24-hour Basics of Construction module from Merit's Construction Skills Program and a five-hour safety program on CD ROM certified by the Alberta Construction Safety Association.

“It gives them a little edge so they don’t come in completely green,” Kushner says.

Merit committed to finding positions for 100 RAP PLUS students with member firms in 1997. The response was very positive, Kushner reports.

One employer who needed no convincing was Roger Dootson, operations manager with Edmonton-based Forest Construction Ltd., commercial, industrial and institutional general contractors.

“Frankly, we’re short-handed right now,” Dootson says, adding that his industry is facing an acute shortage of people in several trades including electricians, concrete finishers, plumbers and carpenters.

“The RAP PLUS program is a good way to replace us baby boomers who are getting ready for retirement.
The bottom line is, we have to try to attract people into construction because most mothers and fathers want their kids to go into post-secondary education whether they want to or not.”

Not only did Forest Construction take on a RAP PLUS student, Dootson volunteered to talk to students and parents first-hand about the benefits of a career in the trades. He visited Paul Kane High School in St. Albert and Victoria Composite High School in Edmonton, describing to students how he went into the trades as a carpenter and moved up into management.

Ray Gertz, president of ASM Industries is another employer who took on a RAP PLUS student last year. His company, a sheet metal and steel contractor and fabricator, is feeling the shortage of qualified people, particularly welders and sheet metal workers.

Gertz says he’s pleased with the way his RAP PLUS apprentice has performed. “He’s doing very well. We’re very pleased with him. He’d already had some instruction on safety and was somewhat knowledgeable about what he was getting into. He also has a work ethic, shows up on time and is very willing to learn.”

Brad Prather hopes someday there will be enough skilled workers around so he won’t have to turn away work, like the $2.5-million job he had to pass up last fall. His company, Bradon Industries, in Calgary, does industrial construction and heavy industry maintenance and installation, as well as steel fabrication. They recently expanded their shop floor from 11,000 to 30,000 square feet and their office from 1,500 to 10,000 square feet.

“I’d hire 30 people today if I could find them,” he says.

When the opportunity to create RAP PLUS apprenticeship positions came along, Prather leaped at it. “The program is good for the kids and good for us. That pre-qualification they go through is a really good deal. The kids have to keep their marks up to a certain standard. There used to be the perception that if a person couldn’t do anything else, they could always do the trades.”

Altogether Merit and CAREERS: The Next Generation Foundation created 55 apprenticeships with Merit Contractors members in 1997. The fact that the goal of 100 wasn’t achieved was not for lack of employers, but of qualified students, says

Kushner.

"On one level we're disappointed not to have made our target. But on another, we're pleased we've made huge inroads into getting students, parents and teachers interested in the trades as a career choice. We've had good feedback from our members, and our board have re-confirmed their commitment to our involvement with CAREERS in RAP PLUS."

A third component of Merit's Youth Employment Program is the creation of a TV program profiling opportunities available in the construction trades. Aimed at junior and senior high school students, the program will air several times over winter and spring 1998 on ACCESS, Alberta's educational television station. Merit will provide every high school in Alberta with a short version of the program on video. CAREERS: The Next Generation Foundation also was a partner in the TV project.

Another Merit initiative brings together a group representing construction contractors, labor, government and large companies that hire construction contractors in an effort to increase youth awareness of job opportunities in construction.

"The average age of apprentices in the construction trades is 27 or 28," Kushner points out. "That's because people usually work at a number of jobs first and then come to construction as their fourth or fifth choice. Our objective is to shorten that route—to make construction a career of first resort and to give our members bright, young, new workers."

RAP Plus: A Cool Idea

Last year at this time, Mike Poplett was in Grade 10 and didn't have a clue what he'd be doing after high school.

"Probably flipping burgers," he says now of what he thought his options were. He wasn't crazy about school, so he knew he didn't want to sign on for another four years in university. And his parents were getting on his case about skipping classes. The last thing he'd really enjoyed in school were the shop courses he took in junior high, where he scored in the 90s. He'd also enjoyed doing carpentry around the house, building a basement room and a deck with his dad, who "beats Tim Allen."

But he had no idea a person could make a good career of these things. "I just thought it was something fun to do."
Then his mother, Joanne, brought home a pamphlet on the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) from a career fair at the junior high school where she works as a teaching assistant. Meanwhile, her husband Michael, a bonding broker, had been talking with Stephen Kushner, president of Merit Contractors Association, and learned about Merit's partnership with the CAREERS: The Next Generation Foundation to recruit young apprentices into the foundation's RAP PLUS program with Merit contractor employers.

Under the program, students who have completed Grade 10 undergo a summer orientation including work experience with a prospective employer, plus Merit's Basics of Construction course and safety training. Then they complete Grades 11 and 12, attending school half the year and working in paid apprenticeship positions the other half. They earn their journeyman's ticket after another two to three years of

full-time apprenticeship, depending upon the trade.

"I said 'Hey, that sounds good. I could do that!'" Mike recalls. After discussions with his parents and the principal and vice-principal of his school, Bellerose Composite in St. Albert, Mike was linked up with Cavan Construction Ltd. in Edmonton as an apprentice carpenter. Following his summer work experience he went to work full time for Cavan in September, then returned to school in January to complete Grade 11. To his surprise, he was looking forward to it.

"Doing this has really kicked me in the butt. This is reality. I used to skip a lot of classes. But I couldn't do that now. This has taught me discipline. I had to get my act together."

Mike's parents are delighted with the change in his attitude. "We hadn't seen him so excited about anything in months," says Joanne after Mike's summer work experience. "It's wonderful. Most of his friends are envious that he gets a regular paycheque." Students working as RAP PLUS apprentices in the construction trades can expect to earn between $10,000 and $15,000 over two years during their work semesters and summers, without working evenings or weekends.

"For Mike, it's been a learning experience––about the trades and about life's lessons too," Joanne says.
And the future is taking shape in Mike's eyes, she adds. "My husband comes home and talks of clients in the construction industry who are having trouble getting framers and other skilled workers, so he sees there's going to be a need for people with training." Says Mike: "It's kind of ringing my bells. Like, wow, it's a cool idea. There's work lined up for at least the next five years, and I can always use it as a fall-back if I ever want to do something else."

Partnerships: Create Synergy in Promoting Co-op Education

If CAREERS: The Next Generation Foundation meets its long-term goals, 237,000 Alberta high school students will have two to three work experiences by the time they graduate. And a large proportion of those work experiences will be in the trades.

CAREERS: The Next Generation came together a little over three years ago to meet the dual challenges of youth unemployment and the impending shortage of skilled labour in Alberta.

The foundation––a partnership of employers, educators and government–– aims to ease the school-to-work transition by involving young people in cooperative education programs and exposing them to a wide variety of career options, including technology and the trades.

Foundation staff work as catalysts at the community level, bringing local businesses, municipal leaders, educators, parents and other stakeholders to the table to create applied learning opportunities for youth and bridge the gap between the classroom and the workplace. So far the foundation has engaged 16 Alberta communities and helped put 800 students in cooperative education programs with more than 400 employers.

Specific programs include RAP PLUS, an enhancement of the province's Registered

Apprenticeship Program for Grades 11 and 12 that pre-screens applicants, places them in apprenticeship positions with employers, and provides them with a pre-employment workplace orientation; and Co-op PLUS, a program that combines four-year rotating apprenticeships and classroom learning at the community college level.

"We're in the applied learning business," says Tom Nisbet, CAREERS foundation president, emphasizing the word learning. "Or, as I like to say, we're in the employability business, not the employment business. RAP PLUS is a beautiful example of this. These apprenticeship positions are educational placements."

In 1997, the foundation worked in partnership with Merit Contractors Association to create 55 RAP PLUS apprenticeship positions for Alberta high school students with Merit contractor employers. As part of the program, Merit president Stephen Kushner and the association's youth employment coordinator Jean Nickel joined CAREER staff in making presentations on career opportunities in the trades at Alberta high schools.

"The result is a new awareness of careers in the construction trades that wasn't there before," says Nisbet. "The challenge we face is the traditional perception among parents, teachers and students that the best path to a good career is a university education. The trades are not for everyone, of course, but we're saying 'just take a look at this.'"

Part of the problem is that a lot of kids aren't aware of the many apprenticeable trades, says Evan Rudyk, head of the Career and Technology Studies (CTS) department at Edmonton's Centre High School. "Most kids don't even know what a millwright or a boilermaker does." Rudyk coordinates the RAP PLUS program for the Edmonton Public School Board with Centre High assistant principal Jan Anderson. Getting students and their parents to look at career options in the trades "is getting easier all the time" because of the work of CAREERS, he says.

"It's really exciting for parents. When the kids get back to school the next year, their maturity level is much higher and they're more responsible."

CAREERS is multiplying this success story throughout Alberta. To meet its ultimate goal of involving all of Alberta's approximately 237,000 students in work experience programs, the foundation is forging partnerships with chambers of commerce, service clubs, industry associations and other organizations.

"Our partnership with Merit is an excellent role model," says Nisbet. "That's what synergy is all about: two plus two equals eight."

Construction Industry Targets Youth in USA

"The industry must change young adult's perception of the benefits of choosing construction as a career," states the Business Roundtable task force report, "Confronting the Skilled Construction Work Force Shortage, A Blueprint for the Future-October 1997,". With the establishment of the National Center for Construction Education and Research, the construction industry is finally being looked upon in a positive light. Young adults are able to see first hand the rewarding career paths that await them in the construction industry.

The National Center strives to enhance the image of construction industry; and it has made a giant leap in doing so with the broadcast of the national "Careers in

Construction...Join America's Build Team" teleconference on October 16th, 1997. More than 3,750 schools participated in this interactive career awareness activity, which broadcast to more than 250,000 students throughout the U.S.A. Public television stations have since broadcast the teleconference in "primetime" for parents, counselors and teachers to see.

The teleconference sparked industry support and employment opportunities in the local communities. Governors throughout the U.S.A. even declared October 16, "Careers in Construction Day" in honor of the national teleconference.

The teleconference focused on two panel groups. The first panel consisted of students enrolled in craft training programs, while the second panel consisted of successful industry executives. The teleconference will play an integral part in the National Center's career awareness and image campaign. The Center is developing a 25 minute videotape of the interactive teleconference to be used in classrooms nationwide as a career guidance tool. In addition, the Center has devoted an entire web site focusing on valuable industry information such as career opportunities and statistics for contractors, educators and students. Industry success stories will also be available.

The National Center, with the support of its partners, is continuing its focus on construction as a career path to young people with the upcoming 1998 Careers in Construction, Build YOUR Future teleconference. This interactive teleconference will show young people and their teachers how to enter into construction training programs.

While the construction industry has been plagued with a negative perception, the establishment of the National Center has proven that the industry is well on its way to recovery. As more and more contractors, trade associations and educational associations recognize the critical need to recruit and retain skilled workers, the construction industry's image will be restored.