

# Trade-Up cd-rom

Attracting new recruits is a key issue in today's burgeoning construction industry. But what is the best way to attract new entrants into the industry and make them aware of the opportunities construction can offer? A newly developed construction careers CD-ROM may be part of the solution.

The construction industry needs to attract young people to its workforce – an issue that's taking on increasing urgency as strong economies across the country push demand for construction. The need to expand workforces to tackle that increasing construction volume comes at a difficult time, with a large part of construction's core group of experienced personnel from the baby boom generation retiring.

Even before booming construction markets heightened the current manpower squeeze, most construction employers were recognizing the need to attract young, new recruits to the industry to take over from the veteran tradespeople they were losing. The question was, how?

Many contractors have spent afternoons at high school career fairs, smiling and pressing pamphlets into the hands of young people in the hopes of sparking

interest in the trades. Most however, would say the process was minimally effective. Part of the difficulty is that construction includes so many different occupations. Trade categories vary from province to province but there are approximately three dozen apprenticeable trades that fall within the construction sphere. In addition, there are a number of other occupations also considered part of construction that do not have formal training programs or trade designations.

While most young people have a basic understanding of what a carpenter, plumber or electrician does, many have never heard of millwrights, sprinkler fitters or glaziers. Of the list of construction occupation trades, most students would not be able to describe in any detail more than half a dozen. Even more worrisome is the fact that the same comment would apply to most of their teachers and guidance counsellors.

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With so many career paths within construction, how is it possible to make potential future tradespeople aware of opportunities construction can offer? Short of daylong tours to building sites, or a parade of working tradespeople visiting classrooms, is there a way to give young people a comprehensive look at the many construction trades? Explaining what each individual trade does is just a start. How can we deliver information on employment, access to training, wage rates, employment prospects, possibilities for advancement, contacts, etc.? These were questions facing an Alberta group intent on stepping up the industry's recruiting efforts. Ironically, the solution to these challenges was provided by the high-tech industry – the very entity perceived to be attracting the majority of bright, young people entering the job market.

CD-ROM disk communications technology has advanced so much in recent years, that it now offers a practical method of delivering a large parcel of information to a very large and geographically dispersed audience. This technology enables students to see real construction work in action and hear real working tradespeople talk to them via video clips.

Merv Ellis is the now-retired executive director of the Alberta Construction Association (ACA). Over his 40 plus years in construction, he was involved in a number of different initiatives aimed at helping the industry attract new entrants. Those included many of the “chat-and-hand-over-the-pamphlet” scenarios at school

career days. As the point man for ACA's efforts to get construction career information to the schools, he recalls how inefficient the process was. “I would spend two or three days on the road to talk to three classes of about 10 kids,” he says.

Always on the lookout for more effective means of promoting construction careers, he was at an industry meeting when he overheard people talking about a CD-ROM careers program developed by the forestry industry. The potential of using this format for construction caught his imagination. He investigated further and then brought the concept to the attention of government and industry stakeholders in Alberta. It received immediate interest. As Ellis recalls, “The concept was so slick that everyone got excited about it.” In short order, a broad based group was formed under the auspices of the Construction Owners Association of Alberta, through a careers subcommittee chaired by Merit Contractors Association president, Stephen Kushner. The goal was to produce a CD-ROM containing construction career information directed at high school students.

The Merit Contractors Association was a very early partner. Stephen Kushner describes the task they faced, “Our early thoughts were heavily focussed on the marketing challenge to reach youth. We needed a medium to distribute our message in an exciting format that was both credible and attractive. We recognized that the job site could be brought to the class-

room and to the home through this technology.”

The early stages of the project involved interviewing focus groups of students to determine what the end product should look like, and what worked and what didn't in a CD-ROM format. Next came a request for proposals to production companies.

Soon, the project had most of its necessary components in place – supporters from the industry, a vision of what the end product would be, and a production company (the Lunny Communications Group) with the technical expertise to produce it. All that was missing was the money to make it happen. The “Become an Apprentice!” brochures of the past may not have been terribly effective, but they were cheap. A CD-ROM disk, with an estimated production and marketing cost of \$400,000, was a different matter. As Merv Ellis recalls, “We shocked a few people when we told them the price tag.” A substantial fundraising campaign was necessary for the project to move forward.

Don Oborowsky of Waiward Steel, an Edmonton steel fabrication company, headed up the fundraising effort. “Overall it was very well-received...all the parties we approached recognized the immediate need to have something like this in the marketplace,” he says.

In short order, fundraising efforts resulted in \$410,000 being committed to the project. Commitments came from both union and non-union contractors' associations (Merit and Construction Labour Relations), the

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Alberta Construction Association, the Alberta Homebuilders Association, the Alberta Roadbuilders Association, trade unions, individual contractors, construction purchasers, the Construction Owners Association of Alberta, and both the federal and provincial governments. The breadth of support demonstrated that although the various constituencies in our industry can be fractious at times, the industry as a whole can come together to embrace a good idea. The Alberta Construction Association, under the direction of Don Oborowsky and new executive director Sharon Copithorne, agreed to take on the day-to-day task of managing this ambitious project.

What exactly was it that produced this level of enthusiasm? The end product is a virtual encyclopedia of information on construction occupations. If you will, this is the pamphlet of years past, transformed to the nth degree by information technology into an attractive, user-friendly, comprehensive and accessible package.

The huge data capacity of a CD-ROM means a tiny plastic disk can deliver full motion video clips of activities on real job sites. Don't know what a millwright does? A click of the mouse brings up video footage of a millwright at work. Concrete Finisher? Machinist? Glazier? Live action eyewitness views are available for 34 different trades and occupations. For each, there is also text information on the work of the trade, current wage rates, how training programs operate and contacts for more

information.

To explain the big picture – how a construction project is put together – there are four different “virtual construction sites”: residential, commercial, industrial, and roadbuilding. With a click of the mouse, students can see these realistic, computer graphic job sites transformed from the earliest site prep through the various stages to the completed project. On any of the various phases depicted, they can also click on the individual workers shown and have their trade identified.

With a target audience of high school students, there was recognition that something more than just information was needed to hold their interest. The computer format was certainly not a problem – today's students have grown up with computer technology and most are totally at ease with navigating through complex programs. For added appeal though, and to encourage users to fully explore the information available, a game was added. This consists of a virtual building project. Students build a house on screen by choosing the appropriate trades for each stage of construction. Choosing correctly before the allotted time runs out results in the virtual house transforming itself to the next phase of construction, where players must choose again on the trades required. Moving through seven different phases allows them to build a house on-screen from excavation through to landscaping.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the program is the video segments

with full audio. In these, different people from the industry speak directly to students about job satisfaction, employment opportunities, income potential, advancement and reasons why a career in the construction trades can be a great choice. These “talking heads” include working tradespeople, apprentices, construction owners and employers. This face-to-face format with its spoken message delivers the desired information more effectively than a whole library of printed material.

The video clips are equivalent to a busload of construction industry people visiting every school in the province and making a pitch selling construction as a career choice. But the video version is even better because the pitch can be repeated endlessly and delivered anywhere and any time.

The CD-ROM, entitled, Trade Up! Careers in Construction, generates instant enthusiasm from anyone who views it. But no matter how good it is, it won't be effective unless seen by the target audience. The backers of the project are making strenuous efforts to ensure that the disk is available to any interested high school student in the province.

Thanks to successful fundraising, resources are available to make that happen. Over 30,000 disks were produced and are available free of charge. Every school received copies and through the early involvement and support of Alberta Learning, a teachers' guide was produced to facilitate classroom use of the disk. To further

enhance accessibility, the program has its own website, [www.careersconstruction.com](http://www.careersconstruction.com), making it available to anyone with internet access. Funds have also been budgeted for the marketing, kick-off publicity, disk distribution and on-going maintenance of the website.

While the impact of this disk may be impossible to measure, everyone who views the program would agree it is a huge step forward in promoting construction as a career choice. Perhaps the reason this project went so well is that it was market-driven: the employer community initiated it, orchestrated it and supplied the majority of the funding for the project. Construction employers recognize the on-going need to attract employees and the Trade Up! CD-ROM is a part of their efforts to meet that demand. As Don Oborowsky says, "Employers took this idea and drove it forward. They could see a definite advantage to partnering in the project."

With the disk now available in classrooms across the province, no one believes, of course, that it will magically bring lines of young people to the doors of construction employers. It is, however, a vast improvement over past recruiting efforts. Delivering information was the challenge and CD-ROM has proven itself as a phenomenal tool to meet that challenge.

A major difficulty of the past was that most teachers and guidance counsellors had very little knowledge of the construction business or the trades. A young person trying to make a decision about where to head after high school would be looking for advice from an educator who had likely never worked in a non-academic setting. They could explain accounting or nursing to their students, but they would be at a loss to describe the working life of an ironworker, concrete finisher or sheet metal worker, or even how to enter those trades. The Trade Up! CD is an easy-to-use tool that provides that information.

No employer, no matter how dedicated to the task of attracting new young apprentices, could hope to accomplish the thousands of face-to-face visits in our schools that would be necessary to make a dent in fulfilling our manpower needs. The trade careers CD and website can work as a "virtual sales force" for the construction industry that is always on duty, always available and able to deliver the message that construction offers great career opportunities to students anywhere. As Merv Ellis says, "The disk allows us to show our industry how it really is, and that it's more than just dirty boots and hard hats." OM

*Joel Thompson*