THE APPRENTICESHIP DU 77 L E

Across Canada, apprenticeship numbers are on the decline causing serious concerns about a future shortage of qualified tradespeople. One notable exception, however, is Alberta where enrolment is at an all time high. Even with only nine per cent of the country's population, Alberta trains 19 per cent of Canada's apprentices and produces more journeymen with a Red Seal designation than any other province in Canada. By all accounts, the system is a huge success. But what is it about Alberta's apprenticeship system that sets it apart?



The Apprenticeship System

Historically, the practice of apprenticeship was a system of learning a craft or trade from one who is engaged in it, then paying for the instruction by a given number of years of work. This practice was known in ancient Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, as well as in modern Europe and to some extent, the United States. Typically, in medieval Europe, a master craftsman agreed to instruct a young man and give him shelter, food and clothing. In exchange, the apprentice would agree to work for the master for a given time. After that time, he would become a journeyman, working for a master for wages, or sometimes become a master himself.

Today's apprenticeship system is a combination of on-the-job training, work experience and technical training. The length of study varies by trade but the average apprentice spends two to five years in training. Of this time, 80 per cent of time is spent gaining on-the-job experience; the other 20 per cent spent receiving technical training. Apprentices are paid on a sliding scale, with first year apprentices earning about half of a journeyman's wage with

pay increasing as training progresses.

Currently in Alberta there are over 38,000 registered apprentices in 50 designated trades and five designated occupations - over 50 per cent of those construction-related. According to Shirley Dul, executive director of Apprenticeship and Industry Training, the system is experiencing tremendous growth. Since 1995, there has been a 65 per cent increase in the number of registered apprentices and enrolment has increased by 18 per cent in the last 12 months alone. In addition, the system is enjoying tremendous growth in the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) for high school students with almost 1,000 students currently participating.

Building the Foundation: An Industry-driven System

Overseeing Alberta's apprenticeship system is the 13-member Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board. The Board does not work in isolation however, but relies on a network of trade specific industry committees. These committees include local and provincial apprenticeship committees (LACs and

PACs) for each of the designated trades and occupations. These committees, composed of equal numbers of employers and employees, recommend training standards, develop course outlines, monitor changes and identify areas for improvement.

Industry's role in this manner is crucial to the system's success as it ensures the apprenticeship program is tied to industry needs. The industry representatives in this role are in the perfect position to monitor industry changes and recommend program improvements or revisions, ensuring the curriculum stays relevant, takes into account effective and safe working practices and keeps pace with technology and industry needs.

According to Cliff Williams, chair of the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board, it is this interactive system of employers and employees providing direction to the Board and setting the standards for training that sets Alberta's apprenticeship training system apart.

"This is very much a 'bottom-up' system. As an apprenticeship board, we don't sit in judgement, as many people perceive a board to do. We don't tell a bunch of folk



Superior Propane

Propane delivers the power.
We deliver the freedom.

24 hours a day • 7 days a week

Call Toll Free 1-877-873-7467 For a Branch Near You

www.superiorpropane.com







For 40 years, Superior Propane has been recognized as the leader in providing quality energy products and services across Canada. Today, we're expanding to bring you even more.

New Products & Services . . .

Natural Gas Appliance Sales and Service • Crane Truck Lifting and Hot Shot Services Fork Lift Emission Testing and Tune-ups • RV Maintenance and Inspections

And of Course . . .

Construction Heater Sales, Service and Rentals Storage Capacities from 100 lb cylinders to 60,000 Gallon Tanks Construction Heater Safety Training • Safety and Installation Inspections On-Site Bulk Delivery • Cylinder Filling and Cylinder Exchange Program

As always, satisfaction quaranteed.



Overseeing Alberta's apprenticeship system is the 13-member Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board. The Board does not work in isolation however, but relies on a network of trade-specific industry committees. These committees include local and provincial apprenticeship committees (LACs and PACs) for each of the designated trades and occupations. These committees, composed of equal numbers of employers and employees, recommend training standards, develop course outlines, monitor changes and identify areas for improvement.

what to do. In fact, it's kind of the other way around. The PAC/LAC networks feed their needs up to us and we try to make them happen on their behalf."

To ensure those industry networks continue to function well, industry workshops are held regularly to keep those committees operating efficiently.

And it's because of this highly responsive system, Williams says, that Alberta's apprenticeship system enjoys tremendous support from industry players. He cites funding and support for the Trade Up! CD-ROM, and apprenticeship scholarships, as well as industry's participation in other initiatives that promote careers in the trades such as Skills Canada competitions and Careers: The Next Generation. "Industry, including all employer associations, construction and trade associations, are very supportive of our system. The reason I think, is because they feel they are included."

A Neutral Player

Another area where Alberta stands out is the neutral role government has taken with regards to training, ensuring both union and non-union workers have access to training. This is in sharp contrast to other jurisdictions, particularly in the U.S., where government provides little funding for trades training and where, in the past, unions were often the largest group offering training — training that was generally restricted to union members.

Recognizing that concern, the U.S.-based National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) was established in 1995. Their aim was to create a national curriculum for non-union contractors in the hopes of standardizing curriculum and improving accessibility. Today, some 30 national associations and many large U.S. contractors have pooled their resources to develop and maintain a

national curriculum for training in the U.S. Further, the NCCER has established an infrastructure to ensure high standards of delivery and skill certification across the U.S. They have also embraced new learning technologies with CD-ROM-based training and have completed some very important work in the area of craft assessment.

In Alberta, government has adopted a neutral stance to ensure training is available to everyone, both union and non-union.

Jake Thygesen, past chair of the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board, confirms that in the U.S. and some other provinces, it was typically the unions that taught their members while government took little interest in apprenticeship training. When government did take interest it was to sign agreements with the unions

"In Alberta, we have totally equal access for union and non-union workers," Thygesen explains. "We have a very strong union and non-union employer/employee support system in place to design the curriculum and monitor the system."

A recent example of Alberta Apprenticeship's commitment to equal access to training occurred with regards to the elevator trade.

For years, the elevator business has been almost exclusively union. Elevator and escalator work is a compulsory trade, meaning that anyone who engages in that work must be a journeyman or registered apprentice. The apprenticeship curriculum is owned by the Elevator Constructors' Union and they refused to permit its use training non-union Apprenticeship and Industry Training quickly stepped in to remedy this situation, developing new curriculum and scheduling classes open to both union and nonunion employees. This is just one example of the way the Alberta system responds and

reacts quickly to industry needs.

Past history suggests that having two separate training programs (one for union and another for open shop) with no centralized curriculum can result in less comprehensive training. By contrast, the Alberta system believes in teaching a wide foundation of general skills first. If an Alberta-trained tradesperson eventually chooses to specialize in a narrow skill area, he or she will always retain a wider skill set. As a result, Alberta-certified journeymen have far greater career flexibility and mobility than people trained in systems where early specialization is the norm.

That also translates into more portable skills, hence Alberta's strong commitment to the Red Seal program – the standard of labour mobility across Canada. Through this program, journeymen and apprentices who have completed their training are able to obtain a "Red Seal" endorsement on their Journeyman Certificate by successfully completing an Interprovincial Standards examination. The "Red Seal" allows qualified tradespeople to practice the trade anywhere in Canada without having to write further examinations. The program encourages the standardization of provincial/territorial training and certification programs and provides greater mobility for skilled workers, allowing them to move from one part of Canada to another.

Government Funded, Government Supported

In the U.S., the government provides little funding for construction trades education. As a result, the majority of training has often been provided by unions for union members.

The level of financial support provided by the Alberta government for apprenticeship training is one of the highest in the country, ensuring the system is able to



A 2000 survey showed that 97 per cent of employers were satisfied or very satisfied with the skills of their certified journeymen; 90 per cent of employers associated with the system were satisfied or very satisfied with the system and 85 per cent of employers were satisfied or very satisfied with the content of their trade's technical training program.

keep pace with the changing needs of the construction industry.

In Alberta, the government has made efforts to ensure training is accessible and affordable. In fact, until recently, apprenticeship tuition fees were paid by the government. In 1998 however, the government introduced tuition fees for the classroom component of apprenticeship training. Today tuition is \$50 per week, or \$400 for an eight-week class. Still, Cliff Williams says, Alberta has enjoyed excellent support from the government. And even with apprentices responsible for their own tuition fees, he adds, it is only a very small portion of the cost of running the system. The provincial government still subsidizes apprenticeship training by millions of dollars each year.

According to Jake Thygesen, industry has taken more and more financial responsibility to promote a self-sustaining system. As an example, he cites the Merit Contractors Association which was the first employer organization to refund apprenticeship tuition fees. This program provided tuition refunds to 1,000 apprentices in 2001. Recently several industry players have also contributed to a new \$1 million scholarship fund to help offset tuition costs. In general, the open shop construction industry has been very supportive of the system and has been a major contributor to its success.

Recently, additional assistance has come from the federal government which made modifications to the employment insurance program (EI) to support apprentices learning the trades. Previously, apprentices had to wait two weeks before receiving EI benefits each time they left the workplace for classroom training. Since an apprenticeship program is a single continuous course of study stretching over a number of years, the EI program will be modified so that apprentices are only subject to one two-week waiting period.

A Solid Foundation: Post Secondary Training

With technical training making up 20 per cent of an apprentices' training, the post-secondary institutions are a very important part of the apprenticeship training system.

In Alberta, there are nine technical training institutes providing the technical training. Of those, approximately 45 per cent of training is done through the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and 27 per cent is done by the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), with the remainder divided among the remaining seven institutions. All are encouraged to provide input to the board and serve as advisors to the PACs and LACs.

With the need for tradespeople at an all time high, Alberta Apprenticeship was challenged to come up with some alternative ways to deliver training. To this end, there are now a number of flexible delivery options available for some programs. For instance, distance delivery allows apprentices to take the theory portion of their training at a distance and come into a post-secondary institution for labs; mobile delivery brings the technical training directly to the apprentices and one-day a week training allows workers to take training one day a week rather than taking the full period off work. These efforts ensure the technical training component of the program is accessible to apprentices and the needs of the construction workforce.

Industry Feedback

According to the apprentices and the employers that hire them, the system is a success.

To ensure the system is responsive to employers and employees, the Board surveys employers and employees in alternating years. A 2000 survey showed that 97 per cent of employers were satisfied or very satisfied with the skills of their certified journeymen; 90 per cent of employers associated with the system were satisfied or very satisfied with the system and 85 per cent of employers were satisfied or very satisfied with the content of their trade's technical training program. In 2001, 92 per cent of graduating apprentices also reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of their work experience and 95 per cent were happy with the quality of their technical training.

Despite these encouraging findings, the Board is always looking at implementing improvements and enhancements, says Cliff Williams. "In spite of the very high satisfaction rates, we tend to hone in on any negative comments to ensure the system is the best it can be."

Alberta Apprenticeship: Responsive, Flexible, Affordable.

With construction industry activity booming, the need for qualified tradespeople is greater than ever. More than ever, apprenticeship must be seen as an effective training and education system to attract new entrants to the field. Alberta Apprenticeship is making that happen, delivering a system that is highly responsive to industry needs while maintaining high standards of training.

In Alberta, as the growing economy demands more and more qualified tradespeople, the apprenticeship system is growing to meet it. "We've always maintained that if the employers can hire them, we can train them. That's a challenge from time to time, but we do it," says Cliff Williams.

Successful apprenticeship training relies on the participation of business, labour, educators, government and other employee market partners. Alberta is leading the way in this regard, allowing the industry to play a major role in the education and training of its future workforce.

Laura Soucek