

On the Fast Track

A carpenter's apprentice couldn't be happier to be out of school

BY JIM VEENBAAS

When Shane McCoy sees his friends struggling to pay bills and piling up enormous debt while attending college or university, he knows he made the right decision. By entering the Alberta Apprenticeship Program, McCoy fast-tracked his way to a high paying career.

“I was thinking about taking some engineering classes after high school, but I couldn’t afford tuition,” says McCoy, who works for Clark Builders in Edmonton. “I didn’t know about the apprenticeship program when I started working, but one of my supervisors introduced me.”

The 21-year-old Edmonton man was wary of enrolling in full-time post-secondary studies after high school because of the high costs. Instead, he started working in the construction industry and quickly became a registered carpenter’s apprentice. He is now a fourth-year apprentice earning 90 per cent of a journeyman’s salary and he has the satisfaction of knowing he’s learning skills for which other companies across the country are clamouring.

“It’s been awesome. My education is paid for, I’m making money while I go to school and I’m starting a career.”

McCoy is one of about 100 apprentices working for Clark Builders. The apprentices play a crucial role in the company’s business operations by providing a mix of semi-skilled and highly skilled workers, introducing new and innovative construction practices, boosting staff morale and reducing the average age of the workforce. With an expected 10-year shortage of skilled trades people in this province, apprenticeships will help companies fill the gaps faster.

“By having good people with excellent skills, we can go after more and better projects,” says Gerald Clark, the company’s human resources manager. “Just imagine what all these apprentices will bring to the company two or three years down the road.”

The Alberta Apprenticeship Program features a combination of on-the-job-training and academic pursuits at the Northern



and Southern Alberta Institutes of Technology. Apprentices also cost less than journeymen; first year apprentices earn 50 per cent of their salary. But their value cannot be measured in wages alone. Enthusiasm and inventiveness are part of what an apprentice has to offer.

“Apprentices often think outside the box,” says Victor Jensen, a controller with Botting & Associates Alberta Ltd. “We’re always looking to do things more efficiently and safer. We find a lot of good ideas come from them. Most of our superintendents started with us as apprentices. It’s a win-win relationship. As an apprentice, you get paid by your employer while you learn to become a journeyman. As an employer, you get staff who are loyal, highly motivated team players.”

Another advantage for employers is the relationships that develop. When you train your own people, you play an active role in ensuring their education meets the unique

For Your Information

Q: What is a registered apprentice?

A: Tradespeople learn their skills by registering with Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training to participate in an Apprenticeship Program and upon successful completion are awarded the Alberta Journeyman Certificate.

Q: What is a certified journeyman?

A: To be considered a certified journeyman in Alberta, a person may be the holder of an Alberta Journeyman Certificate or Interprovincial Standards “Red Seal.” Someone with an equivalent document from another province may apply for an Alberta Journeyman Equivalency document.



needs of your business. “It’s an investment in time and money but it’s worth it,” says Kevin Witzke, project manager for Muth Electrical.

“Being with Muth Electrical is more than a job, it’s a lifestyle,” says Witzke. “We believe in having fun and working hard. We’re going to reward you for being loyal to the company and the apprenticeship program is part of that.”

To maintain enthusiasm and ensure success, many companies support their workers by paying for books and tuition, and giving apprentices more responsibility when they return to the field. Clark Builders holds special events to reward workers when they complete their training.

“We take them out for pizza and play laser tag. We have goal-setting sessions with them and make the extra effort to support them,” says Gerald Clark, who sits as a member of the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board.

Although apprentices have long been a source of skilled employees, the necessities of the booming economy have sparked unprecedented interest in the program. Alberta had more than 56,000 apprentices registered in 50 trades in September 2006, an 18 per cent increase from 2005, and 43 per cent higher than in 2000.

Nevertheless, demand for skilled labour continues to escalate. The Conference Board of Canada predicts there will be a shortage of one million workers in the trades and related occupations within 20 years. Those demands have sparked the creation of new programs designed to create awareness of the advantages of apprenticeships and encourage more people to register in a trade.

So far, it’s working. The 15-year-old Registered Apprenticeship Program, which helps high-school students earn credits

toward an apprenticeship program and a diploma at the same time, saw an enrolment of more than 1,400 students this year, and those numbers continue to grow. The Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program, which was established in 2001 to help Aboriginal people choose a trade, has also seen an increase. With more than 100 participants since its inception, program administrators hope to register a minimum of 255 apprentices by 2007.

One of the most promising programs in the province is Women Building Futures, which prepares women for a trade before they register as an apprentice. More than 240 women have entered the Edmonton-area program since it was established in 1998, and 95 per cent of them have become registered apprentices. Before they enrol, applicants must undergo a rigorous pre-screening process that helps determine if they are suited for a career in the trades, followed by 16 weeks of training. Only then are they hired by a company and enrolled in the program.

The success of Women Building Futures convinced the not-for-profit group to launch a \$10-million expansion project to accept 400 students a year by January 2008. The group purchased an old warehouse in downtown Edmonton and plans to convert it into a training facility that will include 40 units of low-cost housing to accommodate out-of-town students.

“Up to this point, we have been very small,” says JudyLynn Archer, CEO of Women Building Futures. “We spent the first few years building a high-quality program that gives employers the kind of people they need. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. Most of our graduates are now hired sight unseen.”

“We have a huge talent pool of women right here in Alberta and they can be an

“WE HAVE A HUGE TALENT POOL OF WOMEN RIGHT HERE IN ALBERTA AND THEY CAN BE AN EXCELLENT SOURCE OF SKILLED WORKERS. WOMEN CAN BE A PART OF THE SOLUTION.”

Judy Lynn Archer,
CEO of Women Building Futures



excellent source of skilled workers. Women can be part of the solution.”

Although a career in the trades isn't the right option for everyone, the typical journeyman makes between \$20 and \$30 an hour and the annual salary for some workers exceeds six figures. That type of earning power is shaking the stereotype that university grads earn more money and have more rewarding careers, says Victor Jensen.

“I used to teach Junior Achievement and when I asked the kids what they wanted to be, the trades were always way down the list,” he says. “In the past, the common thought was that only kids who didn't do well in school should go into the trades. Now they are starting to get the attention they deserve and schools are aware of what's happening out there in the booming economy. Lots of kids who go to university don't earn as much as people who go through the apprenticeship program.”

Shane McCoy needs no convincing. With a solid financial foundation to work from, he can earn an excellent living as a

Facts

- The number of registered apprentices in Alberta reached a record level of 57,355 in October 2006.
- Albertan employers are hiring and registering about 100 apprentices each workday.
- Merit member companies provide apprenticeship opportunities for more than 200 high-school students through the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP).

carpenter, possibly open his own business or even enrol in those engineering courses he was considering when he graduated from high school.

“I'm really excited about finishing up the program and starting my career as a carpenter. I never really considered taking up a trade until I started working and learned what a great opportunity it is. This was the best decision for me.”

What's in Store

Merit Contractors' new website is an expanding success

When Merit Contractors Association launched www.constructionjobstores.com in early 2006, Association Vice President Brad Wright did not fully appreciate that the organization was at the forefront of a trend. Exclusively focused on job opportunities within the open shop sector across Canada, the website has become a fundamental recruitment tool for many employers and job seekers within the construction industry. It is maintained by the Association and is part of the Construction Job Stores of Canada.

“It's unique in Canada because the website focuses solely on construction job openings,” says Wright. “You won't find the depth or range of job opportunities that we have in any other recruitment website.”

With more than 400 companies using this recruitment resource in Alberta and about 40 new registrants every day, the website is part of a general move toward industry-specific websites. Available as a service free of charge to Merit members and all potential employees, Wright believes it is the Canadian construction industry's most innovative Internet employment initiative.

“We are all trying to figure out ways to make the labour market work as efficiently as possible,” he says. “Within one year the volume of activity on the site has surpassed our expectations.”



stuart olson



people
building
progress

stuartolson.com
Edmonton: 780.452.4260
Calgary: 403.520.6565

Finding good people...

Just got easier.

Because, we know **where to look.**

Proven & effective solutions
for your labour requirements.

Find out how
our unique recruitment
advertising services
can help your business.

Email us today!

info@workwest.ca

Workwest
Alberta Job Market Connections
www.workwest.ca

When You're Here... Location is EVERYTHING!

No matter where you work in Alberta, Cat Rental Stores can provide a wide range of construction tools and equipment, when and where you need it. An industry leader in Equipment Delivery, and Field Service* all it takes is one call to The Cat Rental Store and it's done.

RIGHT TOOLS. RIGHT PLACE. RIGHT NOW.



CAT THE
Rental
STORE.

1-866-285-5550
www.catrents.ca

*Based on a survey of 300 customers between 01/03/06 & 02/23/06