



PHOTOGRAPHY BY 3 TEN

Fourth year apprentice Ryan Watson knows his trade ticket means a successful future



You're Hired!

In Alberta's version of *The Apprentice*, job opportunities are plentiful again for individuals with the right attitude and aptitude

BY STEVE PENNER

Canada's skilled workforce is in decline. While that fact was widely discussed during the frantic construction years between 2002 and 2007, it fell out of the collective consciousness during the economic downturn. But as activity starts to rebuild in all segments of the economy, the construction industry is once again turning its attention to the future reality of a significant labour shortage. Apprentices are unquestionably the future for the construction sector and Merit members are responding by recruiting new apprentices to the workplace in ever-increasing numbers.

The provincial government responded to the anticipated increase in demand for skilled tradespeople in the province by finally answering Merit's calls for a change in the ratios of the number of apprentices that a journeyman can train. As of January, 2011 the journeyman to apprentice ratio changed from one-to-one to one-to-two in 37 trades.

Construction companies applauded the decision. "The change in ratio will help us hire more starters and get young people into the trades,"

says Kevin Witzke, human resource manager at Muth Electrical Management Inc. “It will open up the door into the industry and address our concerns about retiring workers so the industry doesn’t go through all the ups and downs that we have over the past five years.”

The most recent economic up and down, as Witzke refers to it, resulted in a hollowing out of the apprentice ranks. With companies forced to slim down their work force during the slowdown, apprentices took the brunt of the layoffs, both to reflect the decline in work available and because some companies did not have sufficient journeymen to meet the one-to-one ratio. Now Witzke is aggressively recruiting to address that.

“We have a little bit of a hole right now when it comes to apprentices,” Witzke says. “We’re going to have to start at the beginning again and find first year apprentices. Right at this time, we don’t have a lot of third and fourth year apprentices.

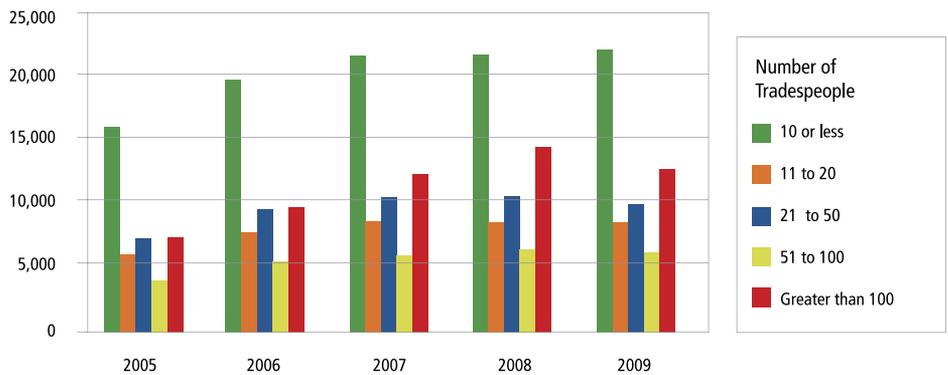
“Since December, I’ve hired quite a few apprentices and starters,” he goes on. “We’re going to start fresh and teach them our systems. The upside is that there are a lot of quality people to be had out there. Everyone’s been put on hold over the last couple years. The ones who have been waiting, who have been patient, they know this is where they want to be. I feel really good about the quality of the current apprentices. They’re sharp and clear and really proud to be working for us.”

Muth Electrical currently has about 40 apprentices working with them, about 50 per cent of what they would have had in 2007. Witzke will continue to grow that number, as the company responds to an increasing volume of projects. As a company that works in the multi-residential, commercial and light industrial areas, Muth is seeing opportunity in every sector. “The high-rise inventory is building,” Witzke notes, “and as the price of oil goes up, so does the volume of industrial work.”

The challenges of recruiting apprentices have changed in the 10 years that Witzke has been at Muth Electrical. While the system and the processes are not significantly different, the expectation of the apprentice has.

“What I find is a different type of worker – younger, more wired, tuned in, more savvy,”

Total Apprentices Being Trained by Employer Site Size, 2005-2009*



Source: Alberta Advanced Education and Technology
*The size of an employer site is determined by the number of tradespeople

Witzke says. “We as a company have to accommodate that. We have to understand that it is a different day and age. We provide more opportunity for workers to learn about our company through our website and online as well as provide an electronic flow of information from the office to them.

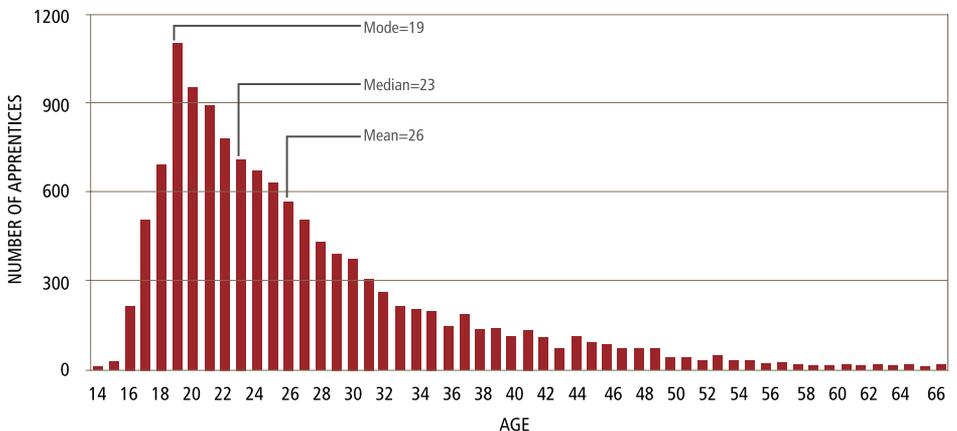
“The other thing we notice is that there is definitely more interest in the trades now than there was 10 years ago. What I hear from young people is that going to university is expensive and that finding jobs after can be difficult. They know that wages in the trades have not gone down, and that they can make a very good living with it. A lot of our youth see trades as a better option for themselves because it is stable in Alberta.”

Despite the interest, Witzke acknowledges that it is still difficult to find quality

people in the numbers he would like. The skill shortage permeates all the trades but the demand for electricians is particularly high. As with any company in the construction sector, apprentices are the life blood of Muth Electrical. To be efficient and meet the expectations of clients, the company has to have apprentices on board. Beyond that, Witzke is looking at the longer term requirements of Muth Electrical.

“Apprentices are our future,” he says. “They are a renewable resource, essential for future of industry. We are accountable as an industry to teach and mentor the young people, to provide the basics of integrity, honesty, accountability and skills. We have to do that to ensure that there is success in the future.”

As an open shop company, Witzke’s



Total number of Alberta apprentices registered in their first trade in 2009=12,298

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Kevin Witzke, *human resources,*
Muth Electrical Management Inc.

recruitment message revolves around the opportunities Muth Electrical can offer apprentices. Along with the variety of work experience the company can provide, Witzke points out that an open shop work environment ensures apprentices are going to be rewarded on a merit model rather than just tenure.

“I always tell them that they have an equal opportunity with anyone who has been here for three or four years. We look at performance, honesty, skills, capacity – what do they bring to the company? Everyone at Muth has their future in their own hands. The attitude an employee has is going to dictate their success. We reward people for hard work.

“Maybe it’s because of that, but we don’t have a lot of turnover in general. We have about a 90 per cent success rate here. I hire for the long term; I hire to train and to keep the employee.”

In return for the hard work, Muth Electrical commits to their apprentices. As Witzke points out, it makes good financial sense to do so.

“It takes four years to put apprentices through. It costs a lot of money to bring someone on, to teach and train them so you need to focus on the future to find the value of that investment. You need to think about the value of a quality tradesperson. Once they

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PATH

Three years ago, Ryan Watson decided

it was time to find a career which he could enjoy and find value in for the rest of his working life. He settled on carpentry.

Now 32 years old, Watson has just completed his third year in-school training at NAIT and is about to start the fourth year of his apprenticeship at Krawford Construction Inc. He is more convinced than ever of the correctness of his decision to pursue his carpentry ticket.

“I had chased the rigs around for a couple years,” he explains, “and finally realized I wanted something more stable. I have my power engineering ticket but I chose power engineering when I was 19; basically, I looked at the NAIT calendar and picked the trade that had the least school time and the best potential income. It wasn’t really something I enjoyed.

“I’ve always liked woodworking. A couple years ago, I started working on a house of my own and realized I didn’t have the skills to do the work. So I started thinking about carpentry and the more I looked into it, the more interested I became.”

Watson’s decision to change careers coincided with the downturn in the economy. Despite that, he found a willing employer in Krawford Construction. “Initially it was tough to find somewhere to apprentice with – I applied all over the place. I had to find someone who would take a chance on me because I was a little older than the average apprentice. But I was willing to start again at the bottom of the pay scale because I knew this was what I wanted. I was really lucky to get on with Krawford.

“They’re a great company and have treated me really well. They haven’t done any lay-offs and they’re supportive of me going to school. And I really like that they do a wide variety of work. It makes the job that much more interesting when you’re doing different things all the time.

“I also like that they have knowledgeable journeymen on the worksite,” he goes on.

“At my stage, you need a workplace that supports you and provides learning experiences or you can’t get the whole scope.”

Despite the challenges of returning to school at his age, Watson is reveling in the apprenticeship process. His biggest – and most pleasant – surprise was at the diversity of work within the carpentry field. “When I got into it, I thought it would just be framing and carpentry but it’s much more than that.

“I’ve enjoyed the constant learning curve. I believe that if you’re interested in the topic, you’ll excel at it and I’m very interested.”

Watson attends NAIT for his schooling and has found that his age is actually an asset in his education. His life experience gives him discipline and determination; his maturity helps him focus on his goal. And since he has found that NAIT sets their students up to succeed, he has enjoyed his classes. While some apprentices find it challenging to manage the school work from a financial perspective, Krawford helps Watson with that as well by deducting money from each pay cheque to put towards tuition. And, as Watson notes: “Being part of Merit helps because we get reimbursed for our tuition at the end of our apprenticeship.”

When asked why he decided to pursue his ticket, Watson quickly cites job security and the potential for advancement. “At the end of the day, I will always have my ticket to fall back on.”

He also has ambitions beyond journeyman status. “My goal is to be a supervisor. I know I have to work hard to prove myself but Krawford has me on the junior supervisor path right now. I’ll take additional courses if I need to; I know Merit offers those as well.”

Pausing to reflect on his current path, Watson offers one final comment. “I am very happy with the way the apprenticeship program is set up in Alberta – the sky is the limit.

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get their ticket is when they really get to learn and think on their own. You've got to build the confidence in an apprentice. You have to continue to develop your crew and bring in third and fourth year apprentices as well as first years. We can make something from these people but it takes time and patience

"It's all about attitude, the willingness to get in and work hard. It's exciting to see an apprentice start here and realize that. They suddenly understand that this is an opportunity for them to make their own future." □

APPRENTICESHIPS BY THE NUMBERS (2009)*

- 50 designated trades and 8 designated occupations
- In 2009, 8,876 individuals certified in the designated trades and occupations and 16,594 new apprentices registered
- 69,904 registered apprentices as of December 2009
- More than 800 employers and employees were involved in a network of over 165 local and provincial apprenticeship committees and occupational committees. All committees are composed of equal numbers of employers and employees
- More than 1,700 high school students were registered in the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP)
- Over 3,300 apprentices who started in RAP are currently continuing in a regular apprenticeship program
- A total of 737 scholarships (or \$743,000) were awarded to apprentices in 2009
- Applicants in the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) category received 396 scholarships, while 341 went to apprentices in the Apprenticeship and Industry Training (AIT) category
- The employment rate for apprentice graduates in the labour force is 92%, based on the results of the 2009 graduate survey
- Most common age of Alberta apprentices registered for the first time is 19
- In 2009, 79% of apprentices were trained by employees with fewer than 100 tradespeople

*Sourced from Apprenticeship and Industry Training Branch of the Government of Alberta

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