

Investing in Apprenticeship, The Bottom Line, What's in it for you?

Background Paper

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Introduction

Ecclesiastes 3:2

“There is an appointed time for everything and there is a time for every event under heaven... a time to plan and a time to reap”.

Apprenticeship

A training system where the aptitude, skills and experience of qualified tradespersons are transferred to the next generation of entry-level tradespersons in training called “apprentices”.

Apprenticeship models vary dramatically in structure across Canada from totally in-school instruction to totally on the job training. Most effective models balance the On-the-Job Instruction with Formal In-school Training, providing the opportunity to acquire essential practical skills, experience with technical knowledge essential for career longevity.

Apprenticeship training is a natural form of learning, with “showing reinforced by doing, until competence and understanding is achieved”. The emergence of apprenticeship started thousands of years ago when education was not universally accessible and reserved only for the elite.

Civilizations relied on the skill of workers to build the infrastructures deemed vital to maintain authority through control and organization and to collect and distribute the resources to support the state. The survival and growth of the civilization relied on the cumulative experience, knowledge and practical skill of the workforce and competitiveness of the society.

Apprenticeship in Canada

Apprenticeship in Canada has developed somewhat as an anomaly relative to Europe, which had a long history of evolvement. A land of Immigrants, this country imported labour and the inherent skills from the colonizing nations. Economic restrictions in Canada were so harsh as to ensure that nothing was to be created as finished product for

export as this would create a threat to economic balance. Raw resources were only for harvest and sent to Europe for further processing and final market, only to be sold back to colonials. Hence the hewers of wood and drawers of water became an ingrained mentality. Privilege to innovate and create with independence was earned and rewarded through the participation in two world wars. Immigrants that were expelled or considered of lesser status suddenly became an asset at a time when the skilled resources of Europe were threatened. In turn, Canada was rewarded with a steady supply of displaced families following the destruction overseas, further assisting the development of the workforce.

The formalization of training became imperative following World War II, with returned veterans. Colleges were mandated to turn soldiers into skilled workers in a post war and emerging consumer's economy. The fundamental elements of apprenticeship training models began to emerge with new skills and knowledge designed to meet the needs of new construction techniques and engineering requirements.

In 1929 Ontario passed legislation regulating the Brick and Stone Masons, introducing formal apprenticeship. Stonemasons and other skilled workers were already in short supply having come through the roaring 20's, only to be crushed with the onset of the depression. The next sixty years would see Canada receiving a steady supply of European Immigrants, many with a strong work ethic and prized skills that would satisfy the needs of the construction industry. This would gradually be augmented by second generation Canadians entering skilled trades especially since the 1960's.

The development of apprenticeship has been largely affected by historical European method, modified with modern approaches to formal training.

“Stealing the Trade” a protectionist approach is largely the result of throwbacks to history where formal instruction was nil. This approach conflicts with modern day approaches to Instruction and Skill Acquisition based on motivation and satisfaction in a society where education and learning is the norm.

“Stealing the Trade” mentality disappeared in Europe over the last century as these countries were forced to replace heavily depleted workforces, a result of war and immigration to North America. Instead they formalized apprentices to ensure expedient re-skilling of the workforce.

In Canada we are left with both approaches ...”Steal the Trade” and “Modern Apprenticeships”.

Investing in Apprenticeship

The evolution of apprenticeship relies largely on entities that understand and buy the training system. So we need to ask “Who is going to benefit from the program?”

It is simple to assume that contractors, government, educational institutions and labour are key to the apprenticeship training system. Let us not forget the young Canadians that want to learn and work and are in fact the future labour force, our apprentices/trades people in training.

A quick glance over the last 15 years will demonstrate that 'Buy-In' has not happened to meet the realities of our demographics. Since 1980, apprenticeship training has been a roller coaster ride often affected conversely by key players in the system.

In Canada training and education is a Provincial Jurisdiction in accordance with the Constitution, hence we have many different systems of delivery, a plethora of curriculae supposedly centralized by the NOA and Red Seal Certification, all to ensure a Pan Canadian consistency of skills and knowledge in each trade. Employers have assumed that "someone else" is looking out for "their" interests.

Governments change and so do their mandates. This instability prevents the emergence of a coherent apprenticeship system and most certainly flies in the face of a national program.

Contractor/Employers that profit from the skilled workers are so competitive, that on-the-job training is often null and void. In fact the current owners are from the generation that adopted the "Steal the Trade" mentality because that was what they were taught and became the essence of their survival. The training component of their apprenticeship was neglected, hence the attitude ... "I will train you with what I know and only in what I know, because that is all you need to know". "Let someone else train them for the first two years and I will steal them from the other guy in their third year". These same employers do not formally sign apprentices nor do they participate on industry committees to improve the system. The premise that the company's skill shortage, and company limitations are a result of their own limited vision, is beyond them.

Educational institutions often raise more questions than they answer on the issues of accountability and self-interest. During strong periods of economic growth the colleges jump on the bandwagon and ensure a steady supply of resources for training to the apprenticeship system. However when the downswing is apparent, re-sizing using the "Stars", "Sacred Cows" and "Dogs" analysis goes into high gear, with little thought of the impact on the apprenticeship system and the construction industry. In the mid to late 1980's the colleges pumped out pre-apprentices to meet the clamouring demands of employers. In 1989/90 the courses were cut because they weren't immediately profitable. Government shared the concern and implemented major cuts. The industry is still paying for the shortsighted approach to skills training, labour demographics and long term economic and infrastructure projections.

Second, when industry organizes and take initiatives to improve the situation, they are eyed by educational institutions with suspicion, and further isolate the parties. In some situations they even place barriers to prevent development. At the same time these same institutions expect employers to send their apprentices to their institutions.

Organized labour has also contributed directly to the fray. Mandates for control over a shrinking skilled labour supply have led to serious and costly battles among locals, their parent union and in some instances other “rading unions”. Training although touted as a priority, in fact was negatively affected by the diversion of funds to pay for costly legal bills, to the tune of millions of dollars in the past 9 years. They are still fighting for control over a shrinking labour supply, in fact, government has provided an open period for raiding to try and resolve the issue with a clear winner in the organized circle.

In addition, the response to apprenticeship reforms led at the Provincial level were perceived as a direct attack on organized labour at the time when they felt very vulnerable. Attempts to modify the system with “skill sets” were soundly trounced to assure the survival of the tradesperson.

In the non-organized sector there doesn’t appear to be any cohesion amongst skilled labour or an organization or association that would provide a forum to support the apprenticeships. Their relationships with education and government are tentative at best and rest solely on the initiative of the individual to pursue training in the hope the contractor will mutually support the endeavour.

Apprenticeship Buy In

In order for the combined On-the-Job and In-school Apprenticeship programs to effectively function you need to have partners that buy into the program. Essentially one has define the industry and select partners that are committed to lead the gaggle, because the leaders will dedicate the resources, expertise and support essential for the program to succeed.

The constituents of the industry include:

The Labour Pool - Entry Level Youth, Career Changers, Immigrants

Contractors – Employers

Organized Labour – Unions

Educational Institutions – Public, Non-for-Profit Private Corporations, Union, Employer Based, etc.

Government – Federal and Provincial, Apprenticeship, Labour Force Development, Industry Skills Development, etc.

Manufacturers – Any supplier of product, tools and equipment that requires final installation of their product by skilled trades or require skilled trades to construct elements of their production process.

Example:

- Brick, block, cement, stone - require masons to build kilns and to consume product
- Steel, Smelters, Forges - require masons to build furnaces, ovens etc.
- If there are no skilled trades, they are out of business.

Although there are many constituents, they don't all buy in and contribute to apprenticeship, even though they all rely on the skilled person for their livelihood. They profit and give little back to the system.

Apprenticeship Buy-In

Constituents must:

- Understand our reliance on the system
- Gain trust in the relationships we have with others within the apprenticeship system
- Be able to achieve major advantages in “quality”
- Identify the sources of our profit, benefits, incentives and potential
- Show the impact of the industry not engaging in the process and the realities of the “failure”
- Establish our place in the “food chain”

Having stated the obvious, every constituent will either claim to see and agree with all the items above, as they wish to belong and be the good guy. They will claim membership on the basis of the thinnest relationships possible to avoid being singled out in fear of being ridiculed by their peers.

The constituents that achieve the realizations and step up to the plate with financial commitments are the leaders. They will have properly addressed the “MUSTS”, will have moved beyond the “I AGREE” stage and will be taking ownership over our industry's needed outcomes.

Simply put they will be “LEADING” not “FOLLOWING”.

The rest slide quietly to the shadows hoping not to be noticed.

What's In It for **YOU?**