



Apprenticeships

Sorry, you're not hired

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By Armina Ligaya, [CBC News Online](#)

There's never been a better time to learn a skilled trade.

With the pool of mechanics, electricians, and machinists shrinking as workers in Canada hit retirement age, individuals with these skills are put at a premium — and compensated accordingly.

Combine that with a booming economy and a flurry of construction starts, there should be lots of people clamouring to work in the trades.

But according to Paul Cappon, president of the Canadian Council on learning, there are not significantly more graduates from apprenticeship programs today than a decade ago.

It's a particularly strange phenomenon considering there has been a surge of applicants entering apprenticeship programs across the country, he said.

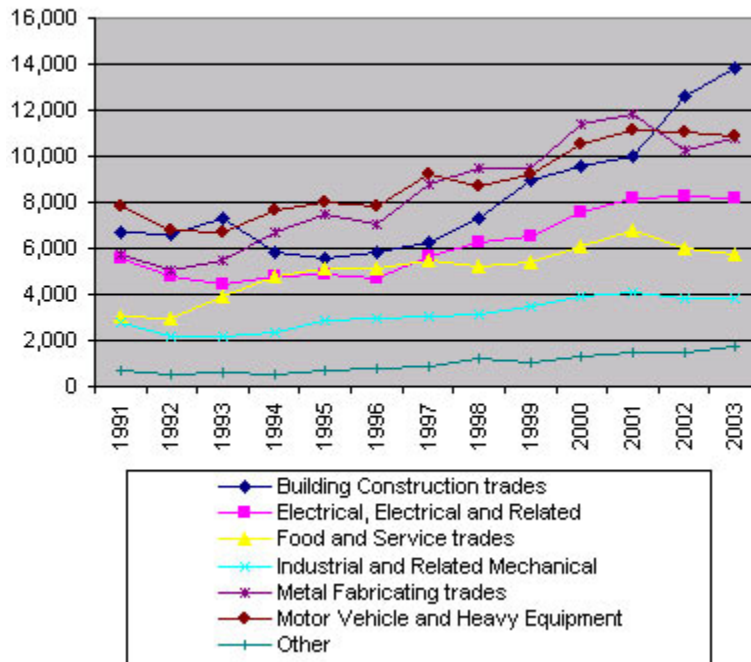
Between 1991 and 2003, the number of registrants for apprenticeship training has steadily climbed each year, according to a 2006 Statistics Canada report. In 1991, 32,306 entered into apprenticeship programs, a figure which rose dramatically in 2003 to 54,938.

However, the number of apprentices graduating has stayed static over the same time period, hovering at around 18,000.

"They're dropping out for various reasons," Cappon said.

"As of 2004, we weren't producing any more apprentices who were certified than we were in 1994, even though we recognize that there's a crunch in terms of the skilled labour that we require," he said.

Number of new registrations for Registered Apprenticeship Training, by Major Trade Group, 1991 to 2003



Part of the problem is that employers are wary of spending the money on apprenticeships because they see little benefit, and a slow or indefinite return on their cash, Cappon said.

Because apprenticeship programs require would-be students to seek out an employer willing to hire them and sponsor their training, it's a significant hurdle.

In Canada, apprenticeship programs involve alternating periods of in-class training and on-the-job instruction, and last between two to five years depending on the trade. A potential apprentice must find an employer with certified staff, called journeypersons, to sign a contract committing to train them.

It took Ted Lourenco a year of pounding the pavement to find an employer to sign him on as a carpentry apprentice. The 30-year-old said he was turned away three times before finding a company who agreed to invest in him.

And even then, Lourenco got a foot in the door because he already came equipped with some experience in the field, he said.

"I was verbally contacting them. Then one day I dropped off a portfolio and they called that same day," said the Mohawk College graduate who now works for Eastern Construction in Toronto.

Some of his fellow would-be apprentices had some success, but like him, many had to wait months before finding a placement.

John-Paul Tapp, dean of the school of transportation and building trades at Algonquin College, said a major factor contributing to the apprentice conundrum is the labour shortage itself.

"If there is reluctance on behalf of the hiring party, the employer, it's that they simply don't have the personnel to train," he said. "They don't have the person on hand that can assist the apprentice in learning because everybody is so busy."

When there's a lot of work to be done, training an apprentice — especially a completely "green" one — can cut into productivity.

If a prospective apprentice has had some experience in that particular trade assisting a plumber or an electrician, placing that individual is easier, Tapp said.

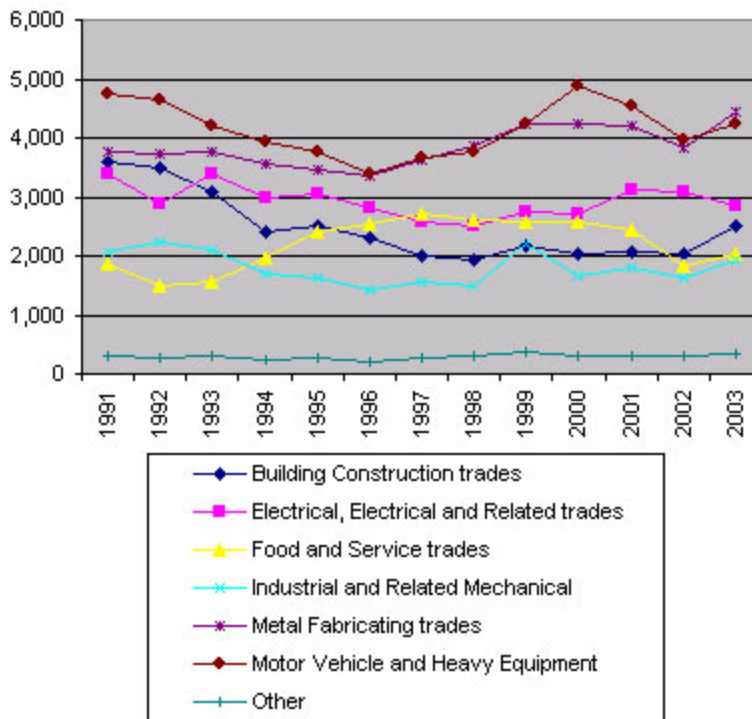
"Unfortunately, in most cases, there's a requirement for a certain amount of skill, even as a brand new apprentice," he said.

Despite that, Canadian high schools aren't doing enough to provide students with enough hands-on experience, Tapp said.

Cappon said Canada should follow in the footsteps of the Norwegian model of apprenticeship programs. There, students enter apprenticeships during high school. These placements are funded in part by the government in partnership with the industry. There are incentives for both the company who takes on the apprentice and the apprentice themselves when the program is complete, he said.

"If he or she completes the program, there's a bonus," said Cappon, adding the program is very successful.

Completions in Registered Apprenticeship Training by Major Trade Groups, 1991 to 2003



There are some incentives for Canadian businesses to take on apprentices, such as tax credits, but more are needed, he said.

One concern for companies is a loss of money that can happen when, after training is provided, a worker strays elsewhere.

It's a fear that's been realized at Dofasco in Hamilton. Dave Santi, manager of learning and development at the Canadian steelmaker, said that in recent years about 25 to 30 Dofasco apprentices have been lured away to work at other companies.

The costs can add up. Currently, Dofasco has about 160 apprentices at its facility. Santi estimates the cost of training and wages for each one can be more than \$200,000-\$250,000.

"The government is aware of that because we've gone to them to say, 'What are you doing about this?'" Santi said. "Because we're not in the business of training for other companies. Not unless they want to pay for it. So we've lost our investment. "In four years, let's just say, it's \$200,000 an apprentice, and you lose 20 or 30 apprentices. That's a significant investment," he said. "Then you have to make it back [by hiring more]. It costs you twice as much."

However, Santi said it's a risk they need to take as the labour crunch looms.

"There are not enough trades people globally to supply the need. And the attrition rates are ahead of the hiring rates. So it's a big problem," he said. "And it takes vision to hire four years in advance of your needs, or longer. Because it takes four years to develop a skilled trades person."

Santi said Dofasco's workforce is in good shape because of its apprenticeship program, despite the attrition. But it's harder for smaller businesses to take the plunge and make similar long-term investments and commitments, he said.

"There's some fear in it, and it's a real one. I have a lot of sympathy for small employers."

If companies don't invest in more apprenticeships, the skilled trades shortage will hit a crisis point, Santi said. Poaching will become more competitive and companies offering the highest wages as bait — such as oil companies with deep pockets in Alberta — will net the workers.

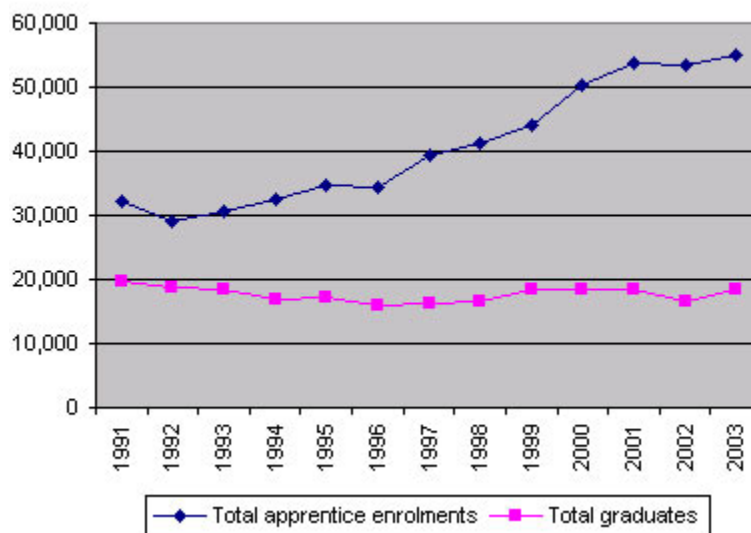
"It's only going to get worse. And if everybody shows up at the table at the same time, it's not going to be a good situation," Santi said.

Governments and industry will also need to find ways to entice existing journeypersons to stay on longer, and not retire, Cappon said.

"We're going to have to find ways to induce the older workers to remain in as mentors for younger people who are entering the trades," he said.

Mandatory retirement has been waived in most provinces, he said, but, still, more must be done.

Total apprentice enrolments and graduates



"We've got to go further faster," he said.

"The bottom line is the match between the skills and an adaptable workforce and Canada's economic and social needs is probably one of the main issues facing the country," he said.