

Canada could be short one million workers by 2020

By LAUREN BRESLIN, SPECIAL TO THE TORONTO SUN

If Ontario placed an employment ad in the newspaper, it might look something like this. Wanted: workers in the skilled trades. Job prospects: excellent. Salary: higher than you think.

Current trends suggest that Ontario, like the rest of Canada, will be facing a critical shortage of skilled tradespeople in the years ahead. According to a report by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, more than half of the province's skilled labour force is expected to retire within the next 15 years. Meanwhile, there aren't enough qualified candidates to fill the void, which means Canada could be short one million workers by the year 2020.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

"We don't have the luxury of time," says Len Crispino, president of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. "Unless we do something about these shortages, the impact on the economy will be very extensive."

From carpenters to welders, from mechanics to metalworkers, hairdressers and chefs, Canada has more than 200 trade vocations to choose from -- all of which operate within four main industries: construction, transportation, manufacturing and service.

Without a skilled labour force to meet the needs of employers, not only will these industries suffer the impact, but so will the average Canadian.

"We all hear cases about somebody paying an enormous amount of money for either a plumber or an electrician," Crispino says. "If this continues it's going to drive up the cost of some of these good and services. So in effect we're all owners of this issue because we all end up paying higher costs."

Part of the problem is that there are still misconceptions about careers in the trades. A 2004 Ipsos-Reid poll revealed that 47% of respondents believe the skilled trades involve hard, physical labour -- and still other people view them as low-paying, dead-end work.

"People think of the trades as a secondary, or inferior form of profession," Crispino says. "And really that can't be further from the truth, in that a lot of these jobs are extremely well-paying jobs."

Indeed, the reality is that many trades offer income levels that are well above the national average for employed Canadians -- and they also offer great security, mobility and very low rates of unemployment.

However, the same Ipsos-Reid poll found that 72% of young people aged 13-24 said their school guidance counsellors have not encouraged careers in the skilled trades.

"High school students are not hearing about all their options," says Gail Smyth, executive director of Skills Canada - Ontario, a non-profit group that advocates careers in the trades. "So we also need to address parents and let them know this is a good career option for their children."

As it stands, job prospects in the trades are excellent. The Ontario Chamber of Commerce reports that the province's manufacturing sector -- which pays its employers 22% more than the national average -- will need to fill about 100,000 positions over the next 15 years.

AUTO INDUSTRY

The Automotive Parts Manufacturers' Association is projecting a 42% vacancy rate across the country by 2007, while other auto industry sectors expect similar labour shortfalls -- even though they offer wages 25% higher than the national average.

Construction has also been hit hard by a skills shortage. The Canadian Construction Association says Canada is already short up to 60,000 workers, and those numbers will only get worse.

50,000 METALWORKERS

The same goes for metalworkers, which will need roughly 50,000 positions filled over the next five years, according to the Canadian Tooling and Machining Association. Ditto the collision industry, which will create between 18,000 and 19,000 new jobs within a five-year span, says the Canadian Collision Industry Forum.

"We need to encourage young people to look at apprenticeships in the skilled trades," Smyth says. "But we also really need to look at the business sector. The business sector really has to start opening their doors and hiring young people and putting them in apprenticeship opportunities."

APPRENTICESHIP WEBSITES

To enter most of the skilled trades, you need to apply for an apprenticeship. Ontario has the largest apprenticeship training system in Canada - here are some resources to get you started:

- Skills Canada - Ontario: www.skillsontario.com

- Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program: www.oyap.com
- Ontario Skills Work: <http://skillswork.com>
- Careers in Trades: <http://careersintrades.ca>
- Skills Connect: www.edu.gov.on.ca/skills.html
- Human Resources Development Canada -- Skilled Trades: www.skilledtrades.ca
- Tradeability: www.tradeability.ca
- Canadian Apprenticeship Forum: <http://caf-fca.org>