



# A Model for Recruiting Apprentices at the High School Level

by | **Sandra Skivsky**

Changing demographics compounded by evolving codes, standards and legislative requirements in the construction industry heighten the need for a skilled, trained labour force. At a high school in Windsor, Ontario, the Ontario Masonry Contractors' Association teamed with high school, college and industry players to create an innovative masonry program that could serve as a model for other trades and provinces.

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**A**pprentices are the lifeblood of the construction industry. Despite technological advancements and visions of robots performing a myriad of tasks in the future, the construction industry still depends on people to build—and not just any people, but people who are highly skilled in the trades.

With the idea of finding the right people for the right trade, the Ontario Masonry Contractors' Association (OMCA) has supported training since its inception in 1972. OMCA started with the Ontario Masonry Training Centre (OMTC) in Mississauga, part of the Greater Toronto area. With support from OMCA members, OMTC expanded to Ottawa, Waterloo and most recently Windsor.

The latest venture, which we will detail later in the article, is unique because it focuses on the high school level by exposing students to a trade and providing a path toward apprenticeship. It provides a model for recruitment that could help youth and industry.

### Meeting the Needs of Industry

Construction for almost every project has become more demanding, with a continual flow of more stringent codes and standards and new legislative requirements. Tools and equipment continue to evolve, requiring workers to have an understanding of new technology and processes. To get the skills it needs, the construction industry relies on the apprenticeship system to produce knowledgeable workers.

By the time apprentices move through required levels of learning, get their work experience and finish their programs, they enter a trade with a broad-based foundation of skills and knowledge and are prepared to further hone these skills as journeypersons.

But in order for the apprenticeship system to meet the needs of the industry, a number of conditions need to be addressed.

- Young people need to be attracted to a trade.
- Barriers to entry need to be minimized.
- Training needs to be continuous, even during economic downturns.
- Training needs to develop job-ready candidates, and employers need to be involved with training.
- Employers need to take on apprentices.

### Apprenticeship Certification and Standards

In Canada, while certification of apprentices is based on national standards, the training regimen falls under provin-

cial jurisdiction. The Red Seal is an interprovincial certification that is based on a standardized national examination. The provinces, guided by a national trade standard, are responsible for training standards, curriculum development and training delivery.

In addition, provinces set the ratios for the number of apprentices per journeyperson on a job site, and each province also has jurisdiction as to whether the status of a trade is compulsory or voluntary. In Ontario, for example, there are 12 construction trades that are compulsory. Those who go into a compulsory trade must be certified/Red Seal workers. There also are 23 trades that are voluntary but still have a national standard and a Red Seal examination for those who choose to take it. The difference with a voluntary trade is that tradespeople do not need to be certified to work in it. This difference, of course, can create its own set of challenges when it comes to training.

### Shifting Demographics, Competition

Demographic changes in our society, which have been talked about for a number of years, are impacting the industry right now. The construction industry had predicted significant waves of Baby Boomers retiring as early as 2010, which in turn would have led to greater demand for new construction workers. Following the economic downturn of 2008, however, many people decided to work longer in order to recoup financial losses or take advantage of the strong construction demand. But the retirement reprieve appears to be over and, according to BuildForce Canada, the national forecast is for more than a quarter of a million retirements over the next ten years. More than one-third of those exits are expected to happen in Ontario.

As construction trades attempt to attract more people over the next decade, so will every other industry. Thus, the competition for workers will be between construction and other industries, between various trades within construction and between employers. Ontario will be looking to replenish approximately 20% of its construction labour force over the next ten years.

### Effective Apprenticeship Systems

Let's return to what makes an apprenticeship system effective.

#### *Young People Need to Be Attracted to a Trade*

According to Statistics Canada, the number of registered apprentices in all trades in Ontario increased steadily from

2000 to 2010 but since then has oscillated and has not shown significant, sustained growth. The strong revitalization of the apprenticeship system in the early 2000s stemmed from the recessionary period of the mid-1990s, when many apprenticeship programs shut down. So the growth was a combination of meeting rising demand, addressing the gap when training was constrained and responding to increased promotion of the trades as a viable career choice.

***Barriers to Entry  
Need to Be Minimized***

Over the years, many studies have analyzed barriers to entry for apprenticeship programs. Barriers include a lack of awareness or guidance into the trades, a lack of employer support for training and hiring (because apprentices were viewed as a cost), and the stigma of apprenticeships being jobs of last resort.

Those barriers, along with practices that sometimes struggled to include immigrants, women and other minority groups, have had an impact. In fact, the majority of apprentices did not enter the trades because of their interest or aptitude. They came to the trades because of an introduction from family, friends or neighbours or through a job program.

***Training Needs to Be Continuous,  
Even During Economic Downturns***

As mentioned previously, apprenticeship training in Canada took a back seat in the mid-1990s because of the downturn in the economy. The result of that training slowdown is still with us 25 years later, with the industry as a whole missing part of an age cohort in the labour force. Those seasoned,

skilled journeypersons in the 45- to 50-year-old range who would be the forepersons, site supervisors and lead hands of today (or who may have moved into estimating and project management) often are not there.

It is very difficult to make up for lost training opportunities in apprenticeship. Even if there is a waiting list for training during economic booms, there is a limit to the number of first-year apprentices an industry can absorb. Everything from crew size to ratios to union membership can slow down the rate at which apprentices are turned into journeypersons. It will become clear to the construction industry that some of those practices will have to change to stay competitive in the future.

***Training Needs to Develop Job-Ready  
Candidates, and Employers Need  
to Be Involved With Training***

Given that the industry is going to experience increasing retirements, there will be fewer experienced, skilled workers to mentor apprentices. There will be greater reliance on the training regimen to produce work-ready apprentices who can more quickly master the learning curve.

***Employers Need to  
Take on Apprentices***

Without a doubt, employers need to be involved in the training process and take on apprentices. Gone are the days when employers could readily find people with the required skills or poach workers from the next contractor. Employer input is also key in having training meet the needs of the market.

***Recruiting at the  
High School Level***

To understand what this means for apprenticeship training, let's examine the practices of OMCA in the masonry industry. In Ontario, masonry is a voluntary trade. It entails greater physicality than many trades and traditionally has been viewed as less sophisticated than trades such as mechanical or electrical. Yet for the contractor members of OMCA, having a skilled labour force is imperative. Most OMCA members are involved in the industrial, commercial and institutional construction sector. Installation includes not only veneer but also masonry systems, including structural components as well as restoration and refractory. Load-bearing masonry is a complex part of

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### Takeaways

- Construction projects are increasingly demanding, with more stringent codes and standards and new legislative requirements.
- Apprenticeship systems need to address better ways to recruit younger apprentices and to reduce barriers for entry into the trades.
- Training needs to be continuous, to develop job-ready candidates and to involve employers that are willing to take on apprentices.
- It is expected that more than a quarter-million Baby Boomers will retire from construction over the next ten years, increasing the need for apprenticeship recruitment and training.
- The Ontario Masonry Contractors' Association joined forces with high school, college and industry players to create an introductory, high school-level masonry program that could serve as a model for other trades and provinces.

the trade, performed under a different set of codes and standards than masonry in the residential market.

So OMCA and its training organization, OMTC, face the challenge of getting young people—some of whom may not be aware of the trades and apprenticeships—interested in entering a voluntary apprenticeship program for what is considered a physically demanding trade. And not only do these young people have to be recruited, they also need an aptitude for laying masonry units in order to stay in the trade.

OMCA values training and has made strategic partnerships to address regional needs. To attract young people

with an aptitude and interest in the trade, OMCA decided to try to catch the attention of students in or before high school.

In 2014-2015, OMCA Executive Director John Blair had an informal discussion with Mike Seguin, superintendent of education at the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board (WECDSB), about bringing masonry training into the school system. The discussion was positive and led to a meeting with Paul Picard, who was WECDSB director of education at the time. The idea was to set up a masonry shop in the high school and expose stu-

dents from Grades 7 through 12 to the masonry trade.

With the help of local contractors, an existing space was converted to a masonry shop at F. J. Brennan Catholic High School. The new program was announced in June 2015. The school board sent a teacher to OMTC to take the first level of apprenticeship training; OMCA donated textbooks, tools and safety kits; and suppliers donated training materials.

### Providing Opportunities for Students

Part of the program aims to address a current skills gap in the trade, Blair noted, but it also prepares students for a wide variety of occupations.

“It’s not just about being a bricklayer or a stonemason,” he said. “Graduates from this program can go into an apprenticeship, into construction technology programs at a community college or into engineering programs at a university, and they’ll have a great head start because they’ll already understand the nomenclature of the trade. From there, they can go on to project management or a whole host of other professions. Their value to potential employers is going to be very high.”

At the start of the program, in September 2015, it was anticipated that 70 to 80 students would go through the shop at some level, depending on the grade. By the end of the school year, in June 2016, more than 250 students had participated.

An important element to a recruitment program at the high school level is finding a teacher who is the right fit for the program. The teacher for this program, chosen by WECDSB, was Marko Senjanin, who connected to stu-



dents with his exuberance for teaching masonry—so much so that there are waiting lists to get into his classes.

Another key is getting families involved. Parents were brought in for show-and-tell events where they could talk to employers and trainers for the brick and stonemason apprenticeship program. They could discover what their children were involved with, appreciate that masonry was a career opportunity and see there were people in the room ready to provide those opportunities.

It was clear that the introductory masonry program was successful, so the next step was providing opportunities for interested students to become registered apprentices and complete the brick and stonemason apprenticeship program. In the Windsor area, St. Clair College was the designated training delivery agent (TDA) for brick and stonemason, but it did not directly provide the training. To solve this issue, Dan Fister, executive superintendent of innovation and human resources for WECDSB; Patti France, president of St. Clair College; John Blair from OMCA; and Tony Masciotra, a local contractor and past president of OMCA, met and came up with a plan to transform an existing building owned by WECDSB into a training shop.

The shop would be operated under the St. Clair TDA, and OMCA would provide construction services, materials, equipment and instructor support to run a full apprenticeship program and transition students from the F. J. Brennan program. The Construction Academy was born.

### Going Operational

In January 2018, the first Level 1 apprenticeship program was operational. In addition, there was an 80-hour

course designed to introduce students in Grade 11 to masonry apprenticeship through the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and prepare them to become registered apprentices while in high school. The students began Level 1 training in January, along with co-op and dual credit at St. Clair College. In other words, they received high school credit in addition to credit from St. Clair for being in the program.

It has been over two years since the introductory masonry program started at F. J. Brennan, and the first students are making their way into a registered apprenticeship. These students know they are interested in masonry and have had the opportunity to see if they have an aptitude for the trade. These 16- and 17-year-olds all have summer jobs lined up in construction and, by the time they turn 20 to 21 years old, they could be full-fledged journeymen, earning good wages, with the option of continuing their education in any number of related career paths.

This type of program also can help with some of the entry and demographic issues in apprenticeship programs. For example, high school girls also are taking the introductory masonry program because it is easily accessible and takes place in a safe environment, and some are choosing to continue with an apprenticeship.

The program at F. J. Brennan was the first of its kind in Ontario, bringing together high school, college and industry to achieve an outcome. It facilitates entry to the trade by increasing awareness and proximity and providing age-suitable, hands-on experience to students. Furthermore, it allows young people to see the masonry trade as a career opportunity.

There will always be new aspects to address when the objective is to build and maintain a skilled workforce for an industry. But this collaboration shows that a program for recruiting students could be an effective component of a labour force strategy for apprenticeships. 

## BIO

**Sandra Skivsky** is director of marketing and business development for Canada Masonry Centre (CMC). She joined CMC to undertake special projects, develop marketing information, coordinate development of products to consolidate and expand market presence, and support government relations and strategic partnerships. Prior to joining CMC, Skivsky spent more than 20 years consulting to the construction industry, mainly in the area of human resource analysis. As a consultant, she worked for all levels of government across Canada, blue-chip corporations and small start-up ventures. Skivsky also acted as project manager to develop the first and second editions of the Canadian Masonry Contractors Association (CMCA) *Textbook of Canadian Masonry*. It is the first Canadian textbook for masonry apprentices. She has a degree in economics and eight years of experience in economics and industrial marketing with a large international consulting firm.