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### **Earn while you learn;**

Centennial College's blended apprentice program lets students work four days a week, then attend classes on Fridays. In the ongoing quest to avert a severe shortage of skilled workers in Ontario, Centennial College thinks it has built a better mousetrap. Centennial has introduced a blended apprenticeship program that lets students work at a regular job four days a week earning a paycheque, then study in school on Fridays. The college describes its blended electrician apprenticeship program as an "earn while you learn" approach, which will culminate in the worker-students writing the exam for their Ontario Certificate of Qualification.

And because it's heavily subsidized by the province, the program only costs the students \$455 per year. "If I had to pay the full cost of the course ... I don't think I would have been able to afford it," says Paul Maynard, 38, who is in the first group of apprentices enrolled in the program. "Because they offer this course one day a week, it looked like a good opportunity for a guy like me, and the fee each year seems pretty reasonable," he says. "It's an excellent course and, because it's on Fridays, it gives me lots of time to review my work. I've learned an awful lot in just eight or nine weeks." The combined workplace-classroom program is a radical departure from previous apprenticeship programs that required apprentices to take a two-month block of courses.

It's a good fit for Maynard, a former Bell Canada installation technician in northern Ontario, who now works for TSN Electric of Toronto. "With Bell, I was at the top of my pay scale but the writing was on the wall. People were losing their jobs right, left and centre, so I took Martin up on his offer and I'm busier than I want to be," he says. Maynard's boss, Martin Kichuk, earned his own apprenticeship papers 10 years ago at Mohawk College under the old system. He insists he could not afford to lose his star pupil for two whole months at a time. "It would be disastrous if I lost him for two months," he says. "Let's face it: with a small company, if you lose a key guy for two months, you would have to replace him."

Kichuk says the blended workweek gives Maynard a well-rounded introduction to electrical work. "In this business, every day is different," he says. "You could be doing a house one day, commercial work the next, then installing a laundromat. There's so many different aspects of electrical, it just boggles my mind." Centennial instructor Armando Henriquez says Maynard is typical of the first wave of apprenticeship students in the program. "They are very good with their hands and they have very good skills because they have working experience, but they don't know things like electrical theory."

Henriquez, a former professor of electrical engineering in his native El Salvador, says the Centennial instructors all have an average 20 years of trade experience. "We have labs to give them a hands-on experience, so we are providing them with everything they need to do their job," he says. "Textbooks and curriculum are important because they guide us, but they're not everything. I know what an electrician needs to know from my experience and we provide them with tips for everyday life."

The blended work-college apprenticeship program is a concerted effort to help Ontario address the predicted shortage of skilled workers, while not placing the entire burden on employers. The Conference Board of Canada estimates Ontario faces a shortfall of 190,000 skilled workers by 2020, rising to 364,000 by 2025 and 564,000 by 2030.

Under criteria set out by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, a potential apprentice must already be employed and have worked for that employer for one year before they can sign up for the Centennial course. Eighty per cent of the tuition costs are paid by the ministry, leaving the student to pay \$455 for each year of the three-year course. None of the direct financial burden falls on the employer, other than freeing up the worker for one day a week.

"It is very interesting and attractive for the small-scale and midsize employers," explains Tito Khandaker, co-ordinator of Centennial's apprenticeship programs. "Many employers really like the new apprenticeship program but this day-release idea is not yet very well known in the industry." A total of 46 would-be electricians, backed by their employers, enrolled in the first session.

In January, the college will open a second program for refrigeration and air conditioning apprentices. That course will require two days per week of classroom study (Fridays and Saturdays), still giving them four weekdays on their regular job.

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