

Construction industry looks to build its ranks in the West

Training Migrants

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Tens of billions of dollars in major infrastructure spending and commercial development in Western Canada are fuelling a sustained shortage of skilled trades people in construction, just as energy projects in the East ramp up and compete for a dwindling pool of workers.

A slowdown in the residential construction sector hasn't eased the need for trades workers as any surplus of labour is quickly being eaten up by the booming institutional and commercial sectors in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, says Larry Rosia, dean of construction at SAIT Polytechnic in Calgary.

"There is quite a large shortage of construction supervisors, foremen and site superintendents," he says. Electricians, carpenters, steam fitters, pipe fitters and sheet metal workers are among the jobs experiencing the most demand, according to the Construction Sector Council.

Workers are in short supply in almost every category and construction firms are particularly concerned about finding people with 15 years of experience and red seal qualifications.

Industry groups in British Columbia are so concerned they have set up programs to boost the number of nontraditional workers, such as recently landed immigrants, with compatible skills.

The B. C. Construction Association launched the Immigrant Skilled Trades Employment program to connect the "under-utilized" skills of immigrants with the needs of the construction sector, says Paul Mitchell, program director for the association.

He has placed about 600 new immigrants, typically with some kind of engineering background, into various roles in construction such as project managers and technicians in the two years the program has been operating.

Many people who have been through the program don't even bother going through the lengthy and often costly process of foreign credential recognition. "We find people will go in as technicians, but

they're using a lot of their old skills and inevitably they can bump up into management level if they do all the right stuff," Mr. Mitchell says.

Institutions like SAIT also help companies train new immigrants. Mr. Rosia says he is also trying to encourage women to give the trades a chance. "We make a special effort to show females in high school that opportunities do exist in some of the trade areas, but there's a stigma attached to it, plus we have to convince parents," he says.

Many in the trades say Canada rarely targets skilled tradespeople to immigrate since the process is "biased" against the occupation because its rating system favours those with university degrees.

Even within Canada, a trades worker who's trained in one province can't work in another province without writing an exam to become recertified in another province, with the exception of British Columbia and Alberta, which have a Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA).

Construction companies will increasingly have to tweak their recruiting strategies in the years ahead as the ageing population further reduces supply, which means casting a wider net in looking for talent.

"There's a huge shortage in all areas," Mr. Rosia says.

"It all becomes relative."