



## **Workforce Development: Skilled Trades Development and Attraction**

Solving the Mysteries Within Ontario's Rural Communities

Group Roundtable Whitepaper

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## Executive Summary

Attracting and retaining workers in the skilled labour force has continuously been a challenge for rural communities across Ontario. While Ontario's urban population grew by 15.13% over 2001-2011, rural and small town population in Ontario declined by 7.34% (Moazzami, 2011). Additionally, Population projections for 2011-2025 indicate that Ontario's rural population will continue to decline – from 1,118,065 to 925,299 (Moazzami, 2011). Much of this decline is due to younger adults leaving their communities for education and work opportunities, and not returning. This is detrimental to rural Ontario because these towns play an integral role in the province's future economic growth, in terms of natural resources, agri-foods, and tourism, for example (Moazzami, 2011). It is essential to analyze the current barriers that rural communities are facing and determine ways to challenge them. This can be done by evaluating case studies and determining ways in which rural communities can attract and retain skilled labourers through channels like education programs. The rural communities of Ontario need to take action, and soon, because their future survival depends on it.

## Introduction

Today, skilled trades are among the top ten jobs employers are finding most difficult to fill (Skilled Trades, 2016). Skilled trades programs in Ontario are designed to meet specific employer demands, and most can be completed in as little as six-to-nine months to less than two years (Skilled Trades, 2016). This means that students are able to start a career quicker and at a cost much less than the typical four years of university (Skilled Trades, 2016). However, because the job descriptions usually include physical labour and unclean work environments, not many students and graduates are eager to pursue this career path. Due to this unglamorized image that individuals have of the skilled labour workforce, Canada is looking at a shortage of one million tradespeople by 2020 (McGinn, 2017). If there was ever a time to spark an interest in young people to pursue skilled trades, the time is now (McGinn, 2017).

## **The Main Challenge**

The main challenge that rural communities are currently facing is a major shortage of labourers in the skilled workforce. More specifically, the construction sector has become Canada's biggest job generator, since the late 1990s construction-related trades have posted double-digit increases in their shares of total employment and now account for almost 5% of total Canadian employment (Dawson Strategic, 2015). In Ontario, construction employment has increased by approximately 200,000 workers since 1997 and now accounts for 6.9% of total Ontario employment (Dawson Strategic, 2015). The skills shortage in Ontario's construction trades is significant today, and as aging baby boomers retire from the workforce it will become

more problematic if more skilled workers are not brought in to replace them (Dawson Strategic, 2015).

The economic sustainability of rural communities is heavily dependent on their ability to attract and retain skilled and experienced trades-people (Wylie, 2008). Skilled workers tend to enjoy around a 41% wage premium over unskilled workers (Wylie, 2008). Ultimately, most rural areas in Ontario are currently experiencing chronic shortages of skilled trades-people, and projections suggest that such shortages will increase in the future (Wylie, 2008).

## **Methodology**

Research for this study was done through roundtable discussions at the Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO) Conference held on February 7, 2018. Discussions incorporated individuals from various communities across Ontario including: Katie Hannah (Township of Atikokan), Stacey Jibb (Region of Durham), Eileen Kennedy (Region of Durham), David Parks (County of Simcoe), Kendra Lorimer (City of Brockville), Tom Lusi (Wellington County), Jim Maudsley (Municipality of Thames Centre), and Kelly Deeks-Johnson (Town of St. Mary's). Research was also conducted through a literature review of various case studies, statistics, and academic journals.

## **Results & Findings**

### **Barriers Involved**

One of the main barriers involved in this challenge surrounds the fact that many high school aged residents are leaving their rural communities to go to post-secondary school. These

students tend to find jobs near their schools, outside of their communities, and rarely return to contribute to their home communities. Many factors, such as the desire to gain independence, the wish to fulfill one's aspirations or to "discover the world" and the need to pursue postsecondary education, may underlie the decision to migrate from a rural area to an urban one (Dupuy, et al., 2000). The notion that labour market conditions are less favourable in rural areas is also cited as a factor, mostly because the jobs in rural communities are of a skilled trades scope of work (Dupuy, et al., 2000). Some who are unemployed move to cities to find employment, while some who already have a job may leave to find one offering better wages, job stability or opportunities (Dupuy, et al., 2000). It seems as though these young residents are being socially conditioned and taught by their high schools that skilled trades work is not "good enough," so they venture outside of their communities to find a job that is.

The parents of young residents in rural communities are also reinforcing this negative attitude towards skilled trades work. It seems that a large proportion of parents are not fully aware of the benefits that the skilled labour force can bring their child, such as the high wages and benefits packages. Therefore parents tend to push their children in the direction of pursuing university degrees that often do not lead to full time positions. In fact, parents remain the single biggest influencing factor on their teens' post-secondary plan, and also the biggest source of misinformation (Barrett, 2014). Parents are operating on experience that is decades out of date and providing a perspective that is woefully biased (Barrett, 2014). In the current economic structure of Ontario, there is a high demand for skilled trades work, so much so that the demand for construction skills is forcing wages to rise higher and faster than for other occupations in Canada (Dawson Strategic, 2015). Essentially, parents need to be educated, just

as much as their children, with regards to the benefits and potential that skilled trades can offer.

The government plays another huge role in promoting specific job sectors. As much as it focuses on innovation, it tends to ignore the importance and significance of trades work. The government needs to better market the skilled labour force in ways that will entice people to *want* to work these jobs. Furthermore, it seems that the government is promoting jobs that are already at capacity, such as policing, firefighting, and teaching. Meanwhile, there is such an abundance of jobs and need for skilled trades workers across the province. In the Construction sector alone, it is expected that Canadian companies will need approximately 300,000 new workers over the next 10 years (Government of Canada, 2014). The Government of Canada developed the Canada Job Grant to ensure that Canada has the skilled workforce it needs to help bridge the gap between the skills Canadians have and the skills employers are looking for (Government of Canada, 2014). This program is definitely a good start to challenging the shortage of skilled labour workers across Canada, however more needs to be done to further promote these types of jobs, especially in rural communities. It would be helpful for the Government of Ontario to look at various case studies from across Ontario in order to determine more ideas towards enhancing and endorsing the skilled labour workforce.

### Case Studies

Communities across Ontario are developing programs that are aimed at attracting and retaining skilled labourers. These programs have proven to be successful and can be used as an example for other rural communities when challenged with this issue. These examples

demonstrate a small sample of the ideas being generated across Ontario towards enhancing the skilled labour workforce.

The Durham District School Board is encouraging students to choose skilled labour opportunities through their Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program, which is a ministry-approved specialized program, that allows students to focus their learning on a specific economic sector, while meeting the requirements to graduate from secondary school (Follert, 2017). Some of the specific areas of study include agriculture, construction, and horticulture and landscaping (Follert, 2017). “It is essentially a bundle of Grade 11 and 12 courses, that also includes mandatory co-op placements and free industry certifications such as First Aid or working at heights training” (Follert, 2017).

In another case study, the Huron County Economic Development Department organized a job fair for recent high school graduates, which was aimed at attracting students to jobs in rural communities, called: “Not Just Another Job Fair,” in January of 2018. This event was hosted by 14 employers, doing 500 interviews, to fill 150 jobs including outdoor labourers, cabinet makers, industrial electricians, forklift operators, general labourers, and plumbing production workers (Huron County, 2018). This event was free to attend and actually received a substantial turnout. Due to the success of this event, Huron County is already making plans to hold another job fair in the spring of 2018.

Peterborough has also demonstrated another initiative towards encouraging young individuals to pursue skilled trade labour in their Flexible Apprenticeship Program. This program challenges the traditionally inflexible apprenticeship system, which will positively impact Ontario’s economic output in rural communities (Greater Peterborough Chamber of



Commerce, 2015). Nearly one in three employers are looking for skilled tradespeople and are unable to fill a job because they cannot find someone with the right qualifications (Greater Peterborough Chamber of Commerce, 2015). Students can benefit from this program because they will receive training and experience through their apprenticeships that they can actually use in the workforce. Employers will also be more motivated to hire these individuals because they will have already completed basic skills training. This program therefore helps students to become more qualified and retain more jobs.

## **Discussion**

### **Best Practices & Potential Solutions**

Rural communities need to implement programs into their high schools that encourage entering the skilled labour workforce. Far too often students are being told that the only path to take after high school graduation is to pursue a university education. However, plenty of the university programs that these students are enroll in have very limited jobs in that specific field. Furthermore, majority of these jobs have significantly low entrance wages. If high schools provided students with more information about skilled labour, they would be more aware of the abundance of available jobs within their local communities. They would also learn that the wages are significantly higher than many other white-collar jobs that they would receive straight out of a post secondary education program. Skilled tradespeople will always be in demand, so there is a strong case for connecting students to hands-on activities and accurate employment data (Bakers Journal, 2014). Many studies have demonstrated that, in the eyes of both youth and parents, careers in skilled trades continue to take a backseat to careers that require a university education (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2004).

Companies recruiting employees for skilled labour also need to be willing to accept students and graduates with minimal experience. They also need to be willing to take the time to train them and incorporate them into their workplaces. However, employers are not generally in the business of giving people chances (Harris, 2015). It would be beneficial for the provincial government to intervene by offering grants to businesses in rural communities to cover the cost of training inexperienced students and graduates. Employers can also use incentive programs to bring experienced workers to their communities by offering competitive wages and benefits. These experienced workers can conduct the training sessions for the newly hired students and graduates.

Rural communities also need to contribute to the attraction of workers by ensuring that there is affordable housing, broadband Internet, transportation, restaurants, and entertainment. By making these enhancements, rural communities will be better able to retain their residents as well as to attract newcomers. These enhancements will contribute to a shift in the perception of rural communities from being sparse and desolate to being comparable to a suburb with the associated amenities. Typically rural communities are viewed as sparse and desolate, however these enhancements in amenities have the potential to actually entice people to want to live there. Essentially, the goal for rural communities is to value the quality of life over the location.

Rural communities can also operate local employment education centres that give students and newcomers information about the available job opportunities in their communities and working in the trades sector. These centres would be dedicated to breaking down specific job duties, encouraging students to participate in co-op and internships, and

explaining the competitive wages available. It would be beneficial to have people with skilled trades experience to visit the centre to talk about their real-life experience and encourage others to join.

## Conclusions

Rural communities across Ontario have faced many challenges associated with attracting and retaining workers in the skilled labour force sector. One of the main reasons that rural communities are facing this challenge is due to the fact that young residents are leaving their communities to pursue higher education and eventually find jobs in these urban centres. Another major contributor is the fact that people tend to not find rural community life as desirable, so they are not eager to apply for jobs in these areas. The province of Ontario relies heavily on rural communities for natural resources, food, energy, and tourism. However, these communities need skilled trades workers in order to operate and produce such necessities.

The current barriers that rural communities are facing when it comes to skilled labourers mainly surround the issue of ignorance on the topic of skilled trades labour. This includes students relocating to urban centres for school, parents encouraging their children to pursue university education, and a lack of government support and marketing to encourage entering the skilled labour sector. This ignorance tends to overlook the fact that skilled trades work has many job opportunities and pays very competitive wages. The above-mentioned case studies demonstrate real-life examples of how this ignorance can be overcome. They also establish a number of different

approaches that communities are taking towards encouraging and enticing individuals to strongly consider the skilled trades workforce.

Ultimately, attracting and retaining individuals to pursue skilled trades work in rural communities is not an easy task. This requires the implementation of high school education programs focused on the benefits of skilled trades work. Employers also need to possess the readiness to hire new graduates without experience. Rural communities must acquire the willingness to enhance their living conditions and organize information centres that provide material about current job opportunities in the community related to skilled labour. Students, employers, and rural communities need to act now because the demand for skilled labourers is higher than ever before; they depend on this sector for survival.

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