

The apprenticeship payback

One important step to closing the skilled trades gap is ensuring young people entering industry have a chance to develop their skills through apprenticeships. Below you can read about a few Canadian companies who are making apprenticeships work — both for the well-being of the country's industry and for their businesses.

By Vanessa Chris

Apprentices play a big role helping Black and McDonald stay competitive. The Canadian contracting company — that provides electrical, mechanical, utility and maintenance services to a variety of markets including industrial and governments — is a union contractor that hires workers from local unions to make the business run. When it can, the company employs apprentices rather than journeymen to help keep their costs as low as possible.

Working with the union simplifies the apprenticeship process, because the union monitors the apprentice's hours, ensures contracts don't overlap with their school time, and determines their wage scale. The only problem is, because of the mass amount of turnover in the construction industry, once a contract is over B&M is often forced to lay off the apprentices — sending them back to the union to be employed by other contractors.

With an abundance of workers about to retire, the company found giving up promising young tradespeople was becoming harder to do.

"Our VP for the Southern Ontario mechanical region takes apprenticeships to heart," says April Jackson, Black and McDonald's HR Officer. "We don't want to them to feel like we're only taking them on because they're cheaper than journeymen. We want them to be with us for the long term."

So in October 2004, the company implemented its Gold Medal Council. The program, still in its infancy stages, aims to retain key apprentices for the length of their apprenticeship and potentially longer — an effort the company believes will help it develop a stronger workforce and give them an edge over its competitors.

The program started by analyzing the career goals and expectations of the apprentices at the company's southern Ontario branch. Throughout the year, B&M's HR department works with the group by setting up seminars that appeal to their interests (i.e. financial planning, mortgages, worker safety, etc.) as well as awarding incentives to those apprentices who share their Gold Medal Council-mandated logbooks. The logbooks allow B&M to ensure they are being trained efficiently, their skills are



Classic Tool & Die's first apprentice, Frank Lochinger, (second from left) now trains other apprentices.

being used and developed, and any potential work conflicts / problems are addressed.

At the end of the 12 months, B&M hopes to retain 10 to 12 of the group's best apprentices. "We have been able to keep them around in the past, but we were very lucky because we've had work for them," says Jackson. "We're hoping that, in the long term, this program will encourage loyalty through their workmanship."

A Classic case

When 19-year-old Frank Lochinger, fresh out of high school, came knocking on Classic Tool & Die's door 25 years ago, he changed the face of this two-person, Oldcastle, Ont. business.

"He came to Classic Tool and Die as green as they come. We were green too. So we learned together," says Kathryn Opio of the very first apprentice to work at her family-run business. "Now he's training other apprentices. We were very lucky to find him."

Since then, the company has tried its luck on a number of young people — about half the company's 32 employees started as apprentices and six young tradespeople are going through the program right now. With this success rate, it is no wonder the company was recently awarded the Ontario Minister's Apprenticeship Employers Recognition Award.

So what's the secret to the company's success? Opio says it's all about taking a risk, overlooking the short-term setbacks and seeing the bigger picture. The standard excuses companies use to justify their poor record



Second-year University of Windsor student, Elizabeth Galbraith, is an engineering co-op student at Classic Tool & Die.

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of hiring apprentices: “I don’t have the time / money to train” and “a bigger company is just going to steal my apprentice anyway” aren’t valid reasons not to take on an apprentice.

“Every time the Big Three start hiring we do lose some of our people. But the company down the road can take your employees. There’s always a risk. That’s the nature of business,” she says. “Taking on apprentices is the only opportunity for a future in this industry. The older population is retiring. Who else is going to take their place?”

Classic takes most of its apprentices from the government’s OYAP program. It maintains close ties with Dario Rossit, the Technical Department Head of nearby Herman’s Secondary School.

“These apprentices on our shop floor are the best quality we’ve had in 25 years. Schools are better preparing kids than ever before,” says Opio. “Back when we started, the risks were higher. There weren’t many incentives. Education has really taken some new strides and is starting to listen to industry.”

But, Opio says, improving apprenticeship programs is a two-way street. “Industry can’t just say ‘this is what we want’ and not hire anybody. You have to put your money where your mouth is.”

Life of the party

Matthew O’Dwyer, owner and CEO of Matcom Industrial and Installations in Concord, Ont., recognized back in the 1980s that apprentices are an important addition to any company. “We like young people here. They’re bright, enthusiastic, and cheerful. It adds some life to the party,” he says.

These qualities — in addition to the specificity of Matcom’s business — inspired the company to spend some money and put together a thorough, in-house training program.

Installing and relocating industrial machinery for the aerospace, automotive, printing, metal stamping and food and beverage industries requires a large amount of rigging — a skill not offered, in depth, in any of Ontario’s specialized apprenticeship programs.

Robert Low, the company’s Director of HR and Staff Development, came aboard full-time in 2000 to put together an official rigging training program, and expand on the company’s welding and steam fitter apprenticeships.

The company recruits apprentices from college programs, OYAP, high school graduates, and in-house employees. They currently have five on the floor, and of the five they hired in 2000, they have three working as employees. Although Low admits it’s disappointing when an apprentice leaves after finishing his training, he doesn’t see it as the end of the world. “You put a lot of money in training, but by the same token, you pick up staff from other companies who have paid for training as well. People will always change jobs,”



Fourth year apprentice, Paul Opio (left) and third year apprentice Georgio Lolancono put their new skills into practice.

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he says. “If somebody leaves and gets a job somewhere else, they’ll always remember who trained them. If they can give you business down the road, they will. They also might come back — with new skills.”

The way to keep apprentices around, Low says, is to treat them well — with fair wages, good benefits, and available overtime. It also helps to treat them as people, not numbers. “The key is to not leave employees alone if they’re having a problem,” he says.

For smaller companies looking to take on apprentices but worried about the risks involved, Low suggests recruiting from a local college program — students already have an understanding of the trade, a desire to be there, and a basic knowledge base so they don’t have to be trained from scratch, he says. **TEN**



Apprentice Alstan Nagee from Matcom Industrial.



Matcom Industrial says fair wages, good benefits and overtime helps entice apprentices to stay.

Survey says...

In 2004, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce conducted a survey on apprenticeships and the skilled trade shortages. The report revealed:

- Companies believe the key to retaining skilled trade workers and apprentices are: good pay and benefits; a good work environment; and opportunity for advancement;
- Respondents with fewer apprentices felt the main causes for the shortage of skilled trade workers and apprentices was because the skilled trades are not viewed as a desired profession and the education system does not focus on skilled trades;
- 59 percent of the organizations surveyed did not partner with other organizations to develop/source skilled trade workers. But almost 75 percent were unwilling to participate in a half-day workshop with other Chamber members to help develop a strategy on the issue.

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