NCHCA
NATIONAL CAPITAL HEAVY CONSTRUCTION ASSOCIATION

Recruitment Project

REPORT



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A. Executive Summary

In 2020, the National Capital Heavy Construction Association undertook a 2-year recruitment project to address current and anticipated labour shortages in the Ottawa region.

In the Ottawa region, the heavy construction sector is expected to see employment rise to a peak of 8,500 workers by 2022 – an increase of 870 jobs, or an 11% increase compared to the 7,620 workers active in the sector in 2020. This growth is driven by an expected 15% rise in engineering investment following the anticipated timing of the OLRT Confederation Line (East-West) and Trillium Line Expansion projects. Moderate growth in other civil infrastructure (including sewer and water) and increased site preparation activity is expected to coincide with an anticipated surge in major hospital and government building construction between 2024 and 2026.

In addition to meeting near-term expansion requirements, Ottawa's heavy construction sector will also need to replace an estimated 1,660 retiring workers, or approximately 22% of the 2020 workforce, between 2021 and 2029. When coupled with demand, the net hiring requirements for the industry over the course of the decade is just over 1,490 workers. This figure excludes turnover, which can be as high as 30-40% among new labourer hires.

Recognizing that not enough people are entering the industry and committing to careers in heavy construction, NCHCA's Recruitment Project was initiated to improve perception of the heavy construction industry in Ottawa to make it an attractive, long-term career choice. The objective of the Project was to develop strategies and solutions to address the current and anticipated labour shortages in the heavy construction industry through testable solutions for recruitment and retention programs.

The following approach was used:

- An understanding of the current landscape was developed through an environmental scan including a literature review, a statistical review, and interviews with industry stakeholders to gather the best available evidence on the trends that need to be considered when formulating a long-term strategy to meet the skill needs of the National Capital Region's heavy construction sector. Recruitment strategies that have yielded some successes in recruiting workers into the construction sector were identified.
- A job matching exercise and analysis of skills transferability was conducted to identify occupations with skills and knowledge that are at least partially transferrable to the heavy construction sector. Identifying these occupations and the industries that employ them provides a basis for assessing how much scope there may be for a recruitment strategy that targets workers with skills and knowledge that are at least partially transferrable to the heavy construction industry, thereby reducing the required up-front investment in training by employers.
- Strategies and solutions including promoting a positive perception of the construction industry so that it is perceived as an attractive, sustainable career choice, identifying barriers to recruitment and retention, creating a focused communications strategy and job opportunity resources available to the public were considered.
- Industry stakeholders identified potential strategies and solutions through a series of workshops by considering which leverage points – obstacles and opportunities – would have an impact if overcome and achieved
- Four strategy working groups were convened to consider:
  - Exploring ways to improve working conditions in the industry
  - Expanding the current labour pool
  - Connecting with high school students and the school system
  - Supporting people to develop their careers at all levels of the industry

B. Findings from interviews and research

1. Historically, the rural labour pool has been an important source for recruiting new workers into the National Capital Region's heavy and civil construction sector. However, this labour pool is declining. To meet its future skill requirements, the sector will need to identify other potential labour pools from which to recruit.

2. There has been a shift in attitudes towards a more positive view of the skilled trades among both parents and students. This creates an opportunity for the heavy and civil construction sector if the sector's strategy aligns with this change in attitudes.

3. The perception that the construction industry does not offer career paths is an important factor in a young worker's decision to avoid the industry, to leave the industry or to move to a different sector in the industry where a career path is more evident.

4. Young women perceive significant barriers to working in construction over and above the barriers that are more widely held by all young workers.

5. In the Ottawa-Gatineau Region the aboriginal share of the construction workforce is approximately proportionate to the aboriginal share of the region's overall workforce. There are distinct channels for recruiting aboriginal workers that parallel traditional channels.

6. While there have been some changes in recent years, relatively few students transition directly from high school into construction. Family and friends are by far the most important factors generating the current flow of workers into the construction industry. These informal channels, however, are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of the National Capital Region's heavy and civil construction sector.

7. There is a large and likely growing pool of workers in their twenties and thirties who are stuck in low-paid, menial, and often precarious jobs. Among the industries that could be included in this category are warehouses, courier and delivery services, assembling and machine operator jobs in manufacturing, non-residential building cleaning and window cleaning. While many of these workers may not be interested in (or suitable to) construction, there will be individuals in this pool of workers who find the wages, benefits and career opportunities in heavy construction attractive.

8. Immigration criteria under the Federal Skilled Worker Program does not align with the construction industry's labour requirements. There may be some scope for using the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program. The Refugee pool may be a potential source of new recruits. The educational and occupational profile of many persons in the refugee pool align with the needs of the heavy and civil construction sector.

9. There are two key messages that have the potential to gain traction. The first is the wages and benefits that the heavy and civil construction sector offers. This message will primarily be of interest to young workers in low-wage jobs with a lack of career development opportunities. The second and related message is that the sector and its employers offer career opportunities and pathways to advancement.

C. Project Outcome and Recommendations

Over a series of four virtual workshops, strategy working groups comprising a cross section of the industry worked to develop strategies to address issues of recruitment and retention. Below is a summary of the main strategies to emerge in **three** key areas:

1. **Connecting with students and the school system**
2. **Improving perception of the industry**
3. **Addressing obstacles to retention within the industry**

1 Connecting with students and the school system

STRATEGY ❯ **Create a liaison position at NCHCA to facilitate a partnership between the heavy construction industry and the school system.**

A formal partnership between the heavy construction industry and school systems in and around Ottawa is critical to the development of long-term plan to utilize the framework that already exists within school districts and high schools to connect with, attract, encourage and educate potential students about possible careers within the heavy construction industry.

A key component to connect with students will be to target programs and courses including the Construction-Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) programs, co-operative education, technology courses and other experiential learning initiatives like career fairs and courses and Grade 10 careers courses.



2 Improving the perception of the industry

STRATEGY 1 ❯ Re-brand heavy construction as a modern, professional, collective focused, technology-driven industry

To attract young people, newcomers to Canada and people with transferrable skills, develop a marketing strategy and campaign to present the construction industry as a modern, professional, collective focused, technology-driven industry that provides unique benefits and opportunities not found in other sectors. The development of certification courses would contribute to improving perception of the industry.

STRATEGY 2 ❯ Change the narrative through use of social media and industry podcasts

Creating podcasts would help to foster a positive narrative around the construction industry and serve as a tool for professionals to share their experience, advice and resources.

Individuals in and outside the industry could gain a better understanding of the industry and provide information about current trends and advancements opportunities. This way of communicating could also promote greater youth engagement, helping young people to become aware of and make informed choices to choose a career in the construction industry.

There are a number of options open to the sector to respond to the need for identified career pathways.

- expand the role of apprenticeship in the sector, taking advantage of the favourable shift in attitudes toward the apprenticeable trades and the funding that is available for delivering apprenticeship training
- work with the Ontario government to introduce industry-validated and recognized micro-credentials to formalize career training in the sector
- implement human resources management strategies that more clearly set out career pathways



3 Addressing structural obstacles to retention within the industry

STRATEGY 1 ❯ Launch a flexible working hours pilot project

Within the heavy construction industry, it is difficult for workers to maintain work/life balance. Long hours are the norm, and there is a shifting of work to evenings, weekends, and irregular shifts. These conditions make it difficult to both attract and retain people for careers in the industry.

To attract and retain people, we want to explore a series of pilot projects where flexible working hours are tested within our industry.

The focus of the strategy would be to run a series of pilot projects where different concepts of working hours to see if any of them will work for the heavy construction industry. Some trades have tried this already and there have been studies in the UK on these pilots. Within the project we would collect data on to what degree have the pilots been able to both deliver on the project work and achieve work/life balance for people.

STRATEGY 2 ❯ Address white male power in construction by creating ambassadors of influence

The heavy construction industry is dominated by white males. They are the key influencers, and this can create an environment that is not welcoming to others. To address this situation, we propose engaging ambassadors who can speak up and influence these attitudes. These ambassadors could help people understand how they may be an impediment to the situation and guide existing white male leaders to think differently and accept diversity.

To pursue this goal, we see the first step is to identify Ambassadors of Influence from within organizations to promote this shift. These ambassadors can also act as mentors across the industry.

STRATEGY 3 ❯ Make opportunities for advancement more visible through a career roadmap

There is a perception of a lack of career pathways in the industry that, if overcome, could have a large impact. " a temporary job, not a career" has been heard often and changing this perception could have a big impact on retention in the industry.

The purpose of creating an interactive, visual roadmap is to provide career paths that outline different levels of skill and education development. This would enable existing employees to realize the potential that exists in the industry, make calculated moves forward, and stay motivated in their chosen profession. As well it would help prospective employees envision a career within the industry rather than seeing it as "just a job".





D. Conclusions & Next Steps

A robust marketing strategy and campaign focused on the specific segments of the overall market that will be most receptive to the marketing message is critical to generate additional interest in the industry.

Based on industry experience to date, there are two marketing messages that have the potential to gain traction. The first is the wages and benefits that the heavy and civil construction sector offers. This message will primarily be of interest to young workers who are "stuck" in low-wage, precarious, and marginal employment. The second and related message is that the sector and its employers offer career opportunities, ie a pathway to advancement.

Based on the identified strategies, we recommend the following next steps in the implementation phase:

1. Increase engagement with schools, newcomers and non-traditional labour pools by creating a liaison position within NCHCA to spearhead this effort. Potential activities might include:

- **a** Working with school systems, newcomer's associations, aboriginal associations and communities, and veteran associations
- **b** Create a platform with up-to-date information from industry and industry partners
- **c** Develop supports and best practices to ensure successful onboarding of workers

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2. Marketing strategy and campaign to rebrand as a modern, professional, collective focused, technology-driven industry

- **a** Conduct a public opinion survey on perceptions of careers in the heavy construction industry and leverage that data to create a compelling campaign
- **b** Develop and deploy a robust marketing strategy and campaign to increase awareness and improve the general perception of the heavy construction targeting:
  - Canadians under the age of 30
  - individuals in low-paying service jobs
  - parents, relatives, teachers and guidance counsellors
  - new Canadians and second-generation immigrants
  - individuals with transferrable skills
- **c** Identify pilot programs to address key structural barriers
  - Assess feasibility of flexible working hours pilot program
  - Ambassadors program
  - Launch credentialling programs and explore the expansion of apprenticeship within the sector
  - Identify mentoring opportunities

E. Acknowledgments

This project could not have been completed without the support and commitment of our industry partners – heavy construction contractors, unions, a newcomer association, high school co-op teachers, women in construction, industry workers, human resources professionals, high school guidance counsellors, veteran organizations, other construction associations and the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

This Employment Ontario project was funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario.



F. Appendix:

Other identified strategies to support recruitment and retention identified through consultation with the heavy construction industry

1. Expanding the current labour pool

- **a** Identify and understand what motivates potential recruits in order to communicate construction as a modern, professional, and technology driven industry that provides unique benefits not found in other sectors.
- **b** Rebrand the heavy construction industry by developing and deploying a targeted marketing strategy and campaign. Include information about good wages, on the job training, benefits and pensions to attract people to the industry.
- **c** Understand the reservations of parents and develop strategies to overcome.
- **d** Develop an online assessment form that would identify where individuals might fit in the heavy construction industry.

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2. Connecting with schools and students

- **a** Develop relationships, information, processes and procedures to facilitate the entry of students into the industry.
- **b** Utilize key personnel within the school system to promote and educate students and parents about employment and career possibilities within the heavy construction industry.
- **c** Facilitate student placements to familiarize potential workers with the industry.
- **d** School information visits and presentations to familiarize students with the industry and potential careers.
- **e** Identify technology courses such as carpentry, construction, and auto as a potential source of workers and a way to promote the industry. Utilize construction SHSM Programs (SHSMs) that provide experiential learning opportunities, training and certifications within the industry. As SHSM Programs are only offered in certain high schools, target other technology courses to reach students that may not have access to a construction SHSM Program.
- **f** Develop an online tool to connect students, schools and companies for co-op placements.

  Note: SHSM programs are Specialist High Skills Major Programs that allow students to gain credits toward their Ontario Secondary School Diploma and focus their learning on a specific economic sector at the same time. The SHSM program is a Ministry of Education approved program.

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3. Improving working conditions

- **a** Launch flexible working hours pilot projects to assess feasibility and potential positive impact on work-life balance of those working in the heavy construction industry.
- **b** Conduct a Canada-wide perception survey to identify and understand the perception of individuals outside the industry, and use this information to develop a marketing strategy and campaign to attract additional workers.
- **c** Develop a diversity, equity and inclusion initiative focused on making the heavy construction industry more welcoming to underrepresented individuals.

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4. Supporting people to develop their careers

- **a** Create an interactive, visual roadmap is to provide career paths for different levels of skill and education so prospective and current employees are informed of career opportunities.
- **b** Change the narrative through social media activities such as industry podcasts. Industry has an opportunity to support career development by sharing knowledge with one another and our community. Creating a podcast for industry members would help to foster a more positive narrative around the construction industry and serve as a tool for professionals to share their experiences and advice to other members.



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