

Good Jobs



Trades Training and Rebuilding BC's Apprenticeship System

The Industry, Trades, and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC) was established in 1997. ITAC engaged industry, labour, education and government in an equal partnership to make policy, oversee delivery and maintain training standards. This stakeholder model of training produced stable apprenticeship completion rates. BC enjoyed a steady supply of nationally recognized journey level trades workers who had been exposed to the full scope of trades training.

The ITAC had a staff of 120 and provided services, including counsellor support for apprentices, at offices in every region of the province.

Currently there are 25 administrative staff at the Richmond office and another 25 at the service centre. The service centre is overwhelmed with calls and are unable to assist apprentices who need help convincing an employer that the apprentice needs time off the job to attend technical training.

In the spring of 2002, the BC government announced it would streamline training in order to boost skill development. This change of direction coincided with the beginning of a demographic swing that would see the retirement of the baby boomer generation. At a time when the focus of government policy should have been encouraging more people to enter trades training, our province closed down direct government involvement in apprenticeship training in favour of an untested privatized model.

From ITAC to ITA

Under ITA, the four-cornered partnership (industry, labour, education and government) was replaced by industry-only governance. The transition to this new privatized and deregulated system was chaotic.

Today the ITA Board does not have a single spot for a labour representative. The Construction ITO, the largest trades training organization, also doesn't have a single labour representative on their Board.

The new system has lost the valuable resource of trained counsellors who ensured that apprentices were paid correctly and received their regular wage increases, assisted with post-secondary education scheduling, monitored job safety and training requirements, helped to find apprenticeship placements, and responded to apprentices' needs, from curriculum to financial assistance.

The new system requires apprentices to update the ITA on their progress by themselves. Many apprentices are unable to cope with this self-help process.

Technical institutions and colleges are unable to plan technical training. The result has been deteriorating standards, a dramatic reduction in the number of apprenticeship completions and the de-skilling of the workforce.

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Under the ITA, BC is simply not producing enough journeypersons to meet the needs of our economy. National Red Seal Endorsement completions fell from 3,093 in 1999/2000 to less than 2,000 per year from 2003 to 2005.

To meet the shortfall, the ITA is increasingly resorting to issuing Certifications of Qualification (C of Qs) to applicants who successfully challenge trades qualifications. There are serious problems with the challenge "solution."

The challenge route can undermine apprenticeships, the Certificate of Apprenticeship and the all important value of a signed off log book of hours. If a person can simply challenge, why would they bother to complete a full scope apprenticeship?

Challenge applicants must show that they have accumulated one and a half times the employment hours required for apprentices. For example, for an apprenticeship which requires 6,000 hours, the challenge applicant would have to show 9,000 hours of employment. But if all of those hours are in residential construction, there has been no exposure to the trade in other crucial sectors like Institutional, Commercial or Industrial construction. An electrician who has worked 9,000 hours in wiring houses is of no use to an employer who needs to wire machinery for a factory, or a transformer in an industrial setting.

The ITA is proposing to improve the challenge process through a new “Enhanced Assessment Approach” with a practical assessment of competencies. Currently only the crane operator, bricklayer and welder have a practical component to the challenge process. But even this process is weak. A six-hour practical demonstration doesn’t match the requirements of a full scope apprenticeship with logbooks and appropriate ratios between apprentices and mentors to ensure exposure to all sectors of the industry.

While there may be suitable candidates for trades qualification challenges, the current system opens the door to abuse. Challenge applications should be limited to those individuals who are sponsored by an employer or a joint board.

Currently, one-third of all apprentices are sponsored by union-training programs. In contrast to the overall completion rate for apprentices at 37 percent, the completion rate for apprentices in these union-sponsored programs is very high, about 95 percent. One reason for the high success rate is the Joint Board system with access to union dispatch halls.

The Joint Board system ensures that apprentices are placed with new employers when there is a work slow-down or during lay-offs. Another success factor is ongoing support and mentoring by union-training coordinators.

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Compulsory Certifications

Early in 2002, the provincial government eliminated compulsory certification in a number of designated trades such as automotive service technician, automotive collision technician, automotive painter, electrician, plumber, pipe fitter/steamfitter, sheet metal worker, power line technician, roofer, sprinkler system installer, refrigerator/air conditioning mechanic, elevator and gas boiler and pressure vessels work.

If trade certification is compulsory, there is a certainty that the people doing the work have the skills, abilities, qualifications and education to do the job properly. Compulsory certification of trades not only operates in the public interest in the areas of public safety, but also ensures that the work being done meets a standard of quality so that huge repairs are not required shortly after completion or start-up.

Deregulating certification requirements jeopardized the quality of work, safety protection for workers on the job, but above all, compromised public safety by removing the most vital component of the construction process – skilled workers.

In addition, changes were made to the **Safety Standards Act and Regulations**, which have reduced the regulatory requirements for compulsory trades in BC, allowing workers without a skilled trades certificate to perform work that previously required certified trades people. This is because the Safety Authority only requires that the permit for the work be pulled by an individual with a C of Q.

The contractor may send down their single C of Q employee. The employees who actually do the work may or may not hold a trades certification. Deregulating certification requirements jeopardized the quality of work, safety protection for workers on the job, and compromised public safety by removing the most vital component of the construction process – skilled workers.

Training

Canadian employers are not meeting acceptable standards when it comes to spending on workplace training and skills upgrading. Canadian workers are left on their own to acquire skills that employers demand and the financial burden placed on individuals has created skill supply problems.

Except for Quebec, where employers must invest a minimum of one percent of their payroll in training, there is no obligation on employers to invest in training in Canada. Compared to other developed countries, Canada ranks near the bottom of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in investment in workplace learning. Canadian companies spend only 0.5 percent of payroll on training compared to the 1.3 percent average for all OECD countries and well below the 3 percent of several European Union (EU) countries.

Six Immediate Actions to Rebuild Apprenticeship and Trades Training in BC

In order to create a workable and effective labour force development policy, it is necessary for the government of British Columbia to listen seriously to all stakeholders and be prepared to reconsider many assumptions in the area of training and post-secondary education and labour force management.

Labour unions have a proven track record in training that must be integrated into labour force development policies. The energy, interest and resources of the labour movement are immense and have been put to good use over the years in the development of the BC apprenticeship system.

1. Amend legislation to establish an apprenticeship and skills training system organized by trade (not industrial sector) that has full and equal representation by labour, business and educators guaranteed by legislation, with government oversight.
2. Reinstate apprenticeship ratios and require apprenticeship quotas in any government contract or RFP where trades are employed, including those awarded by Crown Corporations.
3. Reinstate the system of compulsory trades to maintain national standards.
4. Fully support employers and apprentices by opening offices throughout the province to provide assistance and counselling to apprentices.
5. Direct Crown Corporations and government services to indenture apprentices (as appropriate to their business) as a regular practice, not only on projects.
6. Fund a financial incentive to encourage companies to train apprentices, which could be funded through a levy on companies that employ skilled trades but do not provide their own training.