

A looming shortage of skilled tradespeople presents challenges for the construction trades as demand in the labour market increases. The author discusses strategic decisions that skilled trade leaders can make to provide solutions and positive outcomes to both the industry and their employees.





# THE RISE OF WOMIEN

## Working in the Trades

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**R**ooted in tradition and skills passed down over generations, the construction industry and its ability to evolve and innovate continues to successfully build the world in which we live. In nearly every aspect of the business, from integrating new materials, raising productivity and incorporating safety practices among other advancements, the construction industry uses its foundation of knowledge and drive for improvement to address steep challenges and overcome them.

The availability of skilled tradespeople and the willingness of new workers to join in shaping our world through the construction trades presents a looming challenge for the industry. The anticipated need for highly skilled workers continues to rise for two significant reasons: As the need for new construction (and maintenance of existing facilities) accelerates so does the demand for tradespeople, and more skilled workers are retiring as the average age continues to climb.

This brings us to one of the industry's current opportunities: Traditionally, construction jobsites have been male-dominated, but to meet the future needs of the industry, all genders, races and orientations—indeed, all people—must have the opportunity to join the construction industry's skilled workforce. The survival of the industry depends on attracting and retaining people with interest and skills.

### Takeaways

- The need for tradespeople continues to increase along with the demand for new construction and upkeep of existing facilities. With the average worker age rising and more skilled workers retiring, the necessity for tradespeople will only continue to accelerate.
- Construction jobsite cultures, which are slow to change, will inevitably cease to be competitive unless industry focuses on attracting, developing and retaining people with interest and skills.
- Comprehensive benefits and employee supports can help expectant mothers avoid worksite hazards, ensure women and men feel valued, and offer flexible schedules and child care accommodations. These benefits encourage women to return to their chosen trade and contribute valuable work.
- To stay in a chosen career, individuals need to feel they belong, and they need to feel safe, valued and seen. Gender-diverse workplaces enhance culture, increase visibility of women and encourage future employees.

### People Are Needed

According to Statistics Canada, approximately 1,624,000 people comprise the current construction labour force in Canada, a 2.98% increase over last year (May 2023). Build-Force Canada, a construction industry service that provides labour market information, projects that nearly 300,000 additional skilled workers will be required in Canada to meet expected demand in the next ten years.

Right now, the trades face an unprecedented challenge as more and more of the experienced workforce leaves the industry, and companies struggle to attract enough people to replace them, let alone meet the increased demand for skilled labour expected to adapt to all the new technologies and opportunities.

Competition to attract and retain young workers remains fierce: Diversifying the approach means actively working to recruit from the *entire* population. Of the 1,624,000 people comprising the construction labour force, 1,402,200 (86.3%) are men. The population of women in construction is much smaller at 221,800, but it is growing at a much faster rate: The number of women in construction as of May 2023 is up 14.09% over last year versus male employment numbers, up 1.42%. Even though women constitute 13.7% of the construction employment in Canada, statistics tend to gloss over the fact that most of those women work in construction offices. Women only represent about 5% of the skilled labour on the jobsite, and that number has been low for decades.

Considering that women make up 50.9% of Canada's total population ages 15 and older in private households in 2021 (Statistics Canada 2022), there is an opportunity for improvement in attracting talent to the jobsite.

### Welcoming Women Into the Trades

Increasing exposure to the many opportunities in the skilled trades is happening across the country as employers, government and industry groups recognize the growing skills gap in this critical sector. Promotional campaigns highlighting nontraditional participants in construction help encourage women to see themselves in careers that may not have been promoted to them by parents, teachers and other societal influences. The more that people can identify with people like themselves in the trades, the more likely they are to consider a career in construction, which creates a larger labour pool that the industry can access to meet future demands.



Relying on employer diversity programs to attract today's youth may not be enough. Equal treatment and opportunity regardless of gender, race, religion or orientation is the minimum they expect—and they are not afraid to walk away from a job not aligned with their values. New workforce entrants will not tolerate the culture and tactics once used in the “good ole days” or listen to the “when I was an apprentice” diatribes. Our ability to attract and meet the expectations of this workforce will ensure our survival.

Coast-to-coast, many industry-based, employer-based and provincial government-based supports as well as Canadian federal government programs encourage new entrants, including women, to come to the trades. The implementation of programs like the Apprenticeship Incentive Grant (AIG) and the Apprentices Completion Grant (ACG) assists apprentices on their journey to a lifelong career. Further, the Apprenticeship Service supports small- to medium-sized employers in hiring new first-year apprentices in 39 red seal trades. It also helps first-year apprentices get the hands-on work they need for a career in the skilled trades. Employers that hire apprentices from an equity-deserving group, including women, receive additional funding to incentivize prioritizing a diverse workforce more representative of our society.

Essential programs like the Office to Advance Women Apprentices (OAWA) with six offices in Atlantic Canada and the prairies, the BC Center for Women in the Trades (BCC-WIT), Women Building Futures in Alberta and the Women of Steel (WOS) national program offered through the CWB Welding Foundation, show that the industry understands the value of attracting women to the construction industry. These programs and others speak to women about the many opportunities in construction and prepare them to be successful.

### Challenges Faced by Women in Construction

The most obvious challenge that women may encounter on a construction site is an unwelcoming workplace. This may be subtle, or it may include harassment and outright abuse. Construction leadership has the power to manage the culture at a jobsite and determine the norms and acceptable behaviour on the jobsite, rather than simply tolerating individuals with poor behaviour. There must be a new standard set and enforced that ensures all employees feel safe and respected. Employers unwilling to remove impediments on the jobsite,

like providing properly sized personal protection equipment as well as clean and safe washroom facilities on jobsites, sends the message that women do not belong. Although there has been progress, more work still needs to be done.

There are other, less obvious challenges that women face on the jobsite. For example, skilled workers arrive on a jobsite with credentials confirming their competency in their chosen trade. These credentials ensure that the on-site workers have the skills and knowledge necessary to complete the assigned tasks safely and proficiently. Pervasive attitudes question the competency of qualified tradeswomen and require them to continually prove they can do the simplest of tasks, leaving them feeling frustrated, demoralized and discouraged.

Historically, the skilled trades excluded women from the labour force, and the lack of adequate role models and leadership opportunities created additional barriers for women trying to make a career in the construction industry. A woman's perspective brings needed attention to impediments they may face on the jobsite as well as new ideas that can be valuable and innovative to the overall business.

### Retention

Many recruitment programs bring women to the trades, but continuing to operate without also focusing on retention will cost the industry not only the women who currently want to work in the skilled trades but also the younger generation of workers who expect more from their employers and prioritize a work-life balance.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) found that 44% of women and nonbinary tradesworkers either leave or consider leaving their career each year.<sup>1</sup> For the construction industry to meet its projected labour needs, it will have to find a way to overcome these challenges. Retention of a diverse, skilled workforce will be critical, and that means understanding and supporting the needs of these workers.

Supporting Women in Trades (SWIT) is a national strategy offered by the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum (CAF) that listens to tradeswomen and supports employers and organizations that want to improve the attraction and retention of women by offering education and resources. It is also creating a network of employers and other groups that understand and appreciate the value of having women fully represented on construction jobsites. This can help women looking to enter the trades know where their best opportuni-

ties for success are—Notably, it can function as a new industry standard for achievement.

Women are often placed in the position of needing to choose between a career in construction or having and caring for their children. Employers must make accommodations to allow women to continue in their career *and* have a family if they choose. Maternity benefits that provide options for expectant mothers so they can avoid worksite hazards that may impact the health of a developing foetus are essential. Both maternity and paternity benefits are important ways to ensure that women (and men) feel valued. There is a need for programs that consider women with young children, such as providing opportunities to reintegrate back to work with supports for families as well as flexible hours or other child care options. With changes to programs that support women, many more will return to their chosen trade and contribute several more years of valuable work.

### What Can Help?

To feel fulfilled in a job, people need first to feel safe and appreciated, respected and valued. In short, they need to feel as though they *belong*. Many jobsites have been falling short of making new entrants feel welcomed. Women are underrepresented on worksites primarily due to societal views and systems that work against their participation. Employers that ensure their workplaces reflect a standard of having women on the job clearly state to all: Women belong here.

People need to feel *safe*—physically and psychologically. Policies to combat harassment and discrimination must be enforced at all levels to eliminate this pervasive behaviour. Leadership training and ally programs that encourage male counterparts on jobs to stand up to bullying and not just be bystanders are a powerful bolster to these policies. Further, frontline leadership training and support must be available to ensure that policies stick and become part of the ongoing culture.

People need to feel *valued*. Mentorship programs that provide *all* workers with the support and encouragement they need to develop their craft and to feel supported at work will make it clear that the employer is willing to invest in their employees and wants them to become the best tradesperson they can be. Mentorship benefits both the apprentice and the mentor, as they gain additional knowledge and confidence through teaching that helps everyone.

### BIO

**j'Amey Bevan** is the Director of National Training for the Boilermakers' National Training Trust Fund and is a Trustee on the Boilermakers' National Health and Pension (Canada) Funds. She has worked in the industrial construction and maintenance industry for over 25 years. Bevan is a Red and Blue Seal certified Boilermaker and has completed a master of arts in leadership degree through Royal Roads University. She has chosen to direct the bulk of her passion and dedication to advocate for continuous learning, supportive work environments and trade mastery.



People need to feel *seen*. When women see themselves represented in leadership roles, they are more likely to pursue those opportunities for career growth and leadership positions.

### Conclusion

Having gender-diverse workplaces can positively impact the overall work culture while increasing the visibility of women in nontraditional roles and encouraging the next generation of tradespeople. Every improvement listed above is a benefit for both women and men. A better workplace for women is a better workplace for everyone.

The looming labour challenge facing the construction industry is not insurmountable. We have all the tools we need—What we need is the fortitude to overcome the obstacles that are limiting our ability to meet the future successfully. By committing to creating worksites that welcome women and encourage them to stay, grow and lead, we are creating a more nimble, strong and sustainable industry. 🌐

### Endnote

1. [www.businessinsider.com/labor-shortage-why-dont-more-women-work-construction-sexism-iwpr-2021-11](https://www.businessinsider.com/labor-shortage-why-dont-more-women-work-construction-sexism-iwpr-2021-11).