

Trades Alberta: Apprenticeship completion vital to health of trades

BY CAILYNN KLINGBEIL, EDMONTON JOURNAL JULY 4, 2013



Rebecca Lacoursiere finished the apprenticeship prep program at NorQuest College and is currently working in a carpentry shop at Northgate Industries.

Photograph by: Jason Franson, Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - Attracting students to the trades is a crucial part of filling skilled jobs in Alberta, but industry experts also stress the need for those new workers to complete their apprenticeships.

For the 2011-12 school year, Alberta recorded an apprenticeship completion rate of 79 per cent, up slightly from 78 per cent the year before.

Those numbers are "extremely high" compared to the national average of about 50 per cent, said Sarah Watts-Rynard, executive director of the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum. However, the highest attrition rate is among first-year apprentices and Alberta does not include that number in its statistics.

Sorcha Thomas, a spokeswoman for Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education, said Alberta has tracked completion rates for the number of people who have completed their first year of training since 1996.

"What we'll see is sometimes people go into the trades to explore and see if it's right for them," Thomas said. "They would have to register as an apprentice. If the trade isn't right for them, or for whatever reason, they may not continue. Tracking after the first year is completed is a good indication of who is going to progress."

Reasons for non-completion vary, Watts-Rynard said, but research has shown two consistent factors.

"There are some common themes, and those are essential skills and mentoring. Those are areas where stakeholders can make a difference," Watts-Rynard said.

About 80 per cent of apprenticeship training is done on the job, where an apprentice is paired with a certified journeyman to act as a mentor. The other 20 per cent is completed through a college or technical training institute, with apprentices required to pass industry examinations at the end of each training period.

Weaknesses in essential skills including reading, writing, numeracy, oral communication, working with others, and computer use, can be a barrier to participation in apprenticeship training for many.

"I hear college instructors in trades all the time say they need to go back and do Grade 10, 11, 12 level math with apprentices before they can teach them content that is applicable to the course. That's a serious issue," Watts-Rynard said.

Extra tools and resources are available at many technical institutes, but people don't always know where to find them.

"If help is available and issues are identified, that's the way we start to see increased success rates. It isn't a matter of if you don't have these skills, you're never going to have them. They are skills that can be developed," she said.

In Alberta, apprenticeship preparation programs focus on building those essential skills and preparing people to enter further trades training.

Rebecca Lacoursiere was the only female graduate in her class at NorQuest College's apprenticeship preparation training program and is now working in an Edmonton carpentry shop, en route to starting her first-year apprenticeship.

"I was doing some upgrading at NorQuest and there was a little fair going on at lunch one day, about the upcoming programs at NorQuest," said Lacoursiere, a 36-year-old who is Métis. "I started talking to the facilitator from the apprenticeship prep program, set up an appointment that day and then got an interview."

NorQuest's program starts with four months of classroom work at the school's downtown campus, where students focus on science, math, reading skills, computer literacy and workplace culture. In the second semester, students complete work experience in their chosen trade.

"I chose carpentry. I've always been a hands-on type of person and so this was my chance, my opportunity, to learn the trade," she said.

Three weeks into her work experience, Lacoursiere was offered a full-time position. Once she completes her probationary period in July, she'll get her blue book and start tracking hours toward her apprenticeship.

"I'm now in a really good spot and I'm only advancing," she said. "That was one of the things I wanted to do, was to provide a higher standard of living for my children and show them if you want to do something, just go for it."

Watts-Rynard said apprentices have identified journeyman mentors as an integral part of their success. And the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum recently released a report on effective journeyman apprenticeship mentoring, including tips, strategies and resources.

"It does take a special person to be able to get all that work done and at the same time mentor somebody else," said Watts-Rynard.

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