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Major shortage of skilled workers hammers Lower Mainland businesses: Tradesmen's pay rates soar while firms poach each others' labour

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Byline: Greg Mercer
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Vancouver carpenter David Waring can afford to be awfully picky these days.

"I turn down 80 per cent of the calls I get. First thing I ask is where is the job. If it's outside the immediate city, I won't do it. Right now I'm only doing jobs within 20 blocks of my house. And if people complain about my rates, I say 'get someone else to do it,' " Waring said.

A major skilled-labour shortage in the Lower Mainland, coupled with record-low interest rates and an explosion in housing starts and renovations, means Waring, who runs his own home and business renovation and carpentry company, has the luxury of being extra-selective when it comes to taking on work.

"I've never seen it this busy, ever. It's just non-stop, all the time," said Waring, 44. "It's about time for this industry. It's pay-off time."

His day starts at 6:30 a.m. and goes well into the evening, and most of the time, he's juggling four separate projects at once.

"I go seven days a week -- I never take time off. I'm going to drain this thing of as much cash as I can while it lasts, because it's a cycle like everything else and it will end," Waring said.

While a shortage of qualified workers keeps people like Waring running full-tilt, forces auto-body shops to raid each other for employees and sends pay rates soaring for plumbers, electricians, bricklayers, mechanics and other tradesmen, employers in B.C. are anxiously watching the government's plan to get more young people into the trades.

Specifically, they're looking to the new nine-member Industry Training Authority board, charged with modernizing B.C.'s aging trade-school system and encouraging more young people to chose a job in the technical sectors.

To show how serious it is about fixing the problem, under new legislation passed in May, the province put aside more than \$219 million over the next three years to address the skills shortage.

But some are skeptical the new board will be able to fix the problem.

Concerned by a lack of construction-industry involvement on the government board, a number of B.C.'s trade organizations have formed their own committee to address the trade-school training issue.

"We're not sure how the industry authority board is going to work. It's got a big hole to fill," said Richard Campbell, chairman of the B.C. Council of Construction Trade Associations.

The board has its work cut out for it -- the Ministry of Skills Development and Labour expects 700,000 new job openings in all sectors across B.C. by 2008, 380,000 of those from retirements.

Part of the government's plan is to give apprentices the ability to schedule their own training when and where it best suits them and their employers.

Funding is also being pushed into pilot projects that are testing new approaches to the way government offers training for everything from yacht builders and miners to salmon farmers and auto mechanics.

One major challenge is to make a career in trades more appealing to high-school graduates.

Today, rising tuition and fees for trades training is discouraging younger people from getting into the industry, Waring said. He said he was recently forced to lay off an apprentice he was working with because the student couldn't afford to pay the fee to write his final exam.

"I couldn't believe it. I'd never heard of paying to write the exam before. No wonder a lot of these guys are saying 'if I'm going to have to pay that much, I might as well just go to college.'

"There's a huge supply and demand imbalance. There's not even a lot of incentives for contractors to carry apprentices," Waring said.

Waring says when he was getting his journeyman training in Alberta in the early 1980s, the western provincial governments were paying for everything -- food, lodging, trade-school tuition -- and skilled tradesmen flooded the market. Of course, this meant taking lousy jobs at \$9 an hour.

The B.C. Construction Association, which represents some 1,700 construction companies in the province, said domestic demographics are working against both government and industry.

Countering the shortage means ensuring that B.C.'s trade schools are training young people in areas where workers are most needed and offering them greater flexibility to learn a variety of skills, said association president and CEO Michael Geoghegan.

He said there needs to be a look at other alternatives such as using immigration -- targeting young people with specific skill sets living in other countries -- and breaking down the education required for skilled trades such as carpentry into smaller training "modules," such as door framing.

If the shortage isn't filled, it's consumers who will feel the pinch.

"It means in the future it will be more and more difficult to get something done when you need it," he said. "It means people will have to wait longer get a plumber and pay him more when they finally do."

Geoghegan said a recent informal survey of job postings in B.C. revealed there are more than 1,100 openings in the construction industry alone that need to be filled immediately.

"There's lots of jobs out there going unfilled because people don't have the skill sets required to fill them," Geoghegan said.

The problems caused by B.C.'s skilled-labour shortage will only be compounded by a number of major construction projects on the horizon, including work on Olympic facilities, expansion of the Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre, the Vancouver to Richmond rapid-transit line and upgrades to the highway between North Vancouver and Lillooet. These projects will cost an estimated \$2.7 billion and will create 23,000 jobs by 2010, according to the association.

The Business Council of B.C. says only a quarter of the job openings between 1998 and 2008 will require a university degree, but more than half will require other post-secondary training such as an apprenticeship or a college diploma.

"The last thing we need is more English literature majors \$40,000 in debt serving us coffee at Starbucks when lots of well-paying construction jobs go wanting. As a society, we tend to undervalue skilled trades and this makes a bad situation even worse," Geoghegan said.

gmerc@png.canwest.com