

**B.C. Federation of Labour
Moving Forward: Apprenticeships in the New Economy
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On April 19, 2010 I was honoured to speak at the B.C. Federation of Labour's Apprenticeship & Skills Conference.

This opportunity caused me to focus on my expectations as an employer and how to encourage employers to welcome apprenticeships on their job sites and into their businesses.

I realized that employers in the Province of British Columbia not only have certain expectations as to what our educational system should deliver, but also a collective responsibility to support our educational institutions.

As a backdrop to the discussion, we were reminded that, over the next five years, there will be a shortfall of 160,000 placements, largely as a consequence of many workers – in the construction trades in particular – but also in a host of other fields, reaching an age where they are considering retirement.

In addition, 80 percent of training for the various trades, of which 47 are recognized as Red Seal, is received on the job site. This emphasises the need for employers to make an investment in providing opportunities for apprentices to gain valuable experience on site.

We were also reminded that many trades today are not attracting youth – certainly not in sufficient numbers to meet the requirements of our industry as we move forward.

The Economy

To stimulate new growth to meet the demands for trades in the coming years, we need to make much more progress than has been made in the past.

We must make this investment in our future – and we must embrace training and encourage young people to enter construction trades programs. Underlying all this is the increased complexity of the skill sets required for the various trades. The level of sophistication of the industry is much higher than it was even a decade ago. This applies in all sectors – industrial, retail, commercial, residential, and institutional – as we move towards sustainability, the development of green buildings, and incorporation of the most modern systems of communications a much higher level of sophistication in training is required.

My own background gives me a unique perspective on the importance of the trades. I started my career working in the summers in the pipeline construction industry and later I spent a significant amount of time logging. I went to trades training school while I was receiving my university education to equip me for my summer placements in the pipeline industry. My father was a skilled machinist and tool and die maker who later became an executive in the pipeline industry – illustrating for me that trades can be a route towards new opportunities, advancement, and potentially owning your own business.

Only 20 percent of the young people graduating from high school today will attend university. The other 80percent have unique opportunities to contribute to our society by acquiring technical skills and advance in the career of their choice. Apprenticeship training can provide a platform for such advancement.

In our own company several of our most valued and senior executives have come to us through the construction trades.

I wanted to reflect on a few questions.

First of all, as an employer what do I want? I need access to a skilled labour pool with qualified apprentices and fully trained journeymen suited to the requirements of our industry and who bring a high level of sophistication, professionalism and motivation to the job site.

As an employer, what should I do? I and my peers need to become more engaged in support of trades training – and in particular make opportunities available for on-site apprenticeship training.

I am pleased to report that, at Concert, we have made a significant effort to support programs that encourage individuals to enter the construction trades and to support them during their training. We do this in collaboration with 26 of our associates in the industry through the *Trades Discovery Program* at BC Institute of Technology. Concert has also, again with the support of its suppliers and subcontractors and general contractors, created a substantial bursary at BCIT that supports individuals through the course of their training. In addition, we try to support local community colleges that offer trades training.

However, we must do more to encourage our contractors and sub-trades to be provide apprenticeship opportunities on site. We also must encourage government to move forward to provide further support for training, to set ratios that ensure young people are properly supervised when receiving their on-site training, and do everything possible to ensure that those who enter trades training complete their apprenticeship and obtain compulsory certification - such as Red Seal.

We must also support national standards to ensure that labour is mobile so that, when required, we are able to draw on resources from other parts of the

country. Safety is a significant concern and a proper approach to on-job safety is an important part of the entire apprenticeship and certification route.

In terms of the Red Seal, we can advocate to make it more valuable. To make sure that it is well recognized across the country and that as employers we speak out about the importance of properly trained Red Seal employers. Working with our associates in the industry we can provide incentives to ensure that individuals who enter a course of education and training complete and obtain that important, prestigious certification.

Finally, we have to take responsibility. We cannot rely, or expect to rely, solely on government to meet our requirements and the challenges ahead. We have to be outspoken and proactive in the community of our peers – continually reminding everyone of the challenges that we face and the consequences to our businesses and industry if the challenge is not met.

I am reminded of a true story of a maintenance man working for a hotel in England. The individual was asked to trim some trees in the gardens of the hotel. He secured a ladder and a saw and identified a major limb that was causing difficulties in the garden area. Unfortunately, he put his ladder against the branch that was going to be sawn off and proceeded to saw it off; he fell and hurt himself and had to leave the job site for several months. What's really ironic in this story is that he successfully sued the hotel for not properly educating him on the use of a ladder and saw. He was awarded a settlement of \$3,400.

Like the gardener that failed to recognize the risks, we are resting our ladders against a limb that is going to be removed.

Right now less than 20 percent of employers are appropriately responding to encourage a continuum of opportunity for apprentices on their job site. Only a limited number of trades, companies, and sub-trades is ensuring that adequate ratios exist on site so that apprenticeships receive the training that they need on the job site so they can advance and complete their training.

While we can continue to increase our support in selected areas, we must work to encourage those 80 percent of contractors and trades that don't currently provide for apprenticeships on site to do so. We may even want to make this a requirement of our tendering process for projects and construction under our direct control. We can also work to support and encourage government to promote similar practices.

If I had a dream with respect to job training it would be that we are successful in enticing youth to take advantage of the various excellent opportunities to secure trades training. That we will engage industry leaders in being proactive in demonstrating their commitment to supporting trades training. We would work proactively with government and business to jointly increase funding available to trades training; we would move forward to see that P3s and public-

private partnerships that are the vogue today provide opportunities to include requirements for apprenticeship on site and can provide opportunities for individuals to proceed through their training to obtain their Red Seal. There is a link between stimulus funding and job training.

And finally, I would envisage a dream meeting. The dream meeting would bring together influencers from all sectors of our community regardless of political or labour affiliation. Senior industry leaders to come together to meet senior representatives of the government and the opposition as well as representative industry leaders, to make a public commitment to the continuity of the Red Seal, to the establishment of acceptable on-job work ratios, to develop a program of promotion, of the importance of completion, to our trades apprentices. A commitment to the establishment of national standards for certification and a reaffirmation of the importance of on the job oversight and training and, above all, the provision of proper education as to the safety of the workplace.

We're out of time. We need 160,000 individuals in our industry in the next five years. We have to move forward, we'll be there and I will personally make a commitment to do whatever I can to help bring young people into our industry and to ensure that they receive the opportunity to complete their education in an appropriate environment.

Finally, we have to ask ourselves "have things really improved over the past few years with respect to job training and enrolment of apprentices and completion of the Red Seal?" I don't think so.

Seventeen percent of the companies engaged in the construction industry provide apprenticeship opportunities on a continuing basis – that means that 83 percent of the companies operating in our industry are not. The responsible builders are paying for the poor and irresponsible builders who are not providing support, but rely on the good builders to deliver trained employees and trained apprentices to all job sites. This has to change.

It will be an important signal to government if we could make a significant change in the enrolment and take-up of apprenticeship positions by that other 83 percent. Perhaps then government would feel inclined to step forward and increase their commitment.