



**Canadian Apprenticeship Forum**  
**Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage**



**Regional Roundtable Summary**

# **Building Blocks for Youth Success in the Trades**

**Winnipeg, MB**  
**June 1, 2017**

## Background & Context

Each year, Skills/Compétences Canada hosts a national competition for young adults pursuing careers in skilled trades and technology fields. The competition brings together young people from across the country to showcase their talent for hands-on occupations, while also attracting local students, parents and teachers who tour the competition and learn about opportunities in these fields. While competition visitors may arrive with preconceived ideas about careers in the trades – in particular, the notion that the skilled trades are a destination for less successful students – it is intended that they leave with a better understanding of the nature of this work.

It was in this context, at the 2017 National Skills Competition in Winnipeg, that the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum and Skills/Compétences Canada partnered to host an event to bring into sharper focus the skills necessary for success in apprenticeship training. The roundtable brought together the apprenticeship community, including employers, labour groups, apprenticeship training providers, regulatory authorities and other stakeholders, with career influencers. The group heard from a panel of employers representing Manitoba Hydro, Clark Builders and UA Canada, followed by presentations from Skills/Compétences Canada and the Red River Technical Vocational Area. Our sincere thanks to Jason Peterson, Michael Gordon, Gerald Clark, Marisa Sosa and Reg Toews for their contributions. Following presentations from the stage, participants explored three competency areas, or “building blocks,” that young people must develop on the path to trades certification. These include essential skills, technical skills and employability skills.

### *Essential Skills:*

Essential skills provide a foundation for learning all other skills, enabling people to prepare for, get and keep a job, as well as adapt and succeed at work. The Government of Canada has identified nine essential skills – reading, writing, document use, numeracy, thinking skills, oral communication, computer use/digital skills, working with others and skills associated with continuous learning. In the skilled trades environment, there is often emphasis on numeracy, problem-solving, teamwork and document use, though the degree to which each is considered vital to success may vary by trade.

### *Technical Skills:*

Technical skills, sometimes also referred to as “hard skills,” relate to expertise someone possesses that assist in the completion of a job or task. In general, these are abilities acquired through practice and learning. Most skilled trades require the hands-on ability to apply math, science and/or trade-specific expertise to a particular problem or challenge. Tradespeople not



only need to be able to diagnose and understand the scope of a problem, but also apply practical, mechanical or technical skills to its solution, using the tools of trade to carry out tangible work.

### ***Employability Skills:***

Employability skills are the attitudes and behaviours needed to progress in the workplace. They are often referred to as “soft skills.” In general, these are understood to mean communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, organization, self-management and the ability to learn. In the skilled trades context, employers often refer to the need for apprentices to have “the right attitude,” show up on time and appreciate the need for safety on the worksite. To some degree, essential and employability skills overlap.

Drawing on these general definitions and the conversation in Winnipeg, this report summarizes insights gathered at *Building Blocks for Youth Success in the Trades*.

### **Employer Panel**

To start the morning, three organizations that sponsor apprentices shared their views on the skills and attributes they look for in candidates, skills gaps they come across among youth and opportunities to better prepare young people for opportunities in the skilled trades. Our thanks to Jason Peterson from Manitoba Hydro, Michael Gordon from UA Canada and Gerald Clark from Clark Builders for sharing their insights.

There was broad agreement that employers screen prospective apprentices for traits associated with attitude, including loyalty, professionalism, open-mindedness, a strong work ethic, punctuality and leadership potential. An understanding and appreciation of safe work practices, both on and off the work site, is critical. Candidates are also expected to show aptitude in a number of essential skills, including numeracy, oral communication, digital and writing skills. The ability to work with others is important in the skilled trades environment. It was suggested that prospective apprentices illustrate these skills through volunteerism, participation in team sports and early work experiences.

Our panelists also spoke to gaps they are seeing among many young people, including a lack of patience for working their way through the ranks, proving themselves and learning from others. This often results in jumping between jobs with different employers, which superiors believe reflects a lack of loyalty and staying power. They also suggested that young people be provided with more education on the importance of staying physically fit, contributing to greater dexterity and awareness of workplace safety issues. The panel spoke about the importance of financial literacy, particularly for apprentices who are expected to return to school and must be able to manage on a reduced budget for those weeks when they are away from work.



In terms of opportunities to better prepare young people, there was a strong focus on the ways high schools could engage employers to provide presentations and tours, while also providing classes focused on hands-on skills. It wasn't necessarily expected that high schools should provide trades training, instead focusing on awareness of how foundational math and science skills can be applied in a practical, hands-on context. They also suggested that youth be encouraged to demonstrate versatility on their résumés, showcasing a range of experiences that include volunteer work, music lessons and teamwork, all of which reflect abilities required to excel in skilled trades workplaces.

### Skills/Compétences Canada Presentation

Marisa Sosa from Skills/Compétences Canada spoke to the importance of essential skills to trades careers, drawing on resources and information the organization has developed to help students improve their essential skills levels as part of its Work Ready Youth Program. Her presentation was just one element of efforts to promote essential skills at the competition site. More information is available at [skillscompetencescanada.com/en/essential-skills/](https://skillscompetencescanada.com/en/essential-skills/).

She addressed common misperceptions about the level of essential skills required to succeed in the trades, pointing out how literacy and numeracy skills are applied to do the work of a plumber. In this example, she showed how a plumber uses reading skills on par with those of a translator, highlighting the importance of ensuring youth, educators and parents are aware of how foundational skills set young people up for success in trades occupations.

### Red River Technical Vocational Area Presentation

Reg Toews, a high school apprenticeship program instructor with the Red River Technical Vocational Area (RRTVA), showcased a local example of efforts to engage youth in apprenticeship training while they are still in high school. The RRTVA is a consortium of five rural school districts in southern Manitoba that share technical vocational program services. Students have opportunities to pursue high school credits and work experience that is credited toward level one apprenticeship.

The RRTVA is just one example of the province's High School Apprenticeship Program (HSAP) in action. More broadly, HSAP provides practical, paid work experience and credit toward high school completion. It offers opportunity for early entry in the trades and builds interest with youth. After graduation, hours of on-the-job training can be transferred to a level one apprenticeship training program. Students must be at least 16 years old and enrolled in grade 10, 11 or 12 to participate in the program. More information is available at [gov.mb.ca/wd/apprenticeship/discover/youth/index.html](https://gov.mb.ca/wd/apprenticeship/discover/youth/index.html).

## Roundtable Discussion

Once the presentations were completed, participants engaged in a discussion intended to inform future efforts among both educators and apprenticeship stakeholders. In small groups, attendees were able to learn from each other and share their individual experiences, then report to the larger group to share their insights. The following insights reflect a compilation of the notes taken by each small group.

### *Competency Areas that Enhance Apprentice Success*

There was broad agreement among participants about the skills that are important to an apprentice's ability to succeed, generally falling into two categories: employability skills such as working with others and punctuality, and essential skills like critical thinking, math and listening skills. Most groups suggested that technical skills could be learned later, though many employers are looking for an indication that prospective apprentices have some knowledge about the trade and basic hands-on experience that reflects a general understanding of the work.

Among employability skills, the group prioritized:

- A work ethic that is illustrated through punctuality, an eagerness to learn, a positive attitude, self-motivation and flexibility
- A desire to take ownership for their work, notably by demonstrating professionalism, loyalty and judgment, which employers translate into leadership potential
- An understanding that less glamorous aspects of the work also need to be done, recognizing that doing it offers both a learning opportunity and a chance to demonstrate teamwork
- Teamwork skills that include the ability to work with others, listen to instructions and communicate clearly

The group was also agreed on the importance of essential skills among apprentices, notably:

- Literacy skills which, in the context of the skilled trades, translates to an ability to read instructions, regulatory codes and safety information, then put this information to use in the workplace
- Numeracy skills, including both the ability to apply math concepts to real-life problems and have a grasp of financial literacy, such as budgeting
- Critical thinking skills, supporting an apprentice's ability to solve problems, focus on a task and ensure safe work practices are being used
- Digital literacy skills, which are becoming increasingly important as new technologies are introduced to trades work, and tradespeople use apps, smartphones and tablets to access real-time information on the job site

There was consensus that prospective apprentices must have a strong academic foundation, and that teachers and guidance counsellors should not overlook the importance of strong reading, writing, science and math skills when providing career guidance.

### *Effective Programs and Resources*

Participants used their own experiences to reflect on programs and resources that appear to be effective when it comes to preparing prospective apprentices for work in the skilled trades. These programs reflect a combination of initiatives underway in the K-12 school system, within workplaces and being undertaken by other groups.

In the primary and secondary school system, the group saw value in:

- Exploration programs that allow students to consider how existing aptitudes and strengths might be applied to future career opportunities, drawing guidance counsellors in to help students navigate their choices
- High school apprenticeship programs that give students a chance to work in combination with their high school classes, giving them a firmer sense of how theoretical subjects like math and science are applied in workplaces
- Guest speakers that can bring careers to life for students, particularly where these speakers can provide interactive learning opportunities, hands-on activities, photos and stories about the nature of work in a variety of professions
- Practical classes and training in the high school, including shop classes, safety awareness, health and fitness, entrepreneurship and financial literacy, drawing examples from real-life workplace situations
- School-based courses or activities that allow youth to learn basic employability skills

In skilled trades workplaces and more broadly, employers are helping students gain a better understanding of the world of work by providing:

- Paid internships, work experience and co-op placements
- Mentorship
- Supporting “take your child to work day”

To build on these opportunities in the skilled trades, there needs to be awareness of health and safety obligations, proper workplace attire and the need for workplace oversight. Programs that screen students for readiness and provide workplace insurance overcome some common concerns among employers.



Employers can make an additional impact by embracing opportunities to speak to high school classes, participate in try-a-trade activities and provide workplace tours. They should be prepared to talk about current and future job opportunities, as well as what they are looking for in prospective apprentices. If they have apprentices and tradespeople from under-represented groups, they should consider opportunities to have these employees act as mentors. As part of their contributions, employers should be encouraged to talk about trends and technology in their field.

Other organizations play an important role in enhancing career awareness among students, teachers and parents. Among these, Skills Canada and its provincial counterparts were highlighted. Groups that provide career symposiums, Try-a-Trade opportunities and other hands-on activities are also highly valued. Efforts to reach out to parents with clear, proactive messages about career opportunities were viewed as important, calling for collaboration among industry associations, employers, K-12 educators and school boards.

The group suggested that greater effort is required to provide teachers with exposure to skilled trades careers, enabling them to better guide students. Where youth do not have relatives or friends working in the trades, this is particularly critical. There is concern that, at present, teachers are not able to communicate the potential of a career in the skilled trades or connect students with trades they might be interested in pursuing. Students often lack the ability to articulate their skills and experience, making the guidance process more difficult.

Participants also expressed frustration with gaps among prospective apprentices and wondered whose responsibility it is to teach financial fundamentals, entrepreneurship, versatility, patience and ability to take direction. These are critical life skills, the absence of which can undermine success in the workplace.

Finally, there was an appreciation for the additional obstacles faced by under-represented groups, such as new immigrants, women and Indigenous people interested in entering trades careers. Within the K-12 system, the group focused on the importance of role models and mentorship to overcoming youth perceptions that they are unsuited for careers in the skilled trades. Again, a clear need for industry involvement was noted.

\* \* \* \*

For more information on this subject:

- Request a copy of Skills/Compétences Canada's presentation by emailing Marisa Sosa at [marisas@skillscanada.com](mailto:marisas@skillscanada.com)





**Canadian Apprenticeship Forum**  
**Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage**



- Request more information about the Red River Technical Vocational Area by emailing Reg Toews at [ToewsR@blsd.ca](mailto:ToewsR@blsd.ca)
- Connect with your local youth apprenticeship program