

Indigenous Tradespeople Share their Experiences in Apprenticeships and the Skilled Trades



CANADIAN
APPRENTICESHIP
FORUM



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About the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum

The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum – Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage (CAF-FCA) is a national, not-for-profit organization working with stakeholders in all regions of Canada. We influence pan-Canadian apprenticeship strategies through research, discussion and collaboration. We share insights across trades, across sectors and across the country. We do this in order to promote apprenticeship as an effective model for training and education.

Our Board of Directors is comprised of representatives from groups such as business, labour, the jurisdictional apprenticeship authorities, education and equity-priority groups. Through our work, CAF-FCA has shed light on a number of key issues affecting apprenticeship, such as the perceived barriers to accessing and completing apprenticeship, and the business case for apprenticeship training. For more information visit the CAF-FCA website at: caf-fca.org

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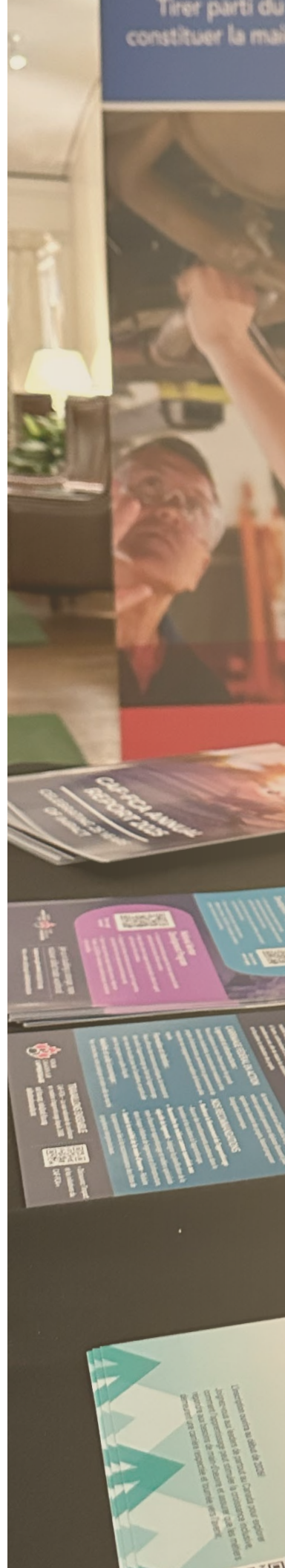


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1.0 Executive Summary

The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum (CAF-FCA) consulted with 50 Indigenous tradespeople. They worked in a variety of trades as carpenters, electricians, powerline technicians, machinists, steamfitters/pipefitters, automotive service technicians and plumbers. Most of the interviewees were from Atlantic Canada.¹ This work was guided by CAF-FCA and the Southern First Nations Secretariat (SFNS) Indigenous Project Advisory Committees.²

What we learned:

Promoting the apprenticeship pathway at the high school level is essential.

- Thirty tradespeople told us they had no recollection of learning about the apprenticeship training pathway at high school, even though some of them took shop classes and demonstrated an interest in the trades.
- Five tradespeople mentioned doing co-ops or Youth Apprenticeship Programs at high school.
- Only four tradespeople said they learned about apprenticeships from their technology or science teachers or counsellors.

1 Not all of the interviewees answered every question which is why totals may not add up to 50. For some questions, respondents provided multiple answers. These questions have been identified in a footnote.

2 These Committees include First Nations or Metis staff from the Metis Nation of Ontario, Skilled Trades BC, Canadian Union of Skilled Workers, Trades NL, Kenjgewin Teg and the Native Council of Nova Scotia. For more information about these organizations use the following six links: [Métis Nation of Ontario \(MNO\)](#) | [Métis People & Communities](#), [Nation métisse de l'Ontario \(NMO\)](#) | [Peuples et communautés métis](#), [SkilledTradesBC](#), [www.cusw.ca/apprenticeship](#), [Trades NL](#), [www.kenjgewinteg.ca](#), [www.ncns.ca](#).

A note about language: There is a French/English language selection option at the bottom of the welcome page of the Metis Nation of Ontario website. The Southern First Nations Secretariat (SFNS) supports its member First Nations by delivering quality programs and services that improve outcomes for their membership. The SFNS website provides additional information about their organization: [Southern First Nations Secretariat](#). This is an English-only link.

Indigenous organizations play a positive role in helping Indigenous tradespeople secure apprenticeships based on the journeys of our interviewees.

- Eleven tradespeople found their employer sponsors by responding to job postings on the Job Bank, online, and calling or going to job sites.
- Nine tradespeople said they secured their apprenticeships by getting help from an Indigenous organization.
- Nine found employer sponsors through family, friends or word-of-mouth.
- Four tradespeople were labourers and it was their employers who sponsored them.
- Three found a sponsor by joining a union.
- Three secured sponsors through a pre-apprenticeship program.

Our interviewees told us:

- About the racism and sexism they experienced at worksites.
- How hard it is to get hired.
- How expensive tools, books and tuition can be.
- About the challenges of adjusting to a college campus or workplace in an urban area after living in an Indigenous community.
- About the difficult challenges of being away from family and friends while travelling for work.
- About their isolation on the worksite and how it was difficult for them to find a mentor. They said this impeded their workplace learning.
- That not having a driver's licence or a vehicle makes it difficult to get to worksites.
- When a work shift starts earlier than the daycare opens its doors, childcare is a major challenge.
- Some of the most common methods used for assessment actually create barriers. Typically, these emphasize reading over practical demonstrations of skills.

They encountered four persistent barriers:

- 1 Workplaces that are unwelcoming
- 2 Finding an employer sponsor
- 3 Travelling for work or technical training and
- 4 The costs associated with an apprenticeship.

Indigenous organizations play a crucial role in supporting Indigenous tradespeople.

Getting help from the staff who work at Indigenous organizations or unions is essential. Twenty-seven interviewees received supports. Interviewees told us that connecting with a support person was an important way to learn about available programs and securing and retaining employment. This also gave them information about getting financial supports and how to navigate and manage the often complicated apprenticeship process. Tradespeople told us they considered these supports were culturally safe and were what assisted them in completing their programs. They also told us about other supports that are helpful in the workplace:

- Employee support groups and opportunities to talk with elders.
- Money to help cover the costs of tools, equipment, bus tickets, tuition, childcare and living allowances because apprenticeships are expensive.
- Finding experienced mentors.
- Networking with fellow tradespeople.

The most important piece of advice that Indigenous tradespeople offer to young people: Go for it!

The tradespeople we interviewed told us about the advice they could offer a young person:

- Careers in the trades are rewarding careers and youth need to know this. There are so many benefits to pursuing a career in the skilled trades including hands-on training and owning your own business.
- Developing a good work ethic is essential.
- Learning does not stop at the end of your apprenticeship. Successful careers in the trades are built on staying curious and being a lifelong learner.
- Although it can be scary when you start out in the trades, you need to keep working towards your goals and not give up.
- It can be intimidating when you arrive at a new workplace. This is why apprentices should ask lots of questions, show up eager and always be willing to learn.

The most consistent and important recommendation we heard from Indigenous tradespeople: Provide more opportunities for career exploration.

Our interviews generated the following recommendations for improving apprenticeship for the next generation of Indigenous apprentices:

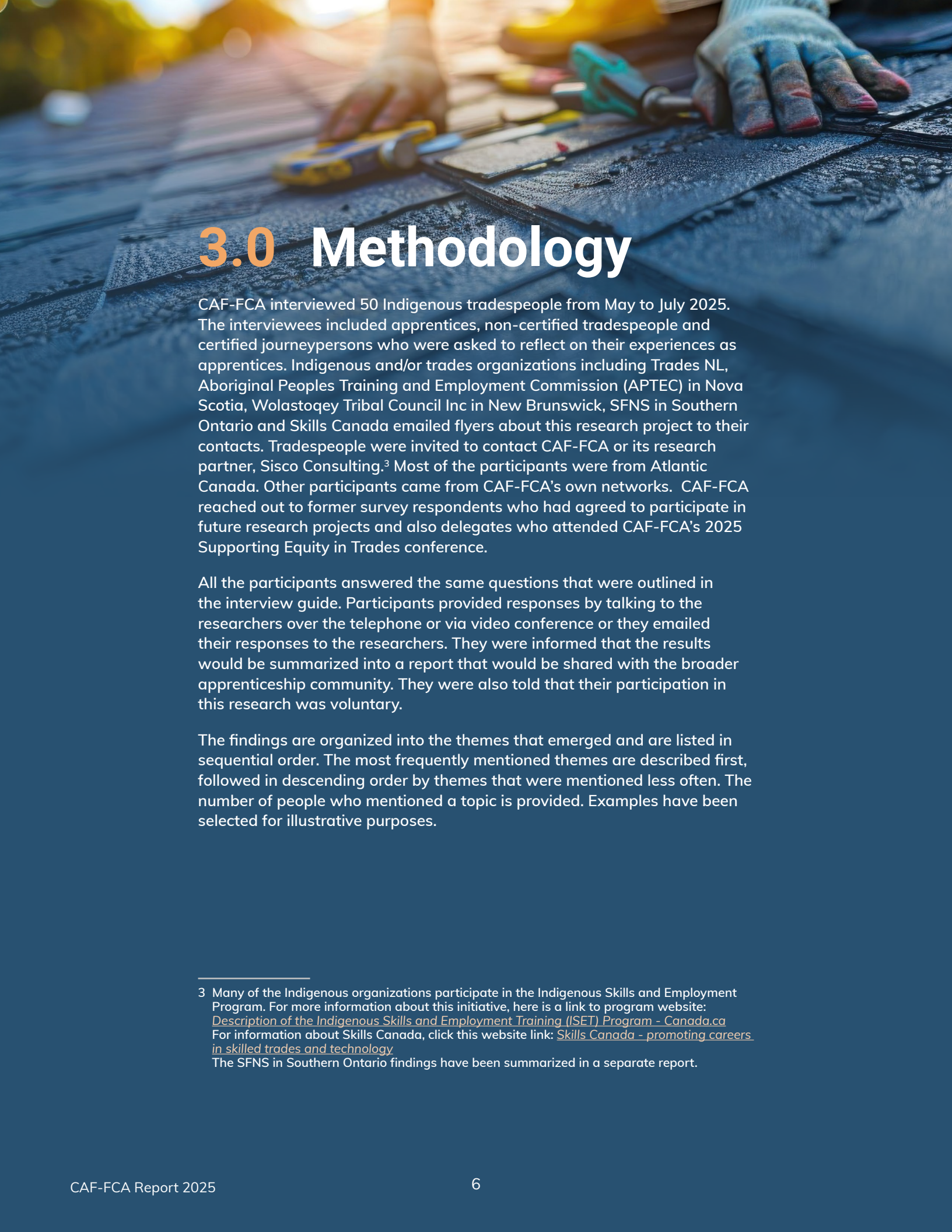
- Provide more opportunities for career exploration.
- Encourage employers to hire apprentices.
- Offer mentorship training for journeypersons.
- Provide learning supports and alternate assessments that allow for the practical demonstration of learning.
- Give financial supports to apprentices.
- Develop meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities and offer cultural supports during apprenticeship training.
- Provide practical supports such as life skills and money management courses.
- Encourage youth to get a driver's licence.
- Listen to Indigenous apprentices and integrate their feedback into apprenticeship programs.
- Ensure apprentices receive EI the moment they start their technical training.
- Promote greater awareness of all the various supports that are available.
- Share the success stories.
- Celebrate Indigenous role models.

2.0 Introduction

CAF-FCA, a national, non-profit organization, interviewed Indigenous tradespeople to better understand their individual journeys in the trades. The work was guided by a CAF-FCA Project Advisory Committee with members from First Nations and Metis organizations across Canada and the SFNS Project Advisory Committee. The starting point was to learn about the unique experiences of Indigenous tradespeople. Both Committees were unanimous on this approach to the issue. Tradespeople who currently are (or were) apprentices have first-hand experience in apprenticeships. Their lived experiences can reveal gaps and unintended consequences that other forms of data-gathering may not bring to light. When you understand the lived experiences of tradespeople you are better able to create policies that reflect the actual needs of various communities beyond any predetermined assumptions on the part of the decision makers. When tradespeople see their realities reflected in these decisions, they are more likely to engage and support the resulting policies and programs. This approach confirms their voices matter.

CAF-FCA asked tradespeople questions about these topics:

- their experience of entering into the trades
- any barriers that were experienced during training
- the supports that were helpful
- the advice that should be offered to youth who are looking to enter the trades
- and any recommendations for future improvements.



3.0 Methodology

CAF-FCA interviewed 50 Indigenous tradespeople from May to July 2025. The interviewees included apprentices, non-certified tradespeople and certified journeypersons who were asked to reflect on their experiences as apprentices. Indigenous and/or trades organizations including Trades NL, Aboriginal Peoples Training and Employment Commission (APTEC) in Nova Scotia, Wolastoqey Tribal Council Inc in New Brunswick, SFNS in Southern Ontario and Skills Canada emailed flyers about this research project to their contacts. Tradespeople were invited to contact CAF-FCA or its research partner, Sisco Consulting.³ Most of the participants were from Atlantic Canada. Other participants came from CAF-FCA's own networks. CAF-FCA reached out to former survey respondents who had agreed to participate in future research projects and also delegates who attended CAF-FCA's 2025 Supporting Equity in Trades conference.

All the participants answered the same questions that were outlined in the interview guide. Participants provided responses by talking to the researchers over the telephone or via video conference or they emailed their responses to the researchers. They were informed that the results would be summarized into a report that would be shared with the broader apprenticeship community. They were also told that their participation in this research was voluntary.

The findings are organized into the themes that emerged and are listed in sequential order. The most frequently mentioned themes are described first, followed in descending order by themes that were mentioned less often. The number of people who mentioned a topic is provided. Examples have been selected for illustrative purposes.

³ Many of the Indigenous organizations participate in the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program. For more information about this initiative, here is a link to program website: [Description of the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training \(ISET\) Program - Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca/en/skills-canada/services/indigenous-skills-and-employment-program.html) For information about Skills Canada, click this website link: [Skills Canada - promoting careers in skilled trades and technology](https://www.skills-canada.ca/en/about-us/promoting-careers-in-skilled-trades-and-technology). The SFNS in Southern Ontario findings have been summarized in a separate report.

4.0 Demographic Information

CAF-FCA interviewed 50 Indigenous tradespeople. They included apprentices, non-certified tradespeople, as well as certified journeypersons. Among those who provided demographic information about themselves, 49 participants identified as First Nation and one participant identified as Métis. There were 29 men and 21 women. Two apprentices identified as having a disability. One indicated dyslexia and the other indicated ADHD.

Tradespeople from Atlantic Canada were overrepresented in the study compared to the geographic distribution of the Canadian apprenticeship population.⁴ This could be because many of the partners who promoted the project were based in Atlantic Canada. Most of the interviewees were from New Brunswick, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia.

Figure 1: Provinces Represented in Study

Category	Number of Interviewees in Each Trade
New Brunswick	14
Ontario	13
Newfoundland and Labrador	10
Nova Scotia	7
British Columbia	3
Manitoba	2
Alberta	1
TOTAL	50

Interviewees worked in a variety of trades as carpenters, electricians, powerline technicians, machinists, steamfitters/pipefitters, automotive service technicians and plumbers. The complete list of trades represented in the study is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Trades Represented in Study

Category	Number of Interviewees in Each Trade
Carpenter	11
Electrician	8
Powerline Technician	4
Machinist	3
Steamfitter/Pipefitter	3
Automotive Service Technician	3
Plumber	3
Industrial Mechanic (Millwright)	2
Cook	2
Heavy Duty Equipment Technician	2
Cabinetmaker	1
Welder	1
Painter	1
Construction Labourer	1
HVAC Technician	1
Hairdresser	1
Scaffolder	1
Auto Body and Collision Technician	1
Power Systems Operator (this is a designated trade in Nova Scotia)	1
TOTAL	50

⁴ For a comprehensive presentation of the geographic distribution of apprentices in Canada, see Emily Jovic and Krysten Frank's article, National Apprenticeship Survey Overview Report, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2017. You can read the report by clicking here: [Canada Overview Report 2015](#)

5.0 Key Findings

5.1 Entry into the Trades

Becoming Interested in the Trades

Eighteen interviewees said they became interested in the trades through family and friends and thirteen tradespeople knew they wanted to work with their hands and were mechanically inclined. As one interviewee remarked, “I tried to do the desk thing but I found I wasn’t happy sitting around. I then heard about the trades through family members and gave it a shot.” One tradesperson learned about plumbing from a friend. The tradesperson said, “I was always a very hands-on person. I love plumbing because there are always new challenges that keep my brain going. There is never a dull moment. I never saw myself in an office.”

Eleven tradespeople realized they liked the trades after doing a labourer job or taking a free pre-apprenticeship program. Four interviewees became interested because a teacher or apprenticeship officer told them about the trades. As one tradesperson said, “I learned from a counsellor at school about a pre-apprenticeship program for carpentry. I knew I did not want to be stuck sitting all day in front of a computer or working fast food or retail.”

Two said they had tried university but did not like it. One tradesperson said she took a university course in business administration and though she found it boring, she managed to earn high marks. Then she decided to pursue a trade instead because it was hands-on learning that really appealed to her. One journeyman reported a similar experience. As she said, “I learn better when I am working hands-on. I wanted to be a mechanic in high school, but decided to try for a degree at Memorial University first. It wasn’t for me so I decided to be an Automotive Service Technician. I loved the course and was top of my class!”

Another tradesperson said it was his enjoyment of carpentry as a hobby that led to his decision to pursue it as a career.

One hairstylist said she got into her trade because she wanted to help people to feel good about themselves.

Trades Exposure at High School

Exposure to the trades at high school is what helps to introduce students to practical, applied learning. More than half the tradespeople (30) said they had no trades exposure at all throughout their high school years, and they entered the trades when they were in their 20s, 30s or 40s.

Students interested in hands-on learning are typically promising candidates for co-op work placements or Youth Apprenticeship Programs. These initiatives allow students to earn credits towards their high school diploma, providing them with hours and credits that will count towards their Level 1 apprenticeship. Only five tradespeople mentioned doing a co-op or Youth Apprenticeship Program at high school. One interviewee wanted to enroll in a Youth Apprenticeship Program but could not find an employer willing to hire him.

Learning about the world of apprenticeship is fundamental. Apprenticeship remains the main pathway to the trades, providing the training that leads to certification and employment. Youth may miss out on training opportunities because they are not aware of the typical components of the apprenticeship process, such as securing an employer sponsor, officially registering for an apprenticeship with the province or territory, tracking hours and attending technical training. Thirty of the interviewees could not recall learning anything about the apprenticeship training pathway, even though some of them took shop classes and demonstrated an interest in the trades. Only four tradespeople recalled learning about apprenticeships from their technology or science teachers or counsellors, even though free information and resources about apprenticeship are widely available to all schoolboards and educators.

One of the apprentices regretted listening to the negative messages he received about the trades when he was in high school. As he recalled, "When I was in high school, I was always told trades were for 'dropouts.' The reality is that an education is most vital in the trades! I got my General Equivalency Diploma only a couple of years ago and it would have been easier to stay in school. I wish the trades would have been encouraged more at high school."

Pre-Employment or Pre-Apprenticeship Programs

Pre-employment or pre-apprenticeships offer an introduction to the trades. Participants learn arithmetic, problem solving, literacy skills while also spending time in the shop learning technical skills. These programs are important because they allow individuals to practice and improve their existing skills or, in some cases, learn new technical skills for the first time. These programs often offer industry connections

that can lead to an apprenticeship or employment as a labourer. Nineteen tradespeople said they completed pre-employment or pre-apprenticeship programs.

One apprentice enrolled in a pre-apprenticeship program in her First Nations community. The participants were taught to build tiny homes. The trainees received six to eight weeks of practical skills training in carpentry and the class then built two tiny homes together. A living allowance, tools and free breakfasts were provided to eliminate financial barriers. A representative from the local carpenter's union spoke to the class about apprenticeship. The interviewee realized that attending this program reinforced how much she liked carpentry. She was thankful for the program and felt it encouraged her to pursue a career in the skilled trades.

Tradespeople mentioned programs that were offered through a union, a First Nations Employment Centre and ACCESS, an organization that helps urban First Nations connect to employment.⁵ Like the tiny homes program, financial supports were offered to remove barriers to participation. Time was spent in the shop, in the classroom and also at worksites.

Finding Employer Sponsors

Apprentices typically need an employer to formally sponsor their apprenticeship before they can become registered as an apprentice. Tradespeople described the various ways they managed to connect with their employer sponsors.⁶

Job Searches: Online or Visits to Job Sites

Eleven tradespeople found their employer sponsors by responding to job postings on the Job Bank, online, calling or going to job sites.

Indigenous Organizations Helped Connect Individuals to an Employer

Nine tradespeople said they secured their apprenticeships by getting help from an Indigenous organization and talked positively about the help they received. Three interviewees secured apprenticeship opportunities in unions with help from the Indigenous Opportunities Network, an organization that helps connect Indigenous candidates to jobs in the trades. The Network can facilitate links between unions and individuals. Representatives from the Network visit communities, attend cultural events and sessions

5 For more information about the ACCESS program, click on this weblink: accessfutures.com/bladerunners/ No French website was found.

6 Not everyone answered this question so the total will not add up to 50.

in high schools, which is how many individuals are initially connected to the organization. Two other apprentices found employer sponsors by working with Six Nations Polytechnic Workplace Specialists.

Personal Contacts

Nine found employer sponsors through family, friends or word-of-mouth. A journeyman, with previous experience working on a railway crew, found his way into his apprenticeship because his friend's mom told him that Hydro One was hiring apprentices. Another apprentice worked for his friend's dad first and was then hired at a union. After a lay-off from his factory job, another tradesperson was given a lead by a relative on another job and this is what eventually led him to an apprenticeship.

Entry by Joining a Union

Five found a sponsor by joining a union. One apprentice applied to a union after completing the tiny homes pre-apprenticeship program mentioned previously. She started with three classmates from the program and said she did not feel alone when she started her apprenticeship. One journeyman completed a pre-apprenticeship program and was then hired by the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry of the United States and Canada (UA) as a Level 1 plumber. Another apprentice joined the union after her pre-apprenticeship program, but has not been called to work and is still working her retail job. One apprentice attended college for a course in welding, worked two years as a welder, went to the Welding Academy and passed the required test. Unfortunately, she was unable to find an apprenticeship. After seven years of calling her local union, she eventually got into the steamfitter/pipefitter union. She is now a Level 2 steamfitter/pipefitter apprentice. Another tradesperson joined a union when she was 17 years old. She had to complete an aptitude test and participate in two interviews.

Labourer Route

Four tradespeople mentioned they had been labourers prior to becoming apprentices. One journeyman worked for four years as a detailer, working with different employers. An auto body and collision technician apprenticeship was promised, but she did not register as an apprentice. Eventually, she started working for a company where the woman who owned it encouraged her to pursue an apprenticeship and helped guide her through it. Throughout her entire

apprenticeship this employer was a huge champion. Another apprentice was also encouraged by her employer to enter into an apprenticeship. She initially found a job as a dishwasher after leaving university. As she worked her way up in the restaurant, the employer eventually recommended she become an apprentice cook.

One apprentice talked about the importance of being persistent when trying to find an apprenticeship. He said he had learning challenges and was unable to pass his pre-apprenticeship program. Still, he kept on working, taking labourer jobs and was, eventually, able to secure an apprenticeship at Ontario Power Generation.

Pre-Apprenticeship Program

Three found sponsorship through a pre-apprenticeship program. One apprentice who was enrolled in a pre-apprenticeship program was able to get a job after an employer who was looking for an apprentice contacted the college.

Entry after High School

An apprentice talked about securing an employer sponsor directly after high school. After completing her Youth Apprenticeship Program in high school, she left the company she was working for and started at a new company where she became registered as an apprentice.

"Don't doubt yourself. Try another company if you don't like the first company you get a job at. Different companies have a different atmosphere. Getting along with co-workers is important, but don't let people take advantage of you. Speak up. You have a voice as an apprentice."

5.2 Barriers

Tradespeople identified the various barriers they encountered during their apprenticeship journeys. Only seven interviewees said they experienced no barriers.⁷

Unwelcoming Work Environment

Racism, sexism and unwelcoming work environments were identified by fourteen tradespeople. As one journeyperson said, “Racism has been a big barrier throughout my apprenticeship.” Another journeyperson said it was hard being the only First Nation apprentice, but he said he coped because of his previous experiences as a labourer. Women spoke about feeling isolated in the workplace. One journeyperson remembers being intimidated her first day on the worksite because she was at a huge industrial site with a lot of people. She was the only female plumber and felt extremely isolated. She persisted, and is now a leader for other women and also a trades teacher. She said she does not want other women to feel as isolated as she did.

Three women felt their colleagues doubted their abilities because of their gender. One tradesperson’s employer was supportive, even though her co-workers told her, “You shouldn’t be here. Be a teacher or nurse instead.” One tradesperson said, “Being a girl in my apprenticeship I learned coworkers don’t trust you as much to do difficult tasks unless you prove it by completing it.” She said that being prepared and on time were important behaviours that proved she was reliable and could be counted on by her co-workers. A tradesperson recalled having to advocate for herself so she could learn new skills and be eligible for promotions. She recalled incidents where less qualified male colleagues were provided training opportunities that she was denied, even though she had equal or superior qualifications.

A non-certified tradesperson reported how the racism and sexism she experienced and the lack of help she received when trying to access training caused her to leave the trades. “I couldn’t see the next step or the path forward,” she said. “I would have loved to be in the trades because I would have gotten the chance to come to work every day and say, ‘I love my job.’” However, the employer never offered her the opportunity to be an apprentice or to earn her certification. She cannot get into the trades through her current employer because the company hires only

certified tradespeople. She now has an administrative position instead.

Two tradespeople mentioned how it can be difficult as a young apprentice to get along with older co-workers, especially if they have different ways of doing things.

Seven tradespeople said they experienced no barriers. One tradesperson thought he did not experience barriers like other tradespeople did because he worked for an Indigenous company. Another tradesperson accessed cultural, learning and other supports at his company. He said it was the group for Indigenous employees that offered teachings by Elders that was important for making him feel welcomed at the company.

Two tradespeople identified what they liked about their companies. One interviewee said she was initially intimidated to enter the trades because she thought she would be poorly treated. Instead, she was happy to find that her co-workers and union staff were welcoming, helpful and wanted her to succeed. Another apprentice said she liked her company because of its small size. “Everyone has a chance to work on the tools and offers input when making decisions,” she said. “Staff is treated fairly and everyone gets the same work and training opportunities. Unlike other places I have worked, I appreciate my current employer’s openness and transparency.”

In contrast to some of the interviewees’ comments, one tradesperson talked positively about his experiences at skilled trades workplaces.

I think that working in the trades is the one place where I have never felt outright racism from anyone. As long as you work hard and you do your job, your race doesn’t matter. At least that is the case for me. I have only been in the trade for about 7 years, but in that time, I went from literally no shop experience to running a shop. If you work hard and you’re passionate and driven, there is no barrier that can stand in your way!

⁷ As the tradespeople mentioned multiple barriers the numbers will not necessarily add up to 50.

Relocation

Six tradespeople identified their biggest struggle was being away from family and friends when they had to travel for work or had to relocate for technical training.

Tradespeople said that travelling to a college campus or workplace in an urban area after living in an Indigenous community in a rural or remote area was a barrier.

Finding an Employer Sponsor

Six tradespeople said the challenge of finding an employer sponsor was a barrier. Each of them talked about there not being enough employers who want to hire apprentices. One journey person identified gender discrimination as her barrier. She was offered jobs as a receptionist, but not as a detailer because, as she told us, the employer said, "We will never hire a 'girl' to work in the shop." The discrimination continued:

I was applying for jobs and I got zero call backs. I took my first name off my resume, and I switched it to my initials because I thought it would look more masculine. After the switch I got quite a few call backs, though one instance stands out. I ended up getting an interview at a shop and I am assuming because of my initials they thought I was male. When I went in for the interview, I could overhear management tell the front desk staff to make an excuse to get rid of me because he 'wasn't hiring a woman.'

One tradesperson recalled a similar experience. She said, "I could not find an employer for over six months. I applied to over 30 garages multiple times, both dealerships and small shops, and kept going back to see if they were hiring, but no one would hire me. One dealership asked if I was applying to be a receptionist."

Another apprentice felt finding an employer sponsor was scary because she did not know if the companies were welcoming to women or not.

Financial

Financial barriers were mentioned by five tradespeople. They mentioned costs such as tuition, tools, equipment and books. One journey person said, "The costs of tools is very expensive." She had advice for her fellow journey persons: "Give your tools away to apprentices. Reuse and share tools. Help apprentices out."

One apprentice recalled having to purchase the most up-to-date version of an expensive code book because he was not allowed to borrow or purchase older copies.

The long wait before receiving EI when at technical training is another financial barrier. The same apprentice who mentioned the text book said he needed the EI money to pay for expenses while at school, but did not receive it until after he returned to work. As a consequence, this apprentice was forced to incur debt. Another tradesperson thought the amount of the EI was too low to cover living expenses.

Tradespeople noted the expensive cost of relocating to a college for technical training or commuting from a rural or Northern community. As one apprentice said, "You have to pay gas to travel back and forth or you need money for an apartment or residence room. It is especially costly if you end up failing your level and having to repeat it."

Tradespeople mentioned the high cost of living and how it is hard to cover monthly expenses on an apprentice's salary, especially if there is no opportunity for full-time hours. Two apprentices said they had to find alternate jobs because they were not getting full-time hours through their unions.

Assessment Methods

Three apprentices mentioned their learning difficulties and that the format of the certification examination was a barrier. One apprentice described how being required to write multiple choice examinations was challenging. “The wording on the written tests seemed deliberately tricky as opposed to trying to understand whether the person can safely perform the work.” He felt there was a major disconnect between the test and the practical, day-to-day realities of the tasks required on the job. He pointed out that non-certified tradespeople earn less throughout their careers compared to certified tradespeople, underlining the consequences of not passing the final certification examination test, which are significant.⁸ One apprentice also felt the multiple-choice format did not align with his preference for practical demonstration. He concluded, “If the exams were practical I’d pass with flying colours, but the exams are done on paper using ‘lawyer language.’ I need one-on-one support from an electrician that is able to explain to me what the question means.”

Getting Prior Learning or Hours Recognized

Three tradespeople talked about their struggles to get their prior learning or hours recognized and how this prevented them from progressing in their programs.

Lack of Role Models

Two tradespeople mentioned the lack of mentorship. As a woman journeyperson said, “I didn’t have the chance to work with many women in culinary, and none of the women I did work with were in leadership roles. There was a lack of mentors, especially mentors who understood the experience of being a woman in trades.” Another journeyperson observed that many younger Indigenous apprentices look for cultural mentorship as well and feel unsure where to turn to for this kind of guidance.

Not Having a Driver’s Licence or a Car

Two tradespeople said that not having a driver’s licence, a vehicle or a reliable way to get to work is a barrier.

Childcare

Two tradespeople mentioned childcare as a barrier. Daycare hours do not align with typical construction site start times, making it difficult to secure childcare. Schedule uncertainty and moving around for jobs assigned by the union can be logistically challenging, especially when short notice is given with little time to make child care arrangements.

Waiting to Get into Technical Training

One tradesperson mentioned that it was difficult to access a spot in technical training and this resulted in long, discouraging waits.

Balancing School and Work

One tradesperson said it was difficult trying to balance school and work obligations.

Out of Date Curriculum

An apprentice mentioned the curriculum at technical training was out of date and did not align with current workplace practices on his jobsite.

Not Promoting Certification

Not promoting certification was a barrier identified by one journeyperson in the cook trade. She observed that there is an attitude in the culinary world that promotes the idea that you do not need certification. Unfortunately, this attitude discouraged her from looking further into what it takes to earn certification. She also noted there is a fear amongst employers that their employees will leave for higher end restaurants should they become certified.

⁸ For more information about the wages differences between apprenticeship completers versus non-completers, take a look at Emily Jovic and Krysten Frank’s article, National Apprenticeship Survey Overview Report, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2017. You can read the report by clicking here: [Canada Overview Report 2015](#).

5.3 Helpful Supports

Tradespeople were invited to identify the kinds of supports they felt were helpful during their training. Twenty-seven tradespeople said they received supports and identified that one-on-one support was available if needed. Twenty-five agreed these supports were culturally safe and helped them complete their training. Two respondents did not answer this question.

Supports from Indigenous Organizations

Thirteen tradespeople discussed the supports they received from various Indigenous cultural or employment organizations.

Tradespeople identified in-person supports, such as job coaching from the staff who work at the Indigenous organizations. They said this kind of in-person support was important for learning about available programs and for securing and retaining employment, as well as navigating the apprenticeship process. Tradespeople said these kinds of supports were culturally safe and appropriate and were what assisted them in completing their programs. As one tradesperson commented, the staff “would check in on me and also give me job leads. They were an amazing supporter in my life especially as an apprentice and even today as they helped me get funding for my Provincial Instructors Diploma.” Another tradesperson commented, “My social support worker...helped me tremendously with funding and [helping me to identify my] mental, cultural and life goals. I don’t think I could have made it this far without her. She guided me so well and helped me feel way better about the process.” One tradesperson felt that it was only because of the help he received that he was finally able to find an employer, “I tried everywhere to get a job. It wasn’t easy. Then the Native Council of Nova Scotia subsidized a program which gave the employer an incentive to give me a chance. This was a few years ago and I’m still working for the same employer today. I’m very grateful for the Native Council.”

Three other apprentices mentioned the Indigenous Opportunities Network as an important facilitator when they tried to connect to employers and unions. This organization continued to be source of support throughout their entire apprenticeship journeys.

Financial Supports

Five tradespeople identified the various financial supports they found useful. These included money for tools, childcare, public transport, living allowances and tuition. Apprentices told us they received grants or bursaries. One apprentice reported they received additional financial support during their technical training. Two apprentices talked about attending free pre-apprenticeship programs where they also earned a weekly allowance and received work-related clothing and tools at no cost. One tradesperson received money through their college for a child’s car seat. One tradesperson said their company paid for all their training expenses, including supplementing the EI he received when he was at technical training.

Union Supports

Three interviewees talked positively about the kinds of supports offered by their unions. Their unions provided them with information about the apprenticeship process and managed the logistics, such as ensuring the apprentices progressed in their apprenticeships and continued through their technical training. The unions also assigned a mentor to each apprentice. One apprentice considered herself lucky because she felt lots of apprentices do not have the same level of supports as those provided by unions. She reported she had a good workplace experience. Another journeyperson talked positively about the kinds of supports she received when she struggled with substance use issues. An apprentice with learning disabilities was provided learning supports and accommodations by the union, including a course about how to prepare for the multiple-choice certification examination. After initially not doing well at school and failing a pre-apprenticeship program while struggling with an undiagnosed learning disability, this apprentice said it was an incredible feeling to find himself at Level 4 of his apprenticeship. He even had an opportunity to travel to Las Vegas to attend an international training centre. “It felt amazing,” he reflected on this experience, “to see the big picture and to know I am part of this strong brother and sisterhood.”

Networking Supports

Two tradespeople talked about the value of mentoring and networking with fellow tradespeople through organizations such as the Office to Advance Women Apprentices. A woman who said she was isolated told us how much she appreciated networking with groups outside of work hours where she could meet other women. She also advocated for the establishment of a Sisterhood Committee within her union, where fellow women union members could meet on a regular basis. In her words, “Other tradeswomen just get it.”

Cultural Supports

Two tradespeople reinforced the importance of cultural supports and learning from elders and the community. One journey person stressed the importance of finding ways to stay connected to your community in order to feel supported whenever you experience discrimination at the workplace. He mentioned the valuable support he received from the Indigenous Circle, an employee resource group at Ontario Power Generation that supports all Indigenous employees who are interested in cultural teachings, comradery and mentorship.

Another journey person talked about a college program which sent her cultural craft materials and connected her to a group of students via Zoom. She learned to bead and weave cedar. These kinds of sessions provided her with a safe, welcoming space to share and explore the traditions of her cultural identity, which had been lost to her family through years of assimilation. “It was the encouragement I needed to begin to embrace my Indigenous identity, which caused a chain reaction of learning, personal development, and decolonization within my own family,” she explained.

Desired Supports

When asked about supports that would have been helpful to them, nine tradespeople talked about access to work placements, co-op positions, hands-on training and “real world” exposure to work sites such as the chance to work on a crew. Seven tradespeople talked about how more in-person supports from mentors, instructors or tradespeople would have been helpful. Looking back, five tradespeople wanted more opportunities to learn about the trades. Three out of the five wished their guidance counsellors had been more knowledgeable about the trades. Tradespeople identified the single thing that would have helped them: having more information about the income, money management, life skills training and a reader for the certification exam. One tradesperson thought more employers willing to hire and train apprentices would have been helpful.



5.4 Advice to Young People Looking to Enter the Trades

Tradespeople offered advice for young people who are looking to enter the trades.⁹

The Skilled Trades are Rewarding Careers

Thirty tradespeople reinforced how rewarding are careers in the trades and recommended that youth should simply “Go for it!” Apprentices told us about how the trades provide possibilities for steady work, advancing your career, for starting your own company or for advancing to supervisory positions. One tradesperson said, “Do a trade and be set for life. You’ll go places!” Tradespeople mentioned the range of work opportunities in the trades due to infrastructure and oil and gas development projects. Others talked about how they enjoyed their careers and the personal satisfaction they feel when they build things with their hands and are able to build and take care of their own homes. As one journey person said, “Be prepared to work hard and show up everyday, but also be ready to have a sense of accomplishment that you can only get from looking back at a job you just completed and built with your own two hands.” Tradespeople emphasized that it is important to pursue a career in something that you find enjoyable and interesting. Tradespeople also talked about the financial benefits of being paid to take courses in order to learn and incur less student debt along the way.

Work Hard, Stay Curious, Don’t Stop Learning

Twenty-one tradespeople told us about the importance of having a good work ethic, staying curious and being a lifelong learner. Although tradespeople acknowledged that it can be intimidating when you are new to a workplace, they recommended

that youth should ask lots of questions, show up eager and be willing to learn. They advised youth should talk to tradespeople in order to learn as much as they can about the trades. They said focus on your learning at work and during technical training by paying attention, reviewing materials and practicing. One apprentice said, “Work hard, don’t give up, don’t be afraid to ask for help! It’s a satisfying journey and one that I am most proud of.” Tradespeople reassured youth that they do not have to know all the answers. They also reminded would-be apprentices that the learning journey continues, even after an apprenticeship is completed. As one journey person said, “When you get your ticket, you don’t know everything. You need to keep learning.”

Believe in Yourself

Twenty tradespeople stressed the importance of believing in yourself. Tradespeople acknowledged how scary it can be when you are first starting out in the trades. Still, they felt it was important to keep working towards your goals and to never give up. One apprentice summed-up a lot of her fellow tradespeople’s comments when she said, “Just do it. If you listen to what everyone has to say about the thing that you are nervous about, you are going to be scared, but if you just push yourself to pull the band-aid off, you’ll look back and wonder why you were even scared in the first place....Don’t think ‘what if I fail?’ If you fail, so what? At least you can say you tried.”

In addition to believing in yourself, being persistent and not giving up are also important. As one apprentice told us, “Keep striving towards your goals in your apprenticeship so you earn the high pay that comes with being certified.” Another apprentice said, “Keep focusing on the fact that things are getting better!” Even when individuals have experienced serious challenges in life, one apprentice concluded, “It’s never too late to become something awesome.”

⁹ Interviewees provided multiple responses to this question.

Apprenticeship needs Navigation

Eighteen tradespeople offered youth some practical advice when doing their apprenticeship training. Work experience is crucial to being credible at the workplace. Alternating between work and technical training gives apprentices multiple opportunities to practice their skills and hone their technique. Gaining the hands-on experience over time is fundamental to the learning experience. Don't get discouraged by the repetitive tasks you may be asked to do on worksites. The repetition reinforces the learning and allows you eventually to develop your skills enough to take on more complex tasks.

Another apprentice suggested that apprentices should save money so they will not find themselves struggling financially when they attend their technical training or they will have the means to buy the tools they might need.

One apprentice advised youth to acquire the proper personal protective safety equipment so they can be safe on-the-job from day one.

Two tradespeople said be open to traveling for work so you can earn additional hours towards your apprenticeship.

Tradespeople advised youth to identify the various support programs that exist for apprentices and to seek out people who are willing to help them. Two tradespeople said joining a union is beneficial because you can get help with navigating your apprenticeship.

"Apply for any and all supports even if you don't 100% fit the qualification...always ask for more than you might feel deserving of. Put yourself in the way of luck. Find other people (develop/access a network) of people involved even tangentially in your areas of interest – community members can refer you to those who may have the answers you seek."

Every Journey Needs That First Step

Twelve tradespeople felt that youth should be open to exploring the trades, especially if they have access to training opportunities in their home communities. As one apprentice said, "You'll never know until you try, either trades are for you or not and that's okay, but...at least give it try and take the chance." Two tradespeople regretted waiting so long to get into the trades and said that youth should take advantage of the opportunities to explore the trades when they are young. Pursuing co-op opportunities in high school is one good way to explore the trades to see what suits your personality and interests.



A photograph of three construction workers standing on a construction site. They are wearing hard hats, safety glasses, and high-visibility vests. The worker on the left is wearing a blue hard hat and an orange vest. The worker in the middle is wearing a blue hard hat and a black vest with a logo. The worker on the right is wearing a grey hard hat and a black vest with a logo. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a construction site with wooden framing and a blue tarp.

6.0 Recommendations

Photo courtesy of
Keepers of the Circle

Tradespeople offered the following recommendations for improving career exploration and employment supports for apprentices:

Provide more opportunities for career exploration by:

- Offering more opportunities for youth to take shop classes and to do co-op work placements at high school
- Explaining the options for pursuing apprenticeships to high school students. Outline with clarity the pathway into the trades and help apprentices at every level to navigate through it. Help people envision their future career by outlining each step. Educate counsellors and teachers about apprenticeship so they can help guide their students who are interested in pursuing this pathway.
- Hosting job fairs and try-a-trade days for youth to learn about the trades and the interesting tools and methods that are used to build and repair things. Teach youth about the apprenticeship infrastructure, how it is maintained and why we need skilled people ready and able to pick up the tools.
- Organizing field trips so that youth can observe for themselves college campuses and other skilled trades workplaces.
- Offering more opportunities for exploring the trades through pre-apprenticeship programs that offer possibilities to learn about the trades and that also provide access to training in First Nation communities.
- Allowing for career exploration that is “try it and test it” rather than an all-consuming commitment of time or money. Give youth realistic chances to determine whether they like a specific trade.
- Having experienced tradespeople and employers talk to classes about their companies and the work they do.
- Focusing the promotion of apprenticeships and careers in the skilled trades to young women who might be unaware of the trades.

“Offer more shop classes to increase skills such as being able to work with power tools.”

“There needs to be more exposure to the trades at high school. Students need to see the ‘trades in action.’ They require hands-on demonstrations. Not everyone learns by listening. Teachers and tradespeople should ‘keep it real’ when sharing information about what the challenges are when pursuing trades training. Accurate information about the costs such as how expensive tools needs to be communicated to students.”

“Teach more real world understanding like work ethic. More trades programs need to be offered at high school. I think that would have had a major impact on my skills development at a younger age. I could have gotten my Red Seal in my 20s not my 30s.”

“If I had had the chance at a younger age to meet tradeswomen through workshops or class visits, I may not have had the bias against trades that I held for so long. I was very academically focussed and did not view the trades as a viable pathway for someone like myself.”

“Organize and host ‘Guess My Job’ events where tradespeople come in dressed in their civilian clothes and have kids ask yes or no questions and then attempt to guess their job. I have participated as a guest and the reactions I got from elementary school kids when I changed from my business dress clothes into my uniform were incredible, especially their reaction to my response when they asked me how much money I made!”

Encourage employers to hire apprentices by:

- Encouraging employers to offer meaningful training opportunities.
- Providing a list of apprentice-friendly companies that you might apply to and offer some direction and help because it can be scary, especially for young women in the trades if they do not know where to start.
- Providing as much notice as possible whenever work is available.

“More employers need to hire Level 1 apprentices. Many employers are only looking for Level 3 and up.”

Offer mentorship training for journeypersons by:

- Encouraging mentors to lead by example.
- Training journeypersons so they can become even more supportive mentors.
- Making sure you welcome every new apprentice because crews can be very closed-off, making it hard for a newcomer to feel included at the beginning.

- Offering different types of mentoring so that apprentices are exposed to various teaching styles on-the-job and at the same time, be sure to provide one-on-one mentoring.
- Being available to talk and share with apprentices and encourage open communication with them by demonstrating open-communication yourself.
- Making sure to have regular check-ins with the apprentice to see how things are going for them. Be sure to listen to their feedback and if you act on it.
- Identifying someone who serves as a “go to” person so that every apprentice knows who they should contact whenever they want help.
- Offering additional supports during the initial transition to a new work environment.

Offer alternate assessments and allow the practical demonstration of learning by:

- Finding different ways to assess skills. Allow apprentices to demonstrate their skills in other ways that put less emphasis on written multiple-choice examinations.
- Emphasizing practical learning. Ensure that any tests are relevant to current practices of the sector the apprentice is working in.
- Delivering course content in a variety of ways. Avoid limiting the delivery to only one approach. Customize teaching methods, align them with what works for different kinds of learners.
- Acknowledging that every question is important. Encourage apprentices to never be shy about asking questions.
- Understanding mistakes happen every day. Do not shame people. It is okay to make mistakes. Correct them, constructively, and move on.

Provide financial supports by:

- Providing financial help to cover the known costs: textbooks and manuals, gas and accommodations at technical training. Find ways to reduce the time away from work by offering alternate delivery technical training, which might also reduce expenses.
- Providing additional grants to Northern students who are required to relocate and incur additional expenses for their training.

- Providing an appropriate living wage for all apprentices.

Provide cultural supports by:

- Making sure everyone involved knows about the cultures of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.
- Providing appropriate support workers for apprentices.
- Acknowledging the impact of the loss of a family member by providing time off for funerals.
- Allowing for other kinds of leaves, for example, enabling apprentices to visit their home communities.

Develop meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities by:

- Establishing direct links with First Nation communities. Develop one-on-one relationships in these communities.
- Focusing on specific recruiting practices for attracting apprentices from Indigenous communities.
- Offering culturally appropriate and targeted training within Indigenous communities.

Establish daycares by:

- Creating flexible daycare centres where tradespeople can drop-off their children early in the morning in order to get to their shifts on time.
- Encouraging unions to establish daycares on worksites.

Offer Courses in Life Skills and Money Management by:

- Developing and offering courses about life skills and how to manage money.

Getting to Training and Getting to the Worksite on Time by:

- Promoting readiness for training and the expectations of the workplace.
- Encouraging youth to get a driver's licence.

Listen to Indigenous Apprentices and Integrate Their Feedback by:

- Being more open to listening to Indigenous apprentices. Integrate their feedback into the existing apprenticeship programming. Reduce any discrimination.
- Establishing an Indigenous Engagement Committee for employees to network and support one another – if there isn't one already in place.

Provide EI more Efficiently by:

- Providing EI on the first day of technical training, not after the technical training component is over.

Offer Learning Supports by:

- Providing access to additional tutors and helpful learning supports.

Provide Greater Awareness of Existing Supports by:

- Ensuring people know where to look for it because there's a lot of help and support out there. Make sure that people know about all the various supports and programs that are currently available within Indigenous communities and beyond.

Provide Role Models to Young People by:

- Celebrating your heroes. There are successful, highly-skilled Indigenous People in the trades who can serve as role models. It is always inspiring for first Nations youth to see other Indigenous Peoples succeeding in the trades.

Photo courtesy of Assiniboine College



7.0 Conclusion

In 2025, CAF-FCA interviewed a mix of Indigenous apprentices, non-certified tradespeople and certified journeypersons from New Brunswick, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Manitoba and Alberta. Interviewees worked in a variety of trades as carpenters, electricians, powerline technicians, machinists, steamfitters/pipefitters, automotive service technicians and plumbers.

At the high school level across the country, there are opportunities to create greater awareness about the trades, apprenticeships, co-ops and Youth Apprenticeship Programs. Only five tradespeople mentioned they were involved in co-ops or Youth Apprenticeship Programs at their high school, even though gaining work experience is important to securing an employer sponsor. Only four tradespeople recalled learning about apprenticeships from their technology or science teachers or counsellors. Nevertheless, there are many free resources available for educators that explain the apprenticeship pathway, including provincial and territorial apprenticeship websites, Skills Canada and Careers in Trades. Creating more awareness among educators of these resources may still be required.

Indigenous organizations need continuing support because they also provide

opportunities for tradespeople to find employer sponsors. Joining unions and becoming a labourer first, and then an apprentice are additional pathways into the trades. These possibilities should also be explained to youth. In-person connections such as support staff or family and friends were identified as more effective ways to get a job than online searching.

The most commonly mentioned barriers encountered by apprentices were unwelcoming workplaces, difficulty finding an employer sponsor, relocating for school or travelling for work, and the costs of an apprenticeship. Each of these barriers can be addressed through in-person and financial supports, often provided by Indigenous organizations that specialize in employment and training. The staff of these organizations helped in multiple ways, such as sharing information about available programs, facilitating employment connections and helping the individuals to navigate the complexities of the apprenticeship process. Tradespeople thought that supports were culturally safe and appropriate and assisted participants to complete their programs. Unions provided similar supports that helped tradespeople manage their apprenticeship process. Financial supports are essential. Money for purchasing tools and equipment, childcare, public transportation, living allowances and tuition helped offset the costs of the apprenticeship. Tradespeople

valued the experience of being mentored and being able to network with other tradespeople. Cultural supports, access to Indigenous employee groups and learning from elders are also identified as being important for feeling included at a workplace.

“Go for it!” was the most common piece of advice that tradespeople shared. They agreed skilled trades careers are rewarding and there are multiple benefits from earn-while-you-learn training to career advancement. Tradespeople acknowledged how scary it can be when you first start out in the trades. They felt it was important to encourage apprentices to keep working towards their goals and to not to give up. Although tradespeople acknowledged it can be intimidating when you arrive at a new workplace, they recommended that youth should ask lots of questions, show up eager and be willing to learn.

Tradespeople provided these recommendations:

- Provide more opportunities for career exploration
- Encourage employers to hire apprentices
- Offer mentorship training for the journeypersons who work with apprentices
- Provide learning supports and alternate assessments that allow for the practical demonstration of learning
- Give appropriate financial supports to apprentices
- Develop meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities and offer cultural supports during apprenticeship training

- Provide practical supports such as courses in life skills.
- Encourage youth to get a driver's licence
- Listen to Indigenous apprentices and integrate their feedback into apprenticeship programs
- Ensure apprentices get their EI as soon as they start their technical training
- Promote greater awareness of the range of existing financial and other supports
- Share the stories of successful Indigenous role models with young people.

By listening in order to better understand the experiences of Indigenous tradespeople, by following up and implementing credible recommendations for change, the apprenticeship community in Canada can improve apprenticeships for future generations of Indigenous apprentices.

