

# BUILDFORCE

MAGAZINE

FALL 2020

**Adapt  
and innovate:**  
developing strategies for  
a post-pandemic world

#### **Safety success**

BCCSA sets the stage delivering COVID-19 materials to members with lightning speed.

#### **Online opportunities**

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# BUILDFORCE

## MAGAZINE

### GREETINGS

- 7 **A message from the Chair of BuildForce Canada**
- 9 **A message from the Executive Director of BuildForce Canada**

### FEATURES

- 11 **Safety success during an unprecedented pandemic**  
When the unimaginable happened, BCCSA delivered COVID-19 materials to its members with lightning speed.
- 14 **Safety, right from the start**  
Tomlinson Group tackled the impact of the pandemic from day one.
- 16 **Easing back into business**  
BOMA Canada predicts that the commercial real estate industry is ready to bounce back.
- 18 **The future of construction contracts**  
Force majeure doesn't apply to COVID-19 now that the pandemic is predictable.
- 20 **Adapting to consumer demands**  
Companies are adapting in order to keep customers coming back. Will their efforts pay off?
- 23 **Online opportunities**  
Apprenticeship training halted across the country in March. Now, UBC is ready to ramp up training with a mix of virtual and in-person options.
- 25 **Keeping up with the youth**  
Canadian youth are optimistic about the future; however, young women are saying they're not excited about a career in trades.
- 26 **Leading the future of building science**  
The new normal must include energy efficiency as standard in new builds.
- 28 **Mentorship matters**  
Worker success is the priority as a new mentorship training model is developed.
- 29 **Down, but not (completely) out**  
Not all hope is lost as Canada's economy re-opens and (hopefully) rebounds.
- 31 **Wondering what's next**  
Canada's construction industry is adapting to the pressures of the ongoing pandemic.
- 32 **Measuring training capacity**  
According to the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario, the key to preparing for labour shortages is to assess projected labour demands.
- 35 **The importance of immigration**  
Many of the countries where immigrants usually come from are facing their own demographic challenges.

### BUILDFORCE BASICS

- 37 **Get to Know BuildForce Canada**
- 38 **INDEX TO ADVERTISERS**

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# A Message from the Chair of BuildForce Canada



**CLYDE SCOLLAN**

Chair,  
BuildForce Canada

**W**hen we first started working on this edition of *BUILDFORCE Magazine* it was February and the world looked a lot different than it does today. As we started to explore themes and topics for articles, it became clear that exploring the post-COVID world in terms of construction and maintenance had to be the number one priority.

Our sector is facing many challenges, but I am proud to see how rapidly the industry has adapted and innovated. Construction was quickly classified as an essential service in most jurisdictions across Canada, which is testament to how important the business of building is across the nation. But we couldn't continue to build as we had been – we all had to be flexible, adapt, and ensure that each person who stepped onto every job site was doing so safely. I think the fact that construction workers are so used to wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) really bolstered everyone's success and I would like to commend every single person who modified their usual routines to keep COVID from spreading to their peers.

For the foreseeable future, this is our new normal. It's not easy, but I am encouraged by anecdotes of socially distanced toolbox talks and contracting companies and unions that are giving back to their communities. If you look for it, optimism can be found even in daunting situations.

BuildForce has been working very hard on the 2021–2030 outlook. As you can imagine, we have had to go back and re-assess how COVID-19 will affect the future in terms of project delays and cancellations, government infrastructure funding, and how all of this will impact the labour force. The outlooks BuildForce puts together are foundational for our organization and we take the data included in them very seriously. I am confident the information found within will assist industry and government with labour challenges moving into the new year and beyond.

I would like to take a moment to touch on a topic that I feel is very important to our industry – that being Black Lives Matter (BLM). Later this year, BuildForce will be releasing an update to its Working in a Respectful and Inclusive Workplace awareness course. I would

like to urge each and every one of you to access this course and to provide it to your employees. Please take this as an opportunity to educate yourself and to ensure that your employees are educated on the importance of inclusion, diversity, and the elimination of racial bias within the industry. There is no better time than now to be on the right side of history.

I read an interesting report in August by Pew Research Center that found that two thirds of Canadians believe Canada is more united as a result of the pandemic. On the other hand, 77% of U.S. participants found the opposite is true south of the border. It buoys me to know that the crisis can bring a country together, even though we live in such a geographically huge and diverse nation. I do believe that while we must socially distance as a rule, the pandemic has brought us closer in other ways. I think that many of us now have a greater appreciation for those who provide essential services to us all, for those who help raise and care for our children, and for those we could “always call tomorrow.” The uncertainty of a pandemic has created more certainty around the importance of staying in touch with friends and family and achieving work-life balance.

I, myself, was blessed with some extra time with my daughter who lives and works in Pakistan, and had to quarantine at home in Vancouver. We biked the island and re-connected as a family, which may not have happened had the usual distractions been available.

As an optimist, I would like to end this message with a tone of hopefulness. We are not fully through this pandemic, and we may not know 100% what the future holds, but if you look for stories of good, they are there to be found. There are many unknowns, but there are also opportunities to make connections, try new things, have adventures, and seek positivity.

If I can help in any way, or if BuildForce can help, please get in touch. Our doors are always open – figuratively speaking of course.

Until next time, we will continue building Canada. I look forward to connecting with you soon.

**CLYDE SCOLLAN**

Chair,  
BuildForce Canada



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# A Message from the Executive Director of BuildForce Canada



**BILL FERREIRA**

Executive Director,  
BuildForce Canada

**A**s provinces reopen economies shuttered in response to COVID-19, it's sometimes difficult to imagine life beyond the pandemic. While history shows that pandemics are temporary and that Canada's construction and maintenance industry will recover, demographic data projects an immutable message – that 22% of the industry's workforce will retire by 2029, and that a potential shortfall of as many as 82,400 workers may emerge over the course of the decade.

With so much uncertainty over the future, maintaining an ongoing commitment to labour force development can be challenging. The reality is that most firms are actively engaged in labour force development; continually training based on their needs and construction demands. But despite the industry's best efforts, the retirement of approximately 22% of the sector's labour force over the decade – slightly lower in Western provinces, but ranging between 24% and 29% in Northern Ontario, the Greater Toronto Area, and all four Atlantic provinces – will create workforce stresses.

Ongoing efforts to enhance the promotion of industry careers to young people should help, particularly with those from groups traditionally underrepresented in the industry. However, to overcome the anticipated worker shortfall identified in our 2020–2029 outlook, new-entrant recruitment would need to increase by approximately 35% by the end of the decade. Given that most other industries face similar age demographic profiles, the competition for younger workers will be intense, since there will be fewer younger workers to draw from than ever before.

Adapting to changing demographics will be important to the future success of the industry. The natural rate of population growth in the country has been dropping since 1972, and as a consequence of this decline, immigration has become the primary driver of population growth in Canada. Newcomers now make up about 22% of Canada's population and approximately 24% of the labour force. In the construction industry, however, newcomers account for just 19% of the labour force and only 15% of skilled trades, indicating that industry will need to improve recruitment of newcomers to remain competitive.

There is much the industry can do to improve its recruitment of newcomers. The industry could work more closely with provincial governments to identify gaps in the labour

force and strategically utilize provincial nominee programs to help supplement domestic training efforts. It can also partner with governments and settlement groups to help facilitate the transition of newcomers with the right skill sets into careers in the industry. Services such as those that job match newcomers with industry employers, or programs designed to support newcomers with the recognition of their educational and professional credentials and certificates are all very helpful. While still a minority, many local and provincial construction associations are already engaged in such activities; some have even participated in job fairs overseas to market careers in the industry directly to potential immigrants.

In support of industry efforts to address future workforce challenges, BuildForce continues to provide the information required to make measured and informed decisions related to labour force development. This year, in addition to our annual labour market information forecasts, BuildForce released a mid-year investment update and will soon be releasing a *Trends in Immigration in the Construction Sector* report to help the industry better gauge the impacts of COVID-19 on anticipated construction investment.

BuildForce has also been active in the promotion and expansion of our online professional development courses. This past year we released updates to our Construction Law and Pipeline Construction Safety Training courses. This fall, we will be releasing a new instructional course focused on the importance of mentorship in the development of apprentices. This winter, we will also be releasing an update to our Working in a Respectful and Inclusive Workplace awareness course to better support education around the importance of inclusion, diversity, and the elimination of racial bias within the industry, as well as a new Contract Essentials course with a focus on the importance of standard industry documents.

It's been a challenging year, but the construction sector has once again risen to the challenge and adapted to thrive. As we exit from the pandemic and move into a recovery phase, BuildForce looks forward to continuing to support the industry with quality labour market information and the resources and tools it needs to develop a skilled and resilient labour force.

**BILL FERREIRA**

Executive Director,  
BuildForce Canada



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# Safety success during an unprecedented pandemic

**BCCSA delivered COVID-19 materials to its members across the province with lightning speed once the pandemic hit. Here's how.**

**F**unded by industry and working for industry, the BC Construction Safety Alliance (BCCSA) provides more than 52,000 construction companies across British Columbia with the best in safety programming, no-cost safety training, consultation services, and resources to help them improve safety for more than 220,000 workers in the province. They have also been the primary line of defence for B.C.'s construction sector during the COVID-19 pandemic; providing guidance and accurate information during these uncertain times.

The speed in which COVID-19 swept into Canada was intense. In early March, BCCSA held its annual three-year planning session in Kelowna. This was the last time the Board has met collectively in person. A week later, the virus arrived in force and BCCSA limited its office to skeletal staffing levels and sent people home to work remotely.

"That's when things got really busy for us," recalls Mike McKenna, Executive Director at BCCSA. "We were fortunate here in British Columbia in that construction was deemed essential, but with that came a real responsibility to ensure our industry was adhering to the Provincial Health Officer's orders. We needed to make sure construction continued to operate in a safe manner in British Columbia."

During the pandemic, BCCSA has acted as a repository or clearing house, receiving individual companies' COVID-19 response plans and reviewing them in-house. The collected material was then repurposed, rebranded, and made available to British Columbia's entire construction industry. When

there were gaps found in the material, BCCSA created the required resources itself. BCCSA was able to provide solid and scientific information through its occupational hygienist, who not only has her Ph.D. in occupation hygiene, but also has a sub-specialty in epidemiology. There was literally nobody else who could get the information to industry as quickly as BCCSA. Additionally, because BCCSA is not a regulator, the organization was able to deliver important information extremely quickly and avoided a lot of the protracted and bureaucratic red tape.

"We worked alongside WorkSafeBC, but let them know that we could not allow resources to languish in their vetting process," says McKenna. "We believe that it is far better to get something out that is 99% correct and then modify it as more information came to light, than to give industry

nothing and wait longer for a more regulatory-sound document to arrive; perhaps too late to do any good."

The process of collecting, vetting, and disseminating information tended to be very reactive and required – particularly in the first month of the pandemic – long days and nights spent in meetings, both virtual and actual. While there was some concern about burnout among the staff, there was a collective push from everyone to ensure success; not just for BCCSA, but also for the entire construction industry.

"If you as a health and safety association can't shine at times like these, then you have a serious problem at your association," says McKenna. "It was a really stressful and rewarding time for BCCSA, and our staff responded tremendously, turning out more than 30 vital documents in less than three weeks."





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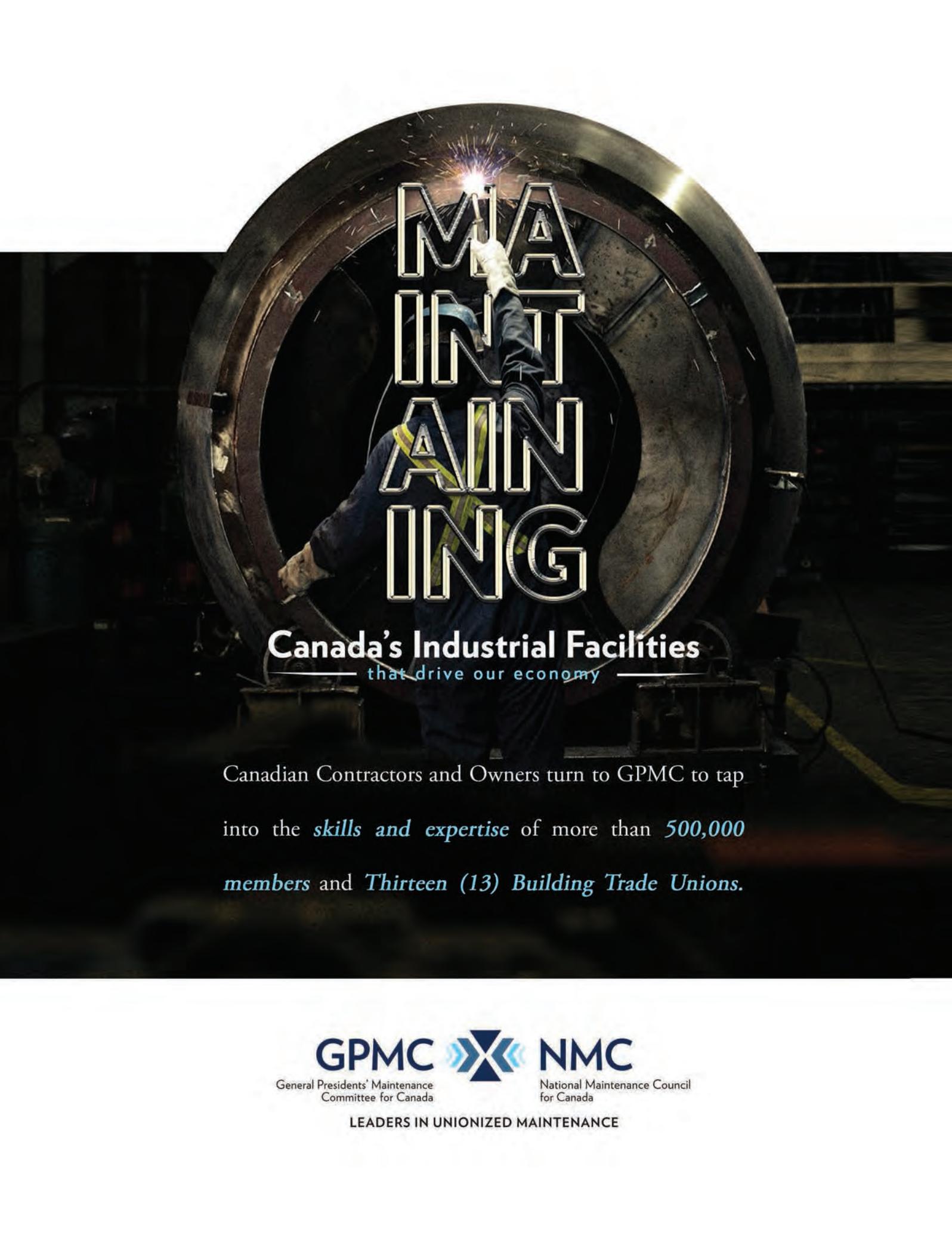
Throughout the pandemic, BCCSA has strived to keep an open line of communication with the industry it supports. Three times per week the organization would meet virtually and debrief with up to 20 different influential provincial construction associations to ensure that a uniform message was collectively released to industry.

"This allowed us to let companies know that they had better be serious about safety during this pandemic," says McKenna. "If they weren't serious, given the unique exposure construction has to the public, there was a really good chance that we could get shut down," says McKenna. "It's easy to shut an industry down and it is much harder to start it up again. We need to keep doing things right if we want to continue to be deemed an essential service."

That is a message that has resonated well with British Columbia's construction industry. When looking at the number of COVID-related claims at WorkSafeBC, to date only one has come from the construction sector, which has more than 220,000 workers. This should be taken as a tremendous success for BCCSA's messaging, as well as speak volumes for the diligence of the construction industry across the province.

Now that the lion's share of the immediate COVID-19 response is over, BCCSA is looking ahead to managing the pandemic, finding ways to continue to motivate its teams remotely, and focusing on some of the long-term ramifications of living with the virus, such as focusing on policies that support mental health. BCCSA is partnering with the BC Municipal Safety Association to produce and deliver a five-part webinar series that will cover COVID-19 and its impact on mental health.

"We will adapt the same process from when the pandemic started, and deploy them on the new fronts going forward," says McKenna. "We have found a niche for ourselves that cannot be filled by any other organization in the province and, if there is information out there and companies are willing to share it, we will once again step up, continue to distribute it, and – where needed – create new resources for industry to succeed." |



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# Safety, right from the start



*Tomlinson employees wear face masks and practice physical distancing on a job site. Photo credits: Tomlinson Group of Companies*

## Many companies were unprepared for the reality of COVID-19, but Tomlinson Group tackled the impact of the pandemic from day one.

**M**embers of the Tomlinson Group of Companies were attending a conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, when COVID-19 crashed into North America on March 13, 2020 and changed everything. While it would have been easy for some to pause, for Tomlinson Group, it was time to get to work.

"After Friday, March 13th, we spent Sunday in conference calls with our senior team just trying to figure out what we needed to do so we could still operate Monday morning," says Tomlinson Group Vice President of Operations, Ryan Downing.

The company's leadership team quickly and efficiently put a series of different staging protocols in place around such things as social distancing, face shields, and respirators, and then – once they

arrived back in Ottawa on Monday – implemented additional protocols to help further secure against the potential of COVID-19.

"We managed to put in place the right protocols, right away, and we never really stopped being able to work," says Rob Pierce, Senior Vice President, Planning and Development at Tomlinson Group. "This is largely due to the culture here at Tomlinson Group. As a company, we are extremely keen on taking action – if there is something to be fixed, we fix it."

Communication was vital to the success of Tomlinson Group's speedy roll-out of protocols. One of the first things the company did on March 15th was to quickly set up a web page to talk about how to best protect against the virus. The Safety Team at Tomlinson Group also publishes all of its COVID-19 recommendations and practices

to the website where they can be accessed and downloaded.

"Many of our workers have been accessing the website daily and using the recommendations to implement their own health protocols based on what we have put in place," says Pierce. "Receiving this information from us has been the key in allowing our employees to apply all of the proper protocols to keep themselves – and the public – safe."

For a company that prides itself on taking measured steps in its decision-making, it was a challenge to implement the new COVID-19 protocols as quickly as it did. To help, early on Tomlinson Group established its COVID-19 task force, which is represented by approximately 50 people from different divisions within the company who met daily to raise issues.

"Everyone embraced the mission," says Downing. "In fact, we probably had more of the COVID-19 stuff implemented before it was up on the Public Health website. We were way ahead of the curve on this, and many of our clients were complimenting us on the actions we took."

Tomlinson Group's CEO, Ron Tomlinson, was also heavily involved with the COVID-19 task force, demonstrating the commitment the company has in protecting the health and safety of its employees.

"To see everybody rely on each other during this time was amazing," says Pierce. "From the leadership of the company to the guys in the field, everybody was in this and working as one. At no time in my entire career have I ever seen anything come together this well."

The leadership at Tomlinson Group also believes in giving back to the communities it serves through these trying times. As the company was working on its COVID-19 preparations in March, it took the time to take stock of its safety supplies and, seeing a small surplus of PPE, made the decision to donate 30,000 N95 respirator masks to local hospitals across eastern Ontario in order to help support front-line workers during the pandemic.

"We discussed the surplus at one of our meetings and Ron Tomlinson said, 'Just give it to the hospitals; they need it. We have to keep the first line safe,'" says Downing. "Even though we were worried that we would run out of masks for ourselves, it was a really easy choice to make, since keeping people safe has been our priority throughout this entire crisis."

Now that the initial peak of the pandemic seems to have passed, the focus of Tomlinson Group is looking to future outbreaks and what to do in the face of a second or third wave.

To plan for this, the team at Tomlinson Group has developed a flow chart with precise communication directed to managers and employees that clearly lays out the steps to be taken in the event of a positive case of COVID-19 within the company. The flow chart was recently put to the test when a positive test result came back from the field in July. After operating for the better part of four months during the height of the pandemic – in



*Workers wear visors and bandanas for protection on a Tomlinson work site.*



*A Tomlinson work site is fully equipped with a handwashing station for all workers to use. This station includes important information from Ontario Health on COVID-19.*

spite of a few false scares – this was the first positive test result for an employee at the company.

"We had everything in place to handle a positive case so it wouldn't spread and so we could keep it isolated," says Downing. "Because we were prepared for just this situation, our crew was kept safe; they were able to get back to work, and there was no delay to any of our projects."

Another concern for the company going forward is to ensure that its employees are well aware of what to

expect living in a COVID world for the foreseeable future, such as what happens when their children go back to school and come in contact with the virus. By talking about it now, Tomlinson Group hopes that, if there is an emergency situation, everyone will be on the same page and know what to do.

Pierce says, "We want to be at the forefront in case something happens. Being proactive about these kinds of scenarios will make a huge difference throughout the coming winter." ■

# Easing back into business

**The commercial real estate industry is ready to bounce back more resilient, adaptable, and stronger than ever.**

**F**or months, COVID-19 has been spreading quickly throughout Canada, forcing both federal and provincial governments to impose stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders. During this time of crisis, building operations and property management teams have had to learn how to adapt to the evolving needs of buyers and renters in a world impacted by a pandemic.

BOMA Canada has represented its more than 3,600 members of the Canadian commercial real estate industry on matters of national concern for more than a century and, while there have been good times and bad over the years, there has been nothing truly comparable to the impact and scale of the current pandemic on the commercial real estate market.

“From the way we go about cleaning and providing security, to the way we think about maintenance, leasing, capital upgrades, elevators, food courts, and mail rooms, there is certainly nothing from a building operations perspective that has been left unaffected by COVID-19,” says Benjamin Shinewald, President and CEO at BOMA Canada. “This is important because virtually all of the Canadian economy happens inside a BOMA building. When a decision is made in any sector, it is made in one of our buildings. We are literally where Canadians live, work, and play. In that regard, we are the front lines of COVID-19.”

When the pandemic hit, BOMA relied heavily on the experience of Toronto’s Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak that happened in 2003 to frame its response to COVID-19. Following

SARS, BOMA leadership came together with the foresight to create a guide that would benefit future generations should another epidemic – or in this case pandemic – come to Canada. The association was able to recall this valuable resource and update, modernize, and reshape it to be more applicable to COVID-19 in 2020.

BOMA’s *Pathway Back to Work Guide V2* is a comprehensive 66-page roadmap written for building operators and management to prepare them for what to expect as the commercial real estate industry eases out of this period of imposed hibernation. BOMA is very proud of this document and has received extremely positive feedback on the Guide from across Canada and from as far away as Africa and Asia. *Pathway Back to Work Guide V2* is downloadable for free on the BOMA Canada website, [www.bomacanada.ca](http://www.bomacanada.ca).

"When we look back to SARS in 2003, our leaders of the day strategically ensured that we would be ready for the next one," says Shinewald. "So now, when it comes to COVID-19, we are obligated to take what we've learned from our experience today and start preparing for "the next one" tomorrow – whenever that may be – to benefit future building operators and managers."

Through this pandemic, BOMA members have stepped up to the challenge and, while there has been some hardship, the Canadian commercial real estate industry has come through fairly unscathed. Although people may not be entering buildings as they would have pre-COVID, Shinewald is not aware of a single BOMA building that had to close and believes all remain completely accessible to tenants.

"Our members are doing reasonably well, all things considered," says Shinewald. "Some may be hurting more than others, but commercial real estate is a long-term play and our members are not in the business of house flipping to make a quick buck. If you are a pension fund or an insurance company, you are looking out with a horizon of 75 years or

more. Generally speaking, our members have the patience and, in many cases, the capital to ride out this pandemic."

The work-from-home phenomena during the pandemic will certainly become more popular and prevalent than it has been in the past; partly because the Canadian economy has discovered that remote working can be effective and partly because some people just like it more. In an open-for-business COVID world, it is anticipated that fewer workers will be coming back to the office and, for the ones who do return, there will be a greater demand for additional space to work to accommodate social distancing.

"Tenants will not want to feel like they are risking their health by sitting in a relatively compact and open-air workspace," says Shinewald. "The need for more space per person will spread the office out, which should roughly offset the numbers of people who aren't coming back to the building because of remote working initiatives. This will also create additional challenges for building operators and managers, as the environmental and operational profiles of their buildings will change dramatically."

For BOMA specifically, Shinewald fully expects the organization will come through the pandemic nimbler and more flexible because of its response to COVID-19. The new perspectives gained from this experience will allow BOMA's members to take what they have learned and then adjust to meet future challenges unrelated to the pandemic, such as cybersecurity threats, the effects of climate change, and issues regarding social justice.

Ultimately, COVID-19 has been a reminder that BOMA buildings do not exist apart from the world but are a physical part of it. As such, the association strives to be constantly evolving in order to attract the brightest minds to the Canadian commercial real estate industry and to provide the best for its tenants.

"Our members are men and women who have built their careers on having people enter their structures," says Shinewald. "It will be a good day when we can return to whatever passes for the new normal and, once we get there, we will see that this pandemic has made our industry more resilient and adaptable, and stronger because of it." |

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# The future of construction contracts

The contractual environment in the post-COVID-19 world has changed.

By Jason J. Annibale and Geza Banfai, McMillan LLP

**T**he global COVID-19 pandemic has made our world very different today than it was this time last year. There are few areas of the global business community that have not been impacted by the pandemic, and the construction industry is no exception.

Health and safety regulations have been adjusted to provide for personal protective equipment, social distancing requirements, and enhanced sanitation and cleaning protocols. Work has been reconfigured to reduce traffic on site and within offices. The movement and access to materials and construction personnel has been impaired. More construction projects are tangled in delay and additional cost disputes, and some construction companies face the threat of bankruptcy.

How extensively the pandemic will change the construction industry going forward is open to debate. What is clear, however, is that we are in a new contractual environment in this post-COVID-19 world. The following are

some of the key issues which owners and contractors should consider when writing future construction contracts.

## **Force majeure**

A *force majeure* event is an unforeseeable, intervening event, outside the control of the contracting parties and capable of delaying the performance of the work. The COVID-19 pandemic is a textbook illustration of this legal definition.

Until the pandemic, *force majeure* events were relatively uncommon. COVID-19 has awakened the need to consider *force majeure* provisions in all contracts. Typical *force majeure* clauses prescribe a list of qualifying events and some feature a basket clause that captures further unspecified events that fit within the legal definition. An example is GC 6.5.3 of the Canadian Construction Documents Committee 2 – 2008 (CCDC 2) stipulated price contract, which lists various delay events such as labour disputes, fire, unusual delay by common carriers, and abnormally

adverse weather conditions. It also covers “any cause beyond the contractor’s control.”

Unfortunately, some construction contracts fail to cover *any force majeure* events, thereby exposing the contractor to the entire risk of delay caused by such events. This could include liability for liquidated damages, owner losses that arise from late performance, as well as contract termination.

## **Monetary compensation for force majeure delay**

*Force majeure* risk is typically shared between owner and contractor. Affording contractors additional time but no money for *force majeure* events represents what most believed was an equitable sharing of the risk for delays that were the fault of neither party. However, COVID-19 has caused parties to reconsider the wisdom of this risk allocation. In many cases, the pandemic substantially increased the contractor’s costs of performance, including costs due to loss of productivity, disruptions in the supply chain, and indirect costs of schedule extension. While such costs may be absorbed over one or two contracts, they could

represent a substantial threat to the contractor's viability when encountered over numerous contracts.

Parties might consider whether some monetary compensation should be available for a force majeure delay and, if so, the kind and extent of such compensation. This benefits owners as well, since no owner wishes to risk the disruption caused by an insolvent contractor.

Another potential route to recovery of additional compensation for a force majeure delay may be found in GC 10.2.7 of the CCDC 2, whereby contractors are entitled to claim additional costs for changes made to "applicable laws, ordinances, rules, regulations, or codes of authorities having jurisdiction which affect the cost of the work" that occur subsequent to bid closing. Note, however, that with COVID-19 a reality, and regulations implementing enhanced site safety measures now in place, it may not be possible to rely on this provision since the change in law may have predated the date of bid.

**Force majeure versus public authority stop work orders**

Contracts often provide varying forms of relief for different delay impacts,

such as owner-caused delays, public authority stop work orders, and force majeure. Parties will want to ensure that there is clarity among the categories of delay impacts to avoid confusion as to what relief is available for each of them.

As an illustration, in GC 6.5.2 of CCDC 2, the contractor gets both an extension of time and monetary compensation for delays arising from public authority stop work orders, while under GC 6.5.3, the contractor gets only extensions of time for force majeure events. Where a stop work order is issued due to COVID-19, the question remains: how should COVID-19 costs be treated given that it was the force majeure event of the pandemic which triggered the public authority stop work order? The need for clarity is apparent.

**A COVID-19 clause**

Much of the foregoing discussion centered around force majeure events, but it is important to note that the COVID-19 event itself may no longer fall into that category in the absence of it being explicitly identified. COVID-19 is now a foreseeable risk.

While COVID-19 is known, there remains the potential for delay and cost impacts caused by COVID-19 that remain unknown and likely unquantifiable. Parties should therefore consider a specific section of their contract to manage the allocation of these risks. A good COVID-19 clause should include provisions dealing with notice, suspension and termination rights, mitigation, and the calculation and allocation of unforeseen costs. Parties should also consider an enhanced contingency allowance that covers COVID-19 related costs.

**Conclusion**

These are some of the main considerations that parties will want to take into account as they continue to allocate risk and structure better relationships in the contractual environment in our post-COVID-19 world. The important thing is that they make the effort to do so. |

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# Adapting **to** consumer demands

## There is hope for retail space in a post-COVID Canada as companies adapt in order to keep customers coming back.

**A** number of high-profile insolvencies and bankruptcies have been happening across Canada since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first few months of the pandemic, more than 20 major Canadian companies sought creditor protection (a number four times greater than usual), including well-known homegrown brands Reitmans, ALDO, and DAVIDsTEA. “There are certainly some entities that will not survive this pandemic,”

says Karl Littler, Senior Vice-President, Public Affairs at the Retail Council of Canada. “It won’t be a revelation to anyone that if you walk past the store fronts in any city, many of them are empty and up for lease. The sad truth is, they won’t all be coming back and replacements will be hard to find.”

That being said, retail is not one size fits all, and some retail has performed exceptionally well during the pandemic compared to others. Grocery and pharmacy, which have been allowed to stay open since day one, have seen significant sales in

recent months. This includes – to a lesser extent – big box stores like Costco and Walmart thanks to their grocery aisles, which allowed them to operate in the pandemic. Other retail segments, such as fashion or malls, were generally closed for a considerable amount of time and suffered because of it.

“It’s really a tale of two retail realities; the retail that was able to operate and the retail that was constrained, either by public order or simply by public aversion,” says Littler. “Everyone is going to remember the

*An essential worker loads groceries ordered online to prevent social contact in store.*



Great 2020 Toilet Paper Crisis, where you couldn't find toilet paper for love or money. On the other hand, people stopped buying a whole lot of business suits and shoes. Sales were really dependent on the product being sold and the province it was being sold in."

As second waves hit across the country, at varying levels depending on the region, there are concerns that more closures will further affect businesses. But the retail sector is resilient and has learned to better operate within a post-COVID environment in terms of mask-wearing (an area in which it is ahead of Public Health), social distancing, and sanitization. In addition, the retail sector found new ways to adapt in response to COVID-19, such as offering curbside pickup and home deliveries, and – perhaps the biggest takeaway – e-commerce.

Prior to the pandemic, many entities had dabbled in e-commerce, but after the onset of COVID-19, a commitment to maintaining an online presence became a matter of economic survival. As such, there has been a significant amount of growth in e-commerce in a relatively short period of time.

"The million-dollar question will be how much of that growth is temporary and how much is a permanent shift in shopping behaviour," says Littler. "The base level of e-commerce will almost certainly have risen though, because of the pandemic."

If e-commerce is here to stay, its popularity may have a dramatic effect on what the future of the retail space

*"It's really a tale of two retail realities; the retail that was able to operate and the retail that was constrained, either by public order or simply by public aversion."*

might look like, and whether or not the physical footprint of a bricks-and-mortar building is even needed going forward. Companies will be assessing if they need the same amount of retail space if they're doing more e-commerce business, which will be felt by the real estate industry.

"I believe that there will be a significant examination by retailers on just how much physical space they actually need," says Littler. "If I were a landlord, I would certainly be nervous in a post-COVID environment."

The retail sector is often able to act as the proverbial "canary in the mineshaft" when gauging people's confidence in the general economy. Through this pandemic, however, the retail sector has been held hostage by the combination of two elements that are largely out of its control: the public health environment and Canada's broader economic performance.

While retail is able to do its part in contributing to the public health environment, its impact is limited, as the retail space is not the only place where physical exchanges can happen. When it comes to the economy, so long as there are lingering effects

from COVID-19 affecting wages and jobs in other sectors, there will be a negative effect on the retail sector. If the economy is booming, then retail is too. The converse is also true.

Looking ahead, there are several indicators that the Canadian retail sector has entered its recovery period. Although the sector is still down relative to where it was last year at this time, the numbers are showing incremental month-over-month improvements. Whether this improvement will continue is dependent on the extent of additional waves of COVID-19, if there is a vaccine readily available, and on the recovery of the general economy.

"There are many different variables to figure out before the future of our sector becomes clear," says Littler. "But presuming that we stay on the path that we are currently on, it would appear that we will probably come through this and get back to a world of modest growth in the sector. Aside from the casualties over the last few months and the attrition still to come, my gut tells me that the retail environment will not look all that vastly different than it did previous to COVID-19." ■

### The latest numbers

A report released by the Retail Council of Canada on September 18, 2020, with numbers reported by Statistics Canada, indicates that the sector is still struggling to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. After an initial jump in June, the 1.2% month-over-month decline in core retail in July indicates retail recovery is slowing. This is consistent with what's happening in the United Kingdom and United States.

"The July numbers continue to reflect the many challenges facing retailers during this pandemic" says Diane J. Brisebois, Retail Council of Canada president and CEO. "We can presume that the June numbers released by Statistics Canada included some pent-up demand for various products and so the July numbers really present a more accurate state of Canadian retail."

Several indicators this fall, including Black Friday and Cyber Monday, will test consumer traffic in most cities across Canada. The Council expects future data will show that consumers are changing their lifestyles when it comes to discretionary spending, focusing on home improvement, furniture, and sporting/hobby-related goods.

For more details on this report, go to [www.retailcouncil.org](http://www.retailcouncil.org).





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# Online opportunities

**W**hen it comes to training and apprenticeships, the pandemic sweeping across the globe has put the Canadian construction industry in uncharted territory. Programs were halted, work opportunities were reduced, new protocols were introduced, and there was a thorough reorganization across the board on how training was offered. COVID-19 has provided a steep learning curve for industry to overcome, but the essence of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC) is *Labor omnia vincit*, which is Latin for “Labour conquers all.”

In mid-March, as Canada began to experience the first wave of COVID-19, the UBC reacted quickly and ceased all in-class training at its more than 40 training centres. The organization then took the time to step back to assess the next steps forward.

“So many of our members rely on their certifications and skills training to ensure their employment opportunities remain strong – there was a lot on the line for our members,” says Bev Young, Training Director for the National Construction Council at UBC.

One of UBC’s primary concerns was for its members holding expiring tickets. With more than 65,000 members working across Canada, the inability to renew tickets because of COVID-19 would have escalated and posed serious challenges in meeting current workforce demand. Fortunately, most provinces and legislative departments recognized this and worked with the organization to either extend expiration dates or grant grace periods until UBC could safely return to a training environment. Regulating bodies have honoured the expiration dates of most tickets for an additional three to six months, and up to a full year in some cases.

## Apprenticeship training halted across the country in March. Now UBC is ready to ramp up training with a mix of virtual and in-person options.

UBC then turned its focus to its apprentices. Many of its training centres offering apprenticeship directly were forced to suspend programming in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. UBC also supported those apprentices enrolled in third-party provincial programs who were sent home for an indeterminate period.

As the centres slowly began to reopen there was uncertainty about what completion would look like. Now, across the country, there have been varying states of readiness to move forward.

“Our training centres were kept busy internally, preparing new policies

and procedures, and laying out a framework for a safe and timely return to training,” says Young. “However, various provincial re-opening phases were limiting us in how quickly we could move forward. In some provinces, construction was deemed an essential service, while in others, the sector was shut down. During this time, some contractors were also erring on the side of caution and postponing jobs. Many were preparing their work sites to accommodate the new procedures that were coming into play.”

Even though the regulating bodies extended the expiration dates on tickets, this was only a short-term solution to a long-term problem that had no end in sight. Finding a means to provide an online delivery method was paramount.

Cautiously and with measured steps, each UBC training centre reached out to connect with its



members remotely within a virtual space. They started with safety training such as Fall Pro, Confined Space, and Construction Safety Training System – some of which already had the advantage of a web-based platform. Other programs, however, were more complex and contained practical elements. Those were held for the time being.

“As the restrictions lifted in each province, we were able to start offering a blended learning approach – part online and part in person – with limited member contact to complete the practical portion,” says Young. “As we

have moved into present-day training, this blended learning approach has been adopted in some of the apprenticeship training, while still being diligent to limit contact and ensure safety protocols are always in place. We have been able to successfully complete the programs that we put on hold in March, and we are prepared for the unique challenges coming this fall.”

The response from UBC members toward this new training format has been largely positive and has encouraged the organization to continue providing this hybrid virtual-practical training post-pandemic. While it is still too early

to determine exactly what provincial authority bodies will allow once the crisis has passed, UBC training centres are currently seeking out ways to offer both a traditional schooling experience, as well as more blended learning options.

“The demand for training will always be there; the ‘how we do it’ is the changing element,” says Young. “Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19 has propelled us five-plus years into the future in regard to working and learning, in terms of both utilizing technology and also harnessing the advantages of online learning, virtual learning, and blended approaches.”

Looking forward, UBC is committed to never compromising the quality of its work; instead, focusing on providing more choice to its members. This will mean better options for remote learners and construction workers who work in fly-in, fly-out conditions or for learners with barriers to accessing full-time school, such as single parents and workers with travel issues.

While there will always be the traditional approach of classroom learning, this fall will look very different for apprentices. Class sizes will be working at half capacity, some learning will happen at home prior to and after the practical learning, and members are required to take the UBC-developed online *COVID-19 Member Preparedness Qualification* program.

“In the wake of this pandemic, we have worked hard to forge new paths and recognize the benefits of a hybrid approach to learning,” says Young. “The success we have had in ensuring our members are well-trained and work-ready with this blended and online approach has been very positive. I think it presents new and exciting possibilities for our members across Canada.”

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# Keeping up

**While Canadian youth are optimistic about their future, young women have indicated they're less interested in the trades.**

## with the youth

**B**etween May 28 and June 11, 2020, The Gandalf Group and SOS Design Inc. conducted a survey of 1,500 young Ontarians aged 16 to 30 to gauge their interest in various careers, including construction, in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey indicated, backed up by data released by Statistics Canada, that it is this younger generation that has been most affected by job losses this spring due to COVID-19. Teenagers were also widely affected by the pandemic, with many opportunities for the usual summer work – tourism and server jobs, for example – severely reduced or completely unavailable.

“The bottom line is that COVID-19 has created a financial impact that has added to the anxiety that young people already have,” says Alex Swann, Principal Partner with The Gandalf Group. “That being said, our research has also shown that young people are more likely to be optimistic about their short-term financial situation when compared to older generations. While their take-home pay has been significantly reduced, that has not totally dampened their outlook, and most expect to be back on track within the year.”

The pandemic also appears to have reinforced the choices young men and women might make about careers. For men ages 16 to 30, their stated interest in the trades has neither increased nor decreased. Women in the same age group, however, say the pandemic has made them less likely than before to be interested in the construction trades, and instead be more interested in professions related to social services – notably related to public health.

“This seems logical, as the importance of those types of jobs has been pushed to the forefront for several months now,” says Swann. “The problem is that the young women surveyed told us they would be far more likely to pursue these kinds of jobs than work in construction or the trades.

The gender gap may have been closing prior to COVID-19, with more women entering the trades, but the pandemic may see other professions become far more top of mind for women.”

When young people were asked about the likelihood of retraining, either through continuing education or enrolling

in a trade school, it was those who were currently employed who said they were more likely to consider it. Those who were unemployed were far more likely to say they were looking for immediate income and less willing to retrain. This signals that if the assumption going into a recession was that unemployed youth would become a potential pool of surplus labour to draw from, that assumption may be challenged.

“Ironically, we shouldn’t overlook the people who are currently employed but want a career change,” says Swann. “These people are the ones who might be financially secure enough to take a year off and go to trade school, rather than someone who is currently unemployed who may have income pressures that make it impossible for them to go back to school.”

The survey also demonstrated that young people in their early to mid-20s show much more interest in the trades as a career than do teenagers, who know less about the sector and are less likely to express interest in various construction jobs. Interestingly, for those teens who are interested in the trades, they are far more likely to be interested in apprenticing as an electrician, rather than to apprentice as anything else.

“For teens, we need to make it clear that there are many different career opportunities within the field; not just those with the highest brand awareness among youth,” says Swann. “It’s not sufficient to go to young people and just talk about the trades as a grouping or category. If we tease out all the different career opportunities or trades that are available, we will be able to create a higher level of interest.” ■



# Leading the future of building science



Net Zero / Net Zero Ready modules craned into place in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Photo credit: Big Block Construction

**Building efficiently must also become part of the new normal.**

By Natasha Rombough, Canadian Home Builders' Association

**A**s we emerge from the pandemic, Canadians are re-evaluating many aspects of our lives: where we live, how we do business, and how global events can change our “normal” more quickly than we could imagine. As leaders in the residential construction industry, members of the Canadian Home Builders' Association (CHBA) have always pursued advancements in construction and design: it's what made Canada a respected international front-runner in building science for years. With climate challenges like no one else in the world, our industry is once again pushing the known boundaries of construction as we build Net Zero Energy homes in sub-zero conditions.

### **An efficient way of building**

A CHBA Net Zero Home is up to 80% more energy efficient than typical new homes and uses renewable energy systems to produce the remaining energy it needs, which means that its occupants, and the whole construction team, can feel good about the home's minimal environmental impact and their contribution to addressing climate change.

These homes are extremely well-built: they have very airtight, well-insulated building envelopes with high-performance windows and doors. They also use efficient, right-sized mechanical systems to reach higher levels of energy performance. Every part of the house works together to provide consistent temperatures

throughout, prevent drafts, and filter indoor air to reduce dust and allergens. That combination results in unrivaled levels of occupant comfort; quieter homes with better indoor air quality – a feature that is considered now more than ever in the wake of the pandemic.

In addition to being incredibly efficient, Net Zero Homes have built-in renewable energy generation; mostly solar photovoltaic panels that generate electricity. In some cases, they incorporate energy storage systems that allow homeowners to bank energy for future use. A Net Zero Ready Home is built to the same level of performance, but installation of the renewable energy system is not yet installed. This is a popular option among Net Zero builders and home buyers. In both cases, occupants can expect utility bills with much lower energy consumption.

### **Innovating for affordability**

For many, living in a Net Zero Home is very appealing, but the question is: what about cost?

CHBA is leading efforts to bring Net Zero and Net Zero Ready Homes to market as affordably as possible. As the industry voluntarily learns new efficiencies with the technology and building practices involved, building costs are decreasing. CHBA's aim is to share efficiencies and innovation among members so that eventually the cost of owning a Net Zero or Net Zero Ready Home is comparable to one built to conventional standards.

CHBA's *Net Zero Home Labelling Program* ensures that each participating home is qualified by a third party to meet the specified technical requirements. Since its pilot in 2015 more than 400 homes have been labelled. Now the program is evolving to include renovations and low-rise multi-unit residential buildings (MURBs).

### **Large buildings, low impact**

This summer, CHBA announced its Net Zero initiative for multi-unit residential buildings, which is in partnership with Natural Resources Canada. The program aims to further advance solutions, technologies, and approaches to building Net Zero and Net Zero Ready MURBs, with the goal of producing homes that are affordable, replicable, and highly appealing to Canadians.

To reach that goal, industry leaders from across Canada are coming together to share their information and research. The core of the initiative involves projects by CHBA members from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. Their MURBs will be built and tested in an effort to arrive at increased energy performance with improved construction productivity and shortened construction schedules – all while keeping costs as low as possible.

Project teams are comprised of the builders, manufacturers, and experts in building science, pre-fabrication, insulation, windows, mechanicals, and renewable energy. Although the initiative was just officially announced, the project teams are already underway, and the first Net Zero MURB is nearing completion, with occupancy scheduled for this fall.

*CHBA's aim is to share efficiencies and innovation among members so that eventually the cost of owning a Net Zero or Net Zero Ready Home is comparable to one built to conventional standards.*

### **Achieving Net Zero through pre-fabrication**

One objective of this project is to validate the use of pre-fabrication (both panelization and modular construction) for Net Zero and Net Zero Ready MURBs. The building teams are taking various approaches, from single wall panels built on site to modular construction in a factory.

Modular construction has many advantages over traditional construction. It is easier to optimize materials and consistently make exact measurements, substantially reducing waste. Both tradespeople and materials are protected from the elements in covered, climate-controlled environments. The production efficiency is also next level: a single machine operator has the ability to assemble walls as large as 40' in just hours. With more than 118,000 professionals retiring from the residential construction industry over the next few years, modular construction may play a crucial role in addressing increasing shortages in skilled labour.

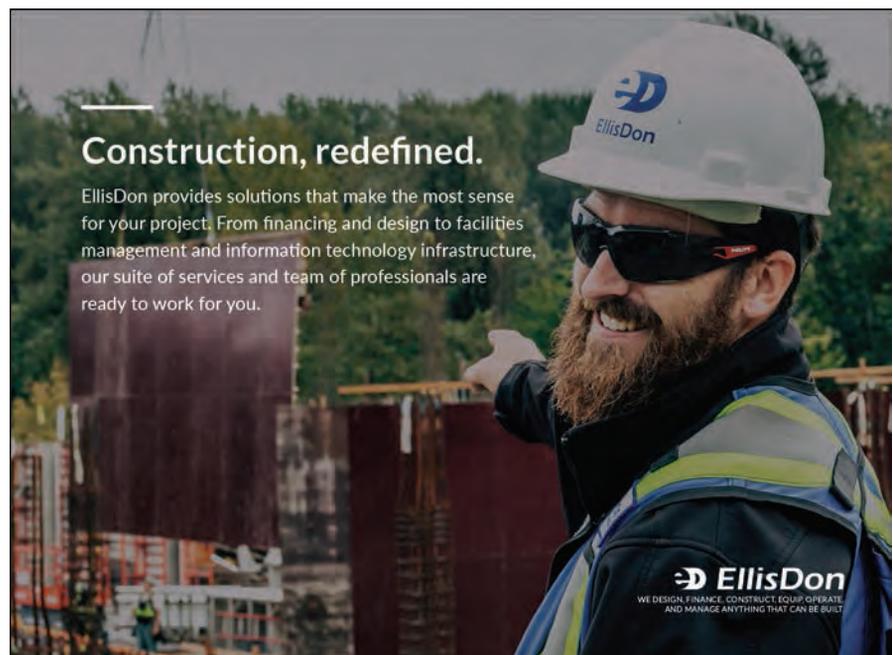
Then there's the safety aspect in a COVID-19 world. The factory setting is optimal for adopting new safety protocols quickly and effectively, and machine operators already have designated areas. When employees need to work together for assembly, additional personal protective equipment (PPE) and an efficient plan to get the job done minimizes contact.

### **The future is looking different**

We can't control if another global virus will change how we live and work. This is why the residential construction industry is taking steps through innovation and collaboration to give builders more options for producing Net Zero and Net Zero Ready Homes that are affordable, replicable, and appealing to Canadians.

To read more about CHBA's Net Zero MURB initiative, visit [chba.ca/nzmurbs](http://chba.ca/nzmurbs). |

*Natasha Rombough is Director, Marketing and Communications for the Canadian Home Builders' Association.*



# Mentorship **matters**



Photo credit:  
SkillPlan

## An innovative mentorship training model is being developed to ensure workers succeed.

to thrive in their training, their jobs, and their ability to take on new roles.”

SkillPlan recognizes the need for good mentors and has been working with the construction industry to implement mentorship programs during technical training and employment. BuildForce and SkillPlan, along with Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, have partnered to undertake an Employment and Social Development Canada-funded initiative to develop and implement an innovative mentorship training model to ensure workers are able to improve their skills to gain and maintain a job, and to better adapt and succeed at work.

This program is aligned with – and endorsed by – industry, and includes mentorship training for apprentices and journeypersons, train-the-trainer training, and on-the-job training to monitor and reinforce good mentoring. The project also involves a return on investment (ROI) analysis to evaluate the benefits of the program on the workforce, including improvements in safety, productivity, quality, and the on-time, on-budget delivery of industrial, commercial, and residential projects. Current research results are showing positive trends in safety, productivity, and quality of work with contractors who have embraced this mentorship training for their workers. It is anticipated that the ROI analysis will be completed and ready to share with the industry by summer 2021.

“Based on extensive feedback from the construction industry, the primary goal for this project is to develop, implement, and evaluate a mentorship training model that will address skills and performance gaps on the job,” says Downie. “This will ultimately lead to a best practice in mentorship training that can be effectively used by the construction industry in Canada.” ■

**E**ven before COVID-19, the Canadian construction industry was expected to lose more than 250,000 skilled tradespeople to retirement in less than a decade. The onset of the pandemic and the many displaced workers as a result only add to the widening skills gap between mentors and apprentices, and mentorship training will be needed to bridge that divide.

“There may not be the need to hire as many workers in today’s economic environment, but there will always be a need for training,” says SkillPlan CEO, Kyle Downie. “Even during a downturn, organizations still need to train people to replace retirees, and train workers on new equipment and work procedures. When the economy recovers and construction ramps back up, as it always does in the construction sector, that need will be more evident than ever.”

Mentorship is one of the most important elements in workforce development. Approximately 80% of all training in the trades and technical sector takes place on the job through mentoring relationships, and industry relies on the mentor-apprentice relationship to help develop qualified journeypersons.

“Mentorship has long been recognized as an effective means of knowledge transfer; a way to pass

on important skills to the upcoming generation, and to produce productive, highly skilled, and safe workers,” says Downie. “Mentorship is a key factor in developing a qualified journeyperson.”

Yet, there is significant variability in how mentoring takes place. Just because someone is a great tradesperson, doesn’t necessarily mean they are good at mentoring. Generally speaking, not all journeypersons have taken training or received guidance on how to be effective mentors, and the construction industry’s traditional mentor-apprentice relationship can use support to ensure that consistent knowledge is transferred from skilled to unskilled workers.

Additionally, with today’s diverse and changing workforce, industry needs good mentorship to support, motivate, encourage, and create more supportive work environments for new workers. Skills development can support the demographic shift, and mentoring – when done right – helps reduce the onboarding time for new workers and has a positive impact on helping them become more effective, thereby ensuring a stronger, safer, and better industry.

“Through effective mentoring, apprentices can learn to be the best from the best,” says Downie. “Good mentoring takes skill and expertise. The passing on of knowledge from one generation to the next will become increasingly necessary for apprentices

# Down, but not (completely) out

COVID-19 has negatively affected Canada's economy, but not all hope is lost.

By Aaron Stokes, Stokes Economics

Significant uncertainty will continue to exist as to how fast the global economy will rebound from the downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as all global growth forecasts rely on assumptions regarding the suppression of the virus, the speed of each country's economic reopening, and the timing and effectiveness of a successful vaccine.

The United States has represented roughly three quarters of Canada's export sector for the past decade, leaving Canada's economy heavily tied to economic growth south of the border. As the number of COVID cases grows at an astonishing rate in the U.S., with 6.8 million confirmed cases between January 20 and September 23, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, protocols regarding social distancing are expected to see a higher take-up rate. In addition, increasingly active measures are expected to lower the rate of new cases in the coming months. Nonetheless, the infection rate is expected to continue to remain relatively high toward the end of the year and into early 2021, which has many forecasters predicting a delayed rebound that will slow imports of Canadian goods and services.

The other quarter of national trade is mostly weighted to the European Union,

Great Britain, and East and South Asian economies, where virus suppression has been significantly more successful due to relatively stronger restrictions put in place. These economies are predicted to see an earlier rebound that will benefit provinces like British Columbia, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, all of which engage in a relatively higher share of trade with these countries than other provinces.

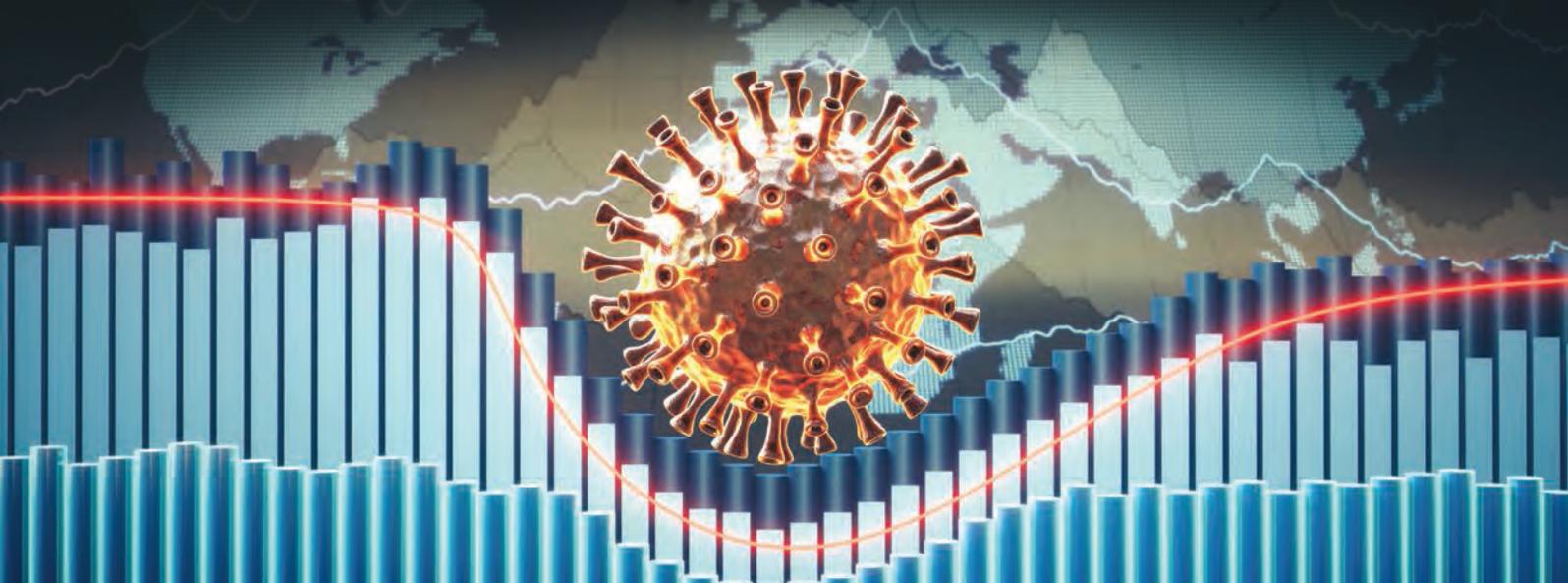
The reduction in global trade in recent months, during the strictest economic lockdowns, created excess or underutilized industrial capacity in some of our key exporting sectors, particularly in some of the raw-material-producing sectors. This will lead to a bit of a hangover in the level of overall non-residential construction toward the end of the year as this excess productive capacity is gradually absorbed. As this happens, I expect that a strong rebound in non-residential construction will take place quite broadly across the economy into next year, as new capital is then needed. This will be supported by many pre-planned major infrastructure and heavy-industrial projects that have been years in the making.

Compared with pre-COVID forecasts, the construction industry will not reach the same highs as previously projected, as there will be a fallout in the sectors related to travel tourism. This lack of consumer

confidence will generate some drag on growth in the next couple of years. For the most part, however, the non-residential construction sector is expected to rebound quite strongly as global and domestic demand improve in the short term.

New residential construction has been mixed across the country this year, with surprisingly high levels of new-home construction in four of Canada's provinces (Ontario, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) in the first half of the year, while the rest have seen varying declines. National trends in new-home construction activity are currently down only slightly to July of 2020, due largely to Ontario holding the numbers up. We expect to see reductions in all provinces toward the end of the year and into the first half of 2021, as job losses related to COVID, combined with the end of federal income supports, will continue to push many new buyers out of the market.

An article published by the CBC on July 31, 2020<sup>1</sup>, shows how condo pre-sales in the Greater Toronto Area have fallen by more than 50% through the lockdowns compared with the same period last year. While troubling, the most recent July real estate sales set a new 40-year record, making clear that the pandemic lockdown may have deferred, not muted, real estate



demand. Nonetheless, with international migration also expected to slow in the short term, as governments will be more focused on getting domestic citizens back to work, overall total activity is expected to come in below 2019 levels. Despite these downside risk factors, the multi-year recovery in economic growth that will bring jobs and income with it, coupled with low interest-rate expectations for the next few years, will support steady gains in new-home construction.

Looking forward, we are likely to see a few quarters of weaker activity before the anticipated return to pre-COVID levels. Data on building permits, a measure of future construction intentions, has seen sharp declines in both residential and non-residential permitting. When compared against the same six-month period in 2019, the value of permits nationally is down by just under four billion dollars, or 8%, for the first six months of 2020, with strong variations between provinces.

To aid in the recovery, governments across Canada have committed themselves to additional stimulus. The federal stimulus announced to

date is expected to play a relatively small part in getting the construction industry back to pre-COVID levels, as the residential market employs about 80% of construction workers and most of the stimulus funding is focused on non-residential construction. The federal government has allotted 10% of the \$33.5 billion *Investing in Canada* program to fund short-term infrastructure projects that can be completed before the end of 2021. These funds were originally intended to span the next decade; therefore, this largely doubles the planned short-term spending, which coupled with the changes in rules regarding leveraging, could help support short-term employment in the industry.

More troubling to the economy, however, is the capacity of municipal governments to continue to participate in longer-term infrastructure redevelopment projects under existing federal-provincial-municipal infrastructure funding programs. Municipal governments were extremely hard hit by the pandemic, with many now deferring planned expenditures. The July federal

announcement of a \$19 billion transfer to provinces to support the safe restart of their respective economies should help alleviate some of the financial pressures on municipalities, but with prolonged declines in revenue and the inability to incur operational debt, there are few options for some municipalities but to scale back investments.

Ultimately, only a return in consumer activity will restore the economy to pre-pandemic levels. Any second wave or prolonged changes in consumer behaviour could undermine the buoyant progress to date. At this point in time, this is unclear. ■

*Aaron Stokes is the president and owner of Stokes Economics. Aaron has been with the company since 2000 and is a subject matter expert in economic model building, forecasting, scenario analysis and economic impact assessment.*

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# Wondering what's next

## Construction projects are starting to get back on track. Will this trend continue?



Since the onset of COVID-19, the pandemic has deeply affected the routine decisions, everyday workflows, and traditional operating procedures of the Canadian construction sector. Provinces and territories across the country were forced to quickly introduce a spate of new health and safety protocols that were specifically designed to allow construction operations to continue throughout the spring and into summer, albeit at a slower pace than before.

"Industry was pounded by the initial imposed work stoppages and job losses across all provinces," says BuildForce Senior Economist, Bob Collins. "While all construction businesses have been affected by the pandemic, those located in Quebec and Ontario were impacted most severely because of mandatory closures when both provinces halted all non-essential services."

The impact of the pandemic was evident in Statistics Canada's monthly Labour Force Survey data. Between pre-pandemic February and the peak of imposed closures in April, the Canadian construction sector lost approximately 266,000 jobs as workers were sent home or voluntarily withdrew due to health and safety concerns. Unemployment increased from 8.1% to 20.5%.

The good news is that as economies started to re-open and construction projects got back on track, employment rose for the fourth consecutive month since the peak job losses in April, returning closer to pre-COVID levels, though the total remains 6.7% lower

than levels seen in August 2019. The national construction unemployment rate declined through August, falling to 7.3% from a high of 20.5% in April.

"We anticipate the numbers will be steady with more moderate employment gains through the fall, but the pace of recovery and market conditions may vary by province," says Collins. "It should also be noted that job losses in Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador were intensified by labour markets that were already weakened by the collapse in the price of oil, which preceded the peak of the pandemic."

Through 2020, residential construction investment is projected to fall by 7.7%, and it may take several years to return to pre-COVID levels of activity. Non-residential construction is also projected to decline by 6.9% in 2020, but is expected to rebound in 2021 with some markets, such as commercial construction (nationally, BuildForce estimates a 12% decline in 2020) to remain more or less muted over the near term. Institutional and civil construction are anticipated to remain strong in most regions, to the extent that governments at all levels can retain their capacity to fund projects. There are also various provincial stimulus programs targeted to boost construction.

Even though construction investment is expected to be constrained, and the slower pace of construction activity is contributing to elevated rates of unemployment, labour market challenges are likely to resurface in some regions as construction activity recovers. In particular, this will be the case for those provinces that were previously projecting strong levels

of investment, such as British Columbia, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island.

In the weeks and months to come, Canada's construction industry will continue to adapt to the pressures of the ongoing pandemic, but challenges may persist, and a great deal of uncertainty remains. As such, construction investment may be more cautious post-COVID.

A number of health and safety protocols are expected to stay in place for as long as it takes to find a vaccine (if not longer). This includes physical distancing, the use of protective equipment where physical distancing is not practical, limiting shared work and rest spaces, and potentially limiting the number of trades in one area or on site. There are also limitations on the practice of sharing equipment and tools.

"The implication here is that it may take longer to do a job and will require additional planning and coordination across trades and work activities," says Collins. "That being said, the impact of these protocols will vary significantly depending on the type of project and the work being done. For example, roadwork, site preparation, and other civil infrastructure work already have traditional layers of distancing in place and were, therefore, less affected by certain COVID-19 mitigation policies."

In short, the construction industry is extremely resilient, and while its recovery may experience some bumps over the coming months, it should bounce back quicker than other sectors of the economy, in part due to the significant volumes of work currently projected over the next few years. ■

# Measuring training capacity

Assessing projected labour demands will help industry better prepare for labour shortages and confront the underground economy.

By Patrick J. Dillon,  
Business Manager,  
Provincial Building and  
Construction Trades  
Council of Ontario

Canada's construction industry is highly cyclical, dynamic, and adaptive to fast-paced change, as demonstrated in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The skilled trades workforce is exceptionally resilient, but like many other sectors of the economy, the projected retirement of the baby boom generation may deplete the sector of some of its most experienced and skilled workers over the coming decade. Industry observers have been sounding the alarm for years, and the current upswing of recovery from the economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic has not halted those warnings. As BuildForce Canada reported in its 2020–2029 outlook, a gap of 82,000 workers could emerge by 2029 if the industry is unable to align new-entrant recruitment and training to the departures of retiring baby boom workers.

At first glance, this number seems daunting, but historical experience shows that construction labour market needs can be met quickly, when private- and public-sector authorities work together to respond to those needs. Retirement is not a new, insurmountable phenomenon that the construction industry cannot manage.

While it is useful to measure anticipated labour market *demand* to assist contractors, workers, and governments in their efforts to plan for oncoming work, it is equally necessary to measure the current *supply* of labour market training and overall industry capacity to provide trained and skilled workers so that an effective response to market needs can be crafted. Better quantifying the national training capacity will be important to ensure that a concerted effort can be organized between labour, contractors, government, and training institutions to overcome any labour market gaps. The old adage, "what gets measured gets done," couldn't be more apt. Only in better understanding our current training capacity can we allocate resources accordingly to address any potential skilled trade labour force development gaps.

In recent years, we have seen several new initiatives launched with the aim of overcoming the recruitment challenge. Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs), Project Labour Agreements (PLAs), and the proactive use of government procurement policies to promote training and workforce development have all been positive, not only to increase overall training, but to improve the industry's recruitment of individuals from historically underrepresented groups in the construction labour force. Reforms to government procurement requirements have helped establish new partnerships designed to promote a more collaborative industry approach to labour force diversity, which includes the hiring of women, youth, Indigenous people, racial minorities, newcomers, and returning veterans and reservists. By broadening the pool of prospective new entrants to Canada's construction industry, the economy will be well-positioned to meet the labour market demand of the next decade.

In the province of Ontario, the Building Trades invest more than \$40 million annually to support training, apprenticeship development, and skills upgrading. As a whole, our members have invested upwards of \$260 million to build out our network of 95 training facilities across the province. These centres provide strong foundational skills development, as well as promote productivity through technological improvements and instill in trainees an uncompromising commitment to workplace health and safety protocols, policies, and regulations.

When contrasted against the health and safety protocols, wage rates, and workplace standards pervasive in the provincial underground construction economy, the comparison is quite stark. Not only do firms operating in the shadows cost government millions of dollars annually in tax revenue, they contribute to inferior construction workplace standards, they dilute the quality of the provincial skilled trades labour force, and they create an unlevel playing field for legitimate contractors. A 2017 Ontario

Construction Secretariat study found that the underground economy costs governments between \$1.8 to \$3.1 billion<sup>3</sup> of annual revenue. Clearly, exploitative workplace practices need to be eliminated to improve the health and safety culture of the industry, and ensure that the viability of other important public services are not undermined by the revenue loss to governments, which translates into strained public services like health care being deprived of precious revenues affecting the quality of life for all citizens.

The construction sector needs to come together to identify what the actual training gap is, and to then act in concert to ensure that demand is met and that those gaps do not re-emerge. Only in working together to fully utilize the existing workforce training infrastructure of the province can we ensure resources are deployed effectively to maximize our recruitment of new entrants. When capacity gaps are identified, the unionized construction industry, together with government, can respond with increased investments in training infrastructure and actual skills training delivery. Should these steps prove insufficient to meet labour market demand, then efforts should be expanded to attract skilled tradespeople nationally, and internationally – in that order. Securing access to construction employment opportunities for Canadians, including historically underrepresented groups, must always be a national priority. Federal government policies should put the interests of Canadian construction workers first by establishing mobility incentives in the *Income Tax Act*.

Insofar as not all the construction sector's needs are met through domestic recruitment alone, increasing the attraction of skilled trade professionals through the legitimate immigration system may also be required. Only when all other avenues for recruitment have been exhausted should we turn to the *Temporary Foreign Worker Program* (TFWP). However, for those admitted as temporary foreign workers where there is demonstrable domestic shortage for their skills, better pathways must exist to provide these individuals with permanent residency in Canada. The Building Trades are ready and willing to play a constructive role to inform government policy in that regard, to avoid the dislocation of Canadian workers.

Measuring training capacity across our country with a view to identifying specific trades that will be in peak demand as the industry undergoes peaks and valleys over the next decade is absolutely critical to strengthening the construction industry, and can play a decisive role in tackling the underground economy to the benefit of all Canadians. ■

*Patrick J. Dillon is Business Manager and Secretary Treasurer of the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario.*

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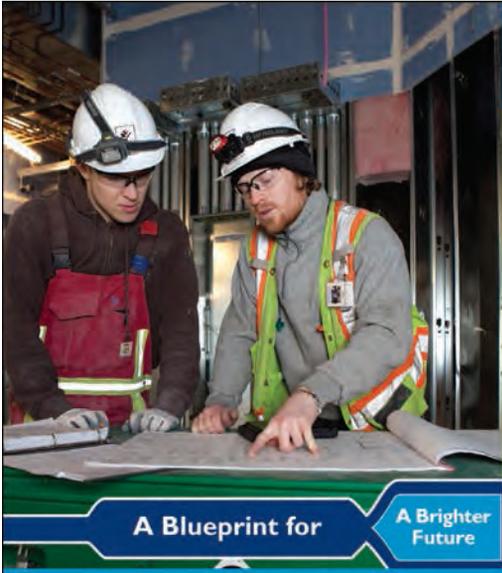
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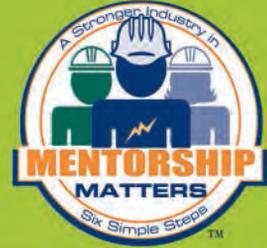
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# The importance of immigration



By Adam Cywinski, Prism Economics and Analysis

**Attracting immigrants in large numbers is likely to become increasingly difficult as traditional source countries face their own demographic challenges.**

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has presented a temporary immigration challenge for Canada. But as we recover from the pandemic, and people are able to move more freely both within their own countries and globally, Canada will once again become a top destination for immigrants. Unfortunately, recent data shows that fewer immigrants with skilled trades qualifications are already entering Canada. This means we will have to find alternative countries from which to recruit potential immigrants in order to meet the needs of Canada's labour force.

Unfortunately, the size of the recruiting pool for immigrants with skilled trades experience is already shrinking as a result of the federal government's policy shift toward

attracting immigrants with degree-level credentials. This is a problem that is only going to get worse as the workforce ages and baby boomers retire en masse. If the construction industry is to compete with other industrial sectors to attract newcomers with skilled trades experience, it will need to step up its recruiting efforts – or get left behind.

By working with Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the industry could identify ways to better promote career opportunities in construction, especially in countries where emigration interest is high. Since the number of immigrants coming from Europe is expected to further decline in the future, focusing recruitment efforts on countries such as India, the Philippines, Nigeria, and Mexico could help increase the number of skilled trade workers choosing Canada – and

help fill the construction industry's growing labour shortage.

There is no question that with the right outreach, the construction industry should be able to attract the skilled immigrants it needs. Data shows that immigrants working in the industry earn above-average wages, are able to establish themselves in Canadian society faster, and rely on social programs less frequently than other immigrants. Ensuring that those within the skilled trades planning to move to Canada are aware of these benefits must become a priority.

Construction employers, labour providers, and industry associations should also reach out to immigrants – who have already decided to work in the industry – before they arrive in Canada. Providing information about provincial technical or vocational training systems and certification

requirements, as well as matching new arrivals with employers in their area, would help assist their transition into the Canadian construction industry. One example of such cooperation is the IRCC-supported British Columbia Construction Association's *Integrating Newcomers* (BCCA-IN) program.<sup>1</sup> The industry can also better support newcomers already in Canada who are looking to start careers in construction. This could include targeted outreach campaigns, specialized pre-apprenticeship training programs, assistance preparing for certification exams, language training, and recognition of educational qualifications.

Ultimately, Canada's immigration policies must also change in order to attract more skilled trades people to the industry. Reforms to existing programs, such as the *Federal Skilled Trades Class* program, should be made to fast track the approval of skilled trade applicants willing to work in Canada. In the past, IRCC has carried out special draws for *Federal Skilled Trades Class* applicants. This is something that should be considered in the future to increase the numbers of skilled trade workers entering the country. Furthermore, since applicants with valid job offers earn additional points under the immigration evaluation criteria, the industry should consider establishing a method to help match interested skilled trade immigrants with Canadian employers.

Another barrier to integrating newcomers into the construction labour market is the current method of assessing and recognizing foreign credentials and work experience. Canada requires all candidates to have their qualifications assessed prior to emigrating, but this does not constitute formal recognition. It is

up to the provinces and territories to recognize education and skills.

Differing requirements across the country, however, impede the free movement of both immigrants and Canadian-born workers. Making immigrants better aware of the steps required to obtain skills and education recognition, as well as starting the licensing process before they arrive in Canada, could help overcome some of the barriers to labour market integration. Employers and labour providers within the construction industry should also work with the government to leverage the existing *Red Seal Program*. This program supports the recognition of foreign certifications by establishing a formal pan-Canadian mechanism for occupational testing of skills in high demand within the construction industry.

Although, many newcomers arriving in Canada are highly skilled, some are fleeing conflict areas. It can therefore be a challenge for them to obtain educational or professional certification documents from their home countries. Since most provinces require these documents for accreditation, this can restrict opportunities for newcomers, especially refugees. The construction industry should work with the provinces to permit individuals without the necessary documentation to take an equivalency exam.

Many newcomers to Canada are highly educated. But most immigrants with university and post-graduate degrees are not easily convinced to give up opportunities in their profession to take up careers in construction. Many are also overqualified for jobs in the industry, with data showing that immigrants are three times more likely to be overqualified than Canadian-born

workers. Overqualification typically also means immigrants earn lower salaries and have lower levels of job satisfaction. Better aligning immigration selection criteria to meet current and future labour market demands would not only reduce immigrant overqualification in the labour market, but ensure a better balance in overall recruitment policies. This would also limit the dependency of industries on temporary foreign workers to fill the growing skilled worker shortage.

If we want to ensure a strong and healthy construction industry in the future, the time to make these changes is now. With almost a quarter of the current construction labour force expected to retire by 2029, the need for workers within the industry will only become more pressing with each passing year. For Canada and its construction industry, there is quite simply no time to waste.

The full report, *Immigration trends in the Canadian construction sector*, will be available in October on the BuildForce website. ■

*Adam Cywinski is a partner with Prism Economics and Analysis. Adam specializes in labour market economics in the construction, manufacturing, and oil and gas sectors, and in research related to post-secondary education and trades training and apprenticeship.*

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**Sean Strickland**  
 Executive Director,  
 Canada's Building  
 Trades Union

**APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS**

Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency .....36

**ASSOCIATIONS**

Pipe Line Contractors Association of Canada .....6  
 Mechanical Contractors Association of Canada (MCAC) .....24  
 Ontario Erectors Association Inc. ....30  
 Operative Plasterers' & Cement Masons' International Association .....OBC  
 Progressive Contractors Association of Canada .....36  
 Winnipeg Construction Association .....12

**BUILDING SERVICES AND CONSTRUCTION**

EllisDon Corporation .....27

**CONSTRUCTION LABOUR MANAGEMENT**

IMPACT .....4

**CONSTRUCTION RELATED UNIONS**

BC Building Trades Union .....38  
 Building Trades of Alberta .....19  
 General Presidents' Maintenance Committee for Canada / National Maintenance Council for Canada .....13  
 International Union of Operating Engineers .....22

**CONSTRUCTION TRADE TRAINING FOR WOMEN**

Women Building Futures .....34

**DEFENCE INFRASTRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT**

Defence Construction Canada .....34

**ELECTRICAL ASSOCIATION**

Electrical Contractors Association of Alberta .....38

**INDUSTRY EVENTS**

Informa (World of Concrete) .....IBC

**LABOUR RELATIONS**

Canada's Building Trades Unions .....17  
 Construction Labour Relations Association of BC .....38

**ONTARIO CONSTRUCTION SECRETARIAT**

Ontario Construction Secretariat .....8

**PROVINCIAL AND REGIONAL BUILDING TRADES COUNCILS**

Manitoba Building Trades .....3  
 Millwright Local 2309 .....10

**PROVINCIAL AND REGIONAL BUILDINGS TRADES COUNCILS**

Provincial Building & Construction Trades Council of Ontario .....33

**UNION SAVING INCENTIVES**

Union Savings .....24

**UNIONS**

CLAC .....IFC  
 SkillPlan .....34

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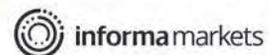
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