

A woman wearing a yellow hard hat, safety glasses, and a high-visibility jacket is crouching next to a large yellow construction vehicle tire. She is holding a clipboard and smiling. The background shows a blue sky with white clouds and a dirt ground.

Female **POWERED INDUSTRY**

The construction industry needs to attract more women to the trades – one Canadian partnership is attempting to bridge this gap

By Heather Hudson

We don't need to tell you that it takes a certain kind of grit to work in the piling industry. Operating oversized equipment and being physical in often-harsh conditions is a demanding career. Skilled workers who want to get into this line of work need to know their trade inside and out and be prepared to work hard on a crew.

Where do you find people with the right stuff?

Some of western Canada's most capable, prepared and eager candidates are coming from what traditionalists would consider an unlikely gender: women.

In fact, Women Building Futures (WBF), the Alberta-based leading organization in trades training for women, is graduating class after class of impressively skilled and polished female professionals who are ready to get dirty in the construction industry.

"Our industry partners value our programs for the unrivalled level of preparedness that our graduates come out with. They know what they're getting into and they have the drive, tenacity and work ethic they need to succeed in the construction industry," said Jacqueline Andersen, WBF's director of industry relations.

With a looming labour shortage on the horizon, it's critical that the industry consider candidates not historically found in the construction industry.

"There are a quarter of a million skilled tradespeople retiring over the next 10 years and there is a smaller pool of young people to draw from. It's important to maximize all sources of labour," said Rosemary Sparks, executive director of BuildForce Canada, a national industry-led organization that works with the construction industry to provide information and resources to help manage workforce requirements.

WBF and BuildForce Canada recently partnered to lead more women into careers in construction while helping revitalize an industry set to experience a skills shortage when baby boomers retire in mass numbers over the next decade. The partnership will create awareness for job opportunities for women and promote the development of critical skills required for success.



What's in it for women?

According to WBF past president JudyLynn Archer, choosing a career in construction could instantly change a woman's life.

"The annual income earned by women working full time in Canada is currently \$32,000 or less. When they join the construction industry, the average increase in income is 128 per cent on their first day of hire," said Archer.

For Indigenous women, that number increases even more dramatically. But despite the huge benefits, encouraging women to enter the trades industry has not been easy.

Sparks says BuildForce Canada's research indicates that women have not traditionally been exposed to occupations in construction.

"Even today, we're still in a situation where many women do not hear about construction as a career option when going through school and even after they graduate," said Sparks.

Andersen says WBF continues to do a lot of outreach and education to demonstrate that careers in construction are a viable choice.

"[Women] don't see themselves in these roles, although that's changing. WBF alumni who have been through the path and have roles in construction and maintenance are proof that it opens up whole new lifestyle," said Andersen.

Still in its infancy, the WBF/BuildForce Canada partnership is beginning to take shape. WBF marketing and communications manager, Heather Markham, says they're working to change attitudes and norms in Canadian industry.

"We see each other as a resource. Sharing information on the labour market is what BuildForce does best. We're working together to help provide opportunities for and demonstrate that women and Indigenous women are a great source of labour we have as Canadians as we prepare for the loss of the baby boomers by 2026."

Why – and how – should the piling industry engage women?

Archer says industry employers can help smooth the path to recruit eager new members of their workforce. She



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encourages employers to look beyond experience and gender and focus on well-trained, well-prepared candidates.

"If I was an employer, I would look for people who have made a well-informed decision about their career path and who have prepared themselves for this opportunity," said Archer. "That might mean focusing less on looking for people with 20 years of experience and instead at commitment and preparedness."

When asked about the physical suitability for women on heavy construction worksites, Archer says that hasn't been an issue.

"On a construction site, most men aren't going to lift something really heavy by themselves. They're going to get a crane or hoist or ask for a hand. That happens with women in the same way. The trick is that we're helping each other equitably to get work done."

Sparks says employers need to be aware of how they are seen [by prospective employees] and what their company is offering.

"Every company, no matter who they are, needs to be thinking about inclusivity in hiring practices," she said. "This often means doing a self-assessment, asking what is in our hiring processes that bring women to our door – or what is keeping them away from our door."

WBF and BuildForce Canada help employers answer those questions and provide advice and resources to help them change their hiring culture to be more inclusive.

The advantage of partnering with WBF is that employers can help shape their future workforce. Some of the services the organization provides their employer partners includes:

- Developing custom training programs to meet employer needs
- Providing recruitment, assessment and job matching services
- Supporting applications for the Canada Alberta Jobs Grant – teaching employers how they can get two-thirds of their training costs reimbursed

Archer notes that employers typically report that WBF's advice is invaluable, particularly with respect to the Canada Job Grant designed for employers to address their workforce



needs. It includes recruiting and training new people, up-skilling existing employees and often covering much of the cost of training.

"It's a huge boon to companies looking to up-skill or begin recruiting new people," said Archer.

A more modest partnership can allow employers to avail themselves of the pool of graduates.

"Employers can co-create a program with us or simply hire grads out of our existing programs," said Andersen. "We want to work with employers who share our values, which include safety, diversity and providing opportunities for career advancement."

She says that no matter what level of engagement they choose, employers are eligible to receive WBF support in the way of access to resources. Later this year, they'll launch Work Proud, a series of workshops for both industry and new workers to share best practices for success.

And as the year rolls out, look for WBF's new national awareness campaign, which will aim to challenge and change the perception of gender in the skilled trades. The goal is to encourage women to consider careers in construction but also position the trades as a first choice for both women and men.

"We want to get people thinking about and engaging and talking about the trades and promote women in the trades in all industries," said Markham. "These are lucrative careers, not just jobs. We want to help overcome the idea that the trades are just a fallback if you can't go to university."

Could 2017 be the year of women in the piling industry?

For more information about WBF, visit womenbuildingfutures.com. To learn about BuildForce Canada's programs, visit buildforce.ca. 🇨🇦



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