

Women to the Rescue

Women can be part of the answer to upcoming industry labour shortfalls

By Heather Hudson

When was the last time you saw a female ironworker, scaffolder, welder or crane operator – let alone hired one? Considering that the construction workforce comprises only about four to five per cent women, the sightings are probably few and far between.

All that is set to change, thanks to a partnership between two organizations aiming to solve two big societal and industry problems with one dynamic force: skilled women in the workforce.

BuildForce Canada and Women Building Futures (WBF) recently joined forces to lead more women into careers in construction, while helping to revitalize an industry that will experience a skills vacuum when baby boomers retire in droves over the next decade. The partnership will create awareness for job opportunities for women and promote the development of critical skills required for success.

“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 BuildForce Canada’s executive director, Rosemary Sparks.

WBF president, JudyLynn Archer, says joining the construction industry could instantly change a woman’s life.

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

It’s a match made in industry heaven.

WBF and BuildForce Canada have been working for years to create opportunities, training and awareness of careers in the industry. WBF is a leader in trades training for women in the heavy industrial workforce. They partner with employers across the country to attract, recruit, train and support women’s advancement into Canada’s construction and maintenance industry.

BuildForce Canada provides labour market information and training to ensure the industry has a sustainable, mobile workforce with the skills, knowledge and flexibility to meet the industry’s changing demands.

Their recent partnership is bolstered by a sense of urgency. Before the mass exodus of skilled workers begins, it’s imperative that their knowledge is transferred to replacements.

“These are seasoned people who’ve been in the industry for a good part of their lives. They are knowledgeable and have expertise that’s



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BUILDFORCE CANADA AND WBF



needed to deliver on the level of investment that Canada makes,” said Archer. “This needs to be passed on.”

She says the spectrum of jobs is massive, including “everything from carpentry to pipe fitting to crane operating to project managers, superintendents, workforce planners, estimators, health and safety officers. It’s a whole gamut of opportunities. The big challenge is the shortening window of time to make that knowledge transfer happen before they all retire.”

Women’s participation in construction historically low

Encouraging women to enter the trades industry is no easy task. 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,” she said.

In addition to awareness campaigns to attract women into this thriving industry, construction employers can help smooth the path to recruit eager new members of their workforce. Archer encourages employers to look beyond experience and gender and focus on well-trained, well-prepared candidates.

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






Site Preparation and Development | Sub-divisions | Road Building | Surface Water Drainage
 Sewer/Water Installations and Improvements | Stabilization Pond Construction and Repairs
 Commercial and Residential Installations

CALL TODAY: 204-344-5760
info@earthmax.ca www.earthmax.ca

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," she said. "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."

Women up to the job

North West Redwater (NWR) Partnership labour relations manager, Mike Yorke, has worked with a number WBF graduates for years, most recently in his work at the NWR Sturgeon Refinery in Alberta. He says he hires them at every opportunity.

"I've had a lot of success with the [WBF] graduates over the years...when we first started hiring [them], the feedback from supervision was overwhelmingly positive. Primarily the grads that we've hired in the last year have been apprentice ironworkers, apprentice scaffolders and apprentice carpenters," he said.

He admits that the initial reaction from contractors is often hesitation.

"Construction managers are not big risk takers and there was a bit of reluctance with the first group of ironworkers we brought on-site back in May. Eight months later, when we needed to bring in a group of scaffolders, the two primary contractors specifically requested the WBF graduates. We were like, 'We'll take them all.'"



How will WBF and BuildForce Canada attract women to the workforce?

The partnership between BuildForce Canada and WBF aims to create more of these watershed moments across the industry and the country. While a full business plan will be rolled out in 2017, they're aiming to accomplish a number of goals, including:

- Delivering a national awareness campaign that positions careers in construction and maintenance as a first-choice career and lifestyle option for women, including targeted campaigns focusing on Indigenous women
- Developing and providing resources to help women explore the opportunities the world of trades offers, assess their interest, readiness and commitment to pursue this career path

PRODUCTION

ACCURACY

RELIABILITY

DIVERSITY

STAY ON GRADE WITH

SITECH

YOUR CONSTRUCTION TECHNOLOGY PROVIDER

Call: 306-550-8165

Email: nathan.duncan@sitech-wc.ca

www.sitech-wc.ca

“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.”

– Rosemary Sparks, Executive Director,
BuildForce Canada



- Providing training programs and coaching services to help women enter and advance a career in trades
- Providing “start to finish” service – from career exploration to foundational learning through to being hired

The two organizations are also focused on identifying the core competencies workers need to be successful as the industry is re-charging with a new labour force.

“BuildForce’s tentacles into industry are helping us develop a competency model that helps meet needs of industry and women,” said Archer.

How can SHCA members attract more women workers?

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 not doing that.”

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.

“We’re very interested in talking with employers and employer associations that are interested in welcoming more women into their workforce,” said Archer. “The women we’re training on behalf of the heavy construction industry love the work. We can certainly help meet any labour needs in this area.”

She notes that WBF often leverages the Canada Job Grant on behalf of employers to address their workforce needs. It includes recruiting and training new people, upskilling existing employees and often covers two-thirds of the cost of training.

“It’s a huge boon to companies looking to upskill or begin recruiting new people,” said Archer. 



BARGER
quality parts **Bp** *since 1981!*
PARTS INC



**One Stop Shop For All
Your Equipment Needs**

Crushing Parts • Screening Parts
Conveying Parts • Wear Parts
Undercarriage Parts/Cutting Edges

11458 Winterburn Road NW, Edmonton, AB T5S 2Y3
Phone: (866) 434-6700 • Email: info@bargerparts.com • www.bargerparts.com

VENTURE CONSTRUCTION INC.
MARTENSVILLE, SK
PHONE: 306-242-1125
EMAIL: VENCON@SASKTEL.NET