

Bright futures in trade careers

While your latte might be served by someone with a BA, it's unlikely you'll find someone trained in the trades settling for a McJob

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There's a scene in the movie *Moonstruck* where a suitor hoping to court Cher's married mother regards her New York family home with awe. "My gawd, it's a mansion," he says. "What exactly does your husband do?"

"He's a plumber," replies Olympia Dukakis, who plays the mother.

"Oh, well that explains it," says the suitor.

It's a scene parents and teens alike might revisit as they plot a career strategy in a world that seems to favour academics over trades and technical training. While proud parents are pushing their children into careers in law and medicine, they may be overlooking the success stories in traditional trade careers.

They cover everything from framing, to forming to finishing, and many other trades in a wide range of areas. Schools and apprenticeship programs can't turn skilled grads out fast enough.

"There's a huge shortage," said M.J. Whitmarsh, CEO of the Canadian Homebuilders Association of B.C., which counts 1,053 companies on its membership roster. "There is a bidding war for workers, especially in framing and drywall."

While your latte might be served by someone with a BA or your cab driver has a PhD, it's unlikely you'll find someone who has trained in trades settling for a McJob.

Grads such as Jason Adams, 23, who finished earning his plumbing and gasfitting credentials through the B.C. Institute of Technology and then the Pacific Vocational College only last December, finds there aren't enough hours in the day to meet his hectic schedule.

"I regularly do 13-hour days and there is as much work for me as I want," said Adams makes about \$22 an hour and regularly clears \$1,5(10 to \$2,(X)) on his biweekly paycheque.

"I get to work whenever I want, however long I want," said Adams, who turned to trades when he discovered he'd need to go to college before trying to get into his first career choice, policing. The four years of training included school and apprentice work and Adams made it by living in Chilliwack and commuting to town for courses and work.

"A lot of times I felt like abandoning it because I could have worked at McDonald's and made more money, but I stuck with it, because I knew once I earned my apprenticeship I'd be set for life," he said. "I'm glad I did."

Adams is not alone in having more work than he can handle. In a field in which demand heavily out-weighs supply, skilled trades people can afford to be choosy. I remember calling a plumber as a new homeowner. He drove a Jaguar, my first clue this job wasn't all about digging ditches and eking out a survival wage by fixing leaky faucets. My next clue came when he went out on his sailboat. Now friends talk about being interviewed by electricians and stealing framers from their relatives who have been lucky enough to find ones to work on their renovations.

Despite the jobs, our education system - even our society - doesn't give trades work the respect it garners in Europe and other countries. High-school students are groomed for university and academic learning, although only a minority emerge with a degree.

It's a gap that people such as Helen Roelofsen, a high school career counsellor who is active in the student apprenticeship program, are trying to address.

"We're gearing our schools to prepare students to go directly to university," said Roelofsen, while the reality is that a large percentage of high school grads don't go to university. Roelofsen and others regard the focus on university and white-collar jobs as a product of our culture.

Many families equate a collar-and-tie job with success and perceive working with one's hands as a step back.

"The non-university careers are a very much lower priority for students, parents and educators," said Kerry Jothen, chief executive of Human Capital Strategies and author of several reports on skills shortages. "The No. 1 barrier is the image of trades, the lack of awareness and lack of promotion."

"Trades jobs are considered dirty, not well-paid, as being for dummies. They have much lower prestige here, whereas in Europe and other jurisdictions people in the trades are treated as professionals."

Paul Arcoite, owner of North Vancouver's Urban Settler Antique Co., which specializes in early Canadian reproduction and original furniture manufacturing and refinishing, receives plenty of applications when he advertises for skilled cabinetmakers, but the applicants are not qualified.

"It's tough to find young people in the trades," he said. "They're not funnelled into trades. When I was in high school, we weren't encouraged to go into trades."

Arcoite said many young people don't realize they may make more money working in the trades than sitting behind a desk. "I know a lot of successful trades people who are making a very good living," he said.

Arne Johansen, trade improvement coordinator for the Ironworkers Local 97 and chairman of the B.C. and Yukon Building and Construction Trades Council's apprenticeship program, said it's not unusual for members to make \$1(X),000 or more annually and \$100,000 US-plus if they choose to travel. "I can think of no better avenue to be paid while you're learning and earn a set of papers, or a set of credentials that will allow you to travel essentially worldwide if you want to," Johansen said of the apprenticeship program.

<p>Journeyman (and journeywomen) in Canada who are qualified in a particular trade have a Red Seal qualification, which is recognized across Canada. except in Quebec. Although the program isn't international, Johansen said in places like the U.S., Europe and Australia, "there are people who understand what it represents and your path is a little easier to travel."</p> <p>"You can make a very good living, it's very enjoyable, it's very rewarding, it's challenging and like anything else you get out of it what you put into it," he said.</p> <p>For Chris Gautreau, learning a trade hailed him out of the flagging tourism industry in the post-Sept. 11 slump. A banquet server then, Gautreau was searching for more work when his hours were cut as one convention after the next cancelled. Arcoite hired him as a trainee and in little more than a year, Gautreau has developed skill as a furniture refinisher. He plans to pursue the trade with more education. Although Arcoite isn't a skilled trades worker himself, he always liked working with his hands and after he graduated in economics from university, he combined that with his passion for antiques to open the Urban Settler. "The best combination is to learn a trade, then pursue college or university," said Arcoite.</p> <p>It's a thought that has occurred to educators at the B.C. Institute of Technology, where they are taking steps to link trades qualifications to academic credentials. "One of our goals is to link to the academic world, so someone can become a tradesperson first . then go into the academic world," said George Douglas, BCIT's dean of trades development. "That has been one of the barriers for people entering a trade. If you wanted to move ahead in your career, when you completed your trades qualifications, you had to start again:'</p> <p>BCIT is establishing a diploma program in trades training to address that. "Mono and dad may be paying for Joe or Mary to go to university, but alternatively, Joe or Mary could work through a trades program and come out half-way towards a degree;" said Douglas. "It will help to change the cultural perception of the wades."</p> <p>Douglas said that as trades people are reaching their late 40s and 50s, there is pressure to produce new skilled grads.</p>	<p>"The trend is clearly towards a shortage of skilled trades people," he said. "Our culture is not one that has embraced trades as a career, not the same way we have embraced university education."</p> <p>BCIT has waiting lists for many programs, but Douglas said places are added to meet demand when possible. "We try not to have extended waiting lists," he said. "We see them as a healthy sign. but we like to get people through."</p> <p>At Vancouver Community College, another class has been added to the automotive technician program in an effort to lower the 1'2--year waiting list.</p> <p>"The shops are crying for really good people," said Phil Johnston, department head for the automotive technician program. "There is a shortage and there will be a bigger shortage coming."</p> <p>Students take a one-year program then serve an apprenticeship before writing exams to earn their licence. "It will take a minimum of four years to earn their licence and after you get your licence, it's takes a minimum of 10 years to be really good," said Johnston.</p> <p>With experienced mechanics retiring, that leaves a skills gap. Johnston ,aid newcomers can't be expected to fill the experience void left by retirees. "Guys retiring have been it for 25 to 30 years." he said. "It's like pilots; before you start flying 747s, you start by flying the small stuff."</p>	
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