

Construction industry questions new industry training model

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Some members of British Columbia's construction community feel the B.C. Liberal government has hammered the industry. With a bona fide shortage of skilled labour already stinging the sector, many believe a change in apprenticeship training could exacerbate the problem. For years, training for the trades has been overseen by the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC). The organization received its pink slip last year, and a new model is under consideration.

"We know that the change will impact the construction industry" says Brenda Hardy, president of the Construction Association of Victoria. "We just don't know what the new model will look like."

MLAs have refused comment and calls have been ignored, Hardy says. "The construction industry has offered to help. It's a very complex situation, and maybe the government acted too quickly."

When ITAC was disbanded after its core review in Jan. 2002, its managing budget totaled \$70 million, says former CEO of ITAC and now CEO of Human Capital Strategies Kerry Jochen. Currently 16,000 apprentices are scattered around the province, and at least half are in construction.

"Apprenticeship needs a new model. I agree with what the government is doing. The former model was too old, and apprenticeship needs to move ahead into the 21st century. Some risks need to be taken," Jochen says.

He claims the governance may have been too bureaucratic. "With a board of 25 people, the pace was too slow. There were too many interests."

But some contend that perhaps the government "threw out the baby with the bath water". "The training system we had worked well, maybe too well," says Brian Scroggs, chairman of Farmer Construction Ltd.

The company will train its own people, if necessary, Scroggs says, adding: "Government can't train people anyway. Only business can train."

While a new system may serve the needs of other sectors of the economy, construction is unique, says Keith Sashaw, president of the Vancouver Regional Construction Association. "It's a multi-site, multiemployer industry; and that makes it all problematic. The construction industry requires mobility of the workforce, so there must be established credentials that cut across the industry:"

Sashaw allows that efficiencies could have been added to the existing apprenticeship training system.

To assess sentiments within the province, forums were held in eight cities. A discussion paper was also circulated. "We received a lot of feedback, and now we're putting it together at the drawing board," says a spokesman for the Ministry of Advanced Education. "Enabling legislation will follow."

In the interim, the status quo will reign, the spokesman says. A transition advisory committee will monitor apprentices already in the system, until a new model is finalized. Initial information can be accessed through the Central Industry Training Centre in the Lower Mainland. A Web site is also available.

"The changes are intended to make it easier and better for apprentices and employers," the ministry spokesman says. "For example, an apprenticeship may last three instead of four years. Or, instead of a work stoppage to attend courses, an individual may be able to take courses online. The idea is to speed the process."