

Construction Association: Career Opportunities

When I am talking to high school students about their futures, the most common theme I hear is, "I am going to go University and then leave the province", and not necessarily in that order. To me that is about as archaic as "After high school, I want to get married and have babies". Don't get me wrong, none of these goals are that bad, but have they really thought about all the great alternatives that are out there and the huge potentials that they contain.

I am a huge supporter of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon in particular. We live in one of the richest areas in the world. Just last week, two canola plants were announced to be built, Cargill is also expanding their plant at Floral. Why here? Because Saskatchewan is one of the best canola growing regions in the world. Great farm land and if you try to grow it south of the border, climate reduces the quality. Virtually every potash mine here is under expansion right now, and there is even talk of a brand new mine. Uranium: we supply 10% of the US energy requirements. Even with the expansion of our mines, we will need added capacity to meet the ever increasing demands of the world for this energy. Oil, do you think the tar sands stop at the border? No, we have huge deposits with a higher percentage of oil than in Alberta. Diamonds: We have proven reserves waiting for the major world players to begin mining and processing. Raw earth deposits were found in our north, the only other one is in China. Gold, salt, coal, the list goes on and on. What other place in the world has so much wealth in natural riches. Look at the growth in Saskatoon, our Synchrotron, the major construction at the University and Innovation place. This and all the infrastructure to support all this growth.

And who builds this, the people in the construction industry. Never has there been a better time to start a career in construction. But we keep hearing, "I am going to University, my old man stood steel, pounded nails or laid brick for over 30 years, but I am going to make something better out of my life!" Did they ever think that maybe their Dad enjoyed his life? That he felt pride in his work, and every day he was able to look at what he did and saw a tangible result. He can drive by a school, a Superstore and say I helped build that building and part of his soul will always be there. Through his career in construction, he was able to create a great living for his family.

I also hear the converse, "I want my kids to stay in school, not have to bust their butt their whole life". Our parents have this idea, and I did too, that by getting a degree somehow life for their kids will be easier and more rewarding. Poppycock! If you want to view success, look at our industry. Virtually every trade and general contracting firm was started by a tradesman. Jim, who started JNE Welding took a pre-employment welding course, got fired from his first job because his employer thought he would never amount to anything. He became one of the best welders in the province and now owns a firm that does \$20,000,000 a year in business and employs 100 people. One of the leaders in our industry started as a laborer using a shovel with a local paving firm. He rose through the ranks of that company to become an operator, foreman, key manager and part owner of this firm. He also rose through the ranks of our associations to become the president of the Saskatchewan Construction Association and the Canadian Construction Association.

Degrees do not guarantee success. It is what you want to do with your life. The construction industry is a great leveling field. A good comparison is two individuals; both are employee/shareholders for a local large construction firm. One graduated as an engineer and got his first job with this firm. He was sent to the field for a couple years to “learn the facts of life” before he was moved into the office to work on estimates and act as a project manager. The second gentleman started his career about the same time as the first one started university. He became a journeyman carpenter for a small firm. He was moved into the office to help with estimates and project management. He had a wonderful employer who was also a great mentor. When a job opening came up to join a larger firm, his employer encouraged him to take advantage of the opportunity. He soon headed up the Saskatoon office of this company and became a shareholder. There came a time when he decided to change companies. He now was able to negotiate a great position with a larger firm. He now handles special projects and loves his career. Both gentlemen are at the same level in the firm but the carpenter is the current President of the Saskatchewan Construction Association.

A lot of people do want to move to the office for management, estimating or purchasing. Other workers would rather remain as craftsman. They enjoy working directly on their projects rather than pushing paper. They love what they do, so why change. A good example is my wife’s brother in-law, a journeyman carpenter. After working in construction for a few years, he got a job at the university in their carpentry shop. Now he gets to build that beautiful oak furniture and fixtures for the university. Wally, just retired, just loved to stand steel structures. Either road, as a tradesman or support staff, will lead to great life.

Don’t send me those kids that you feel can’t make it in secondary school. I want your best and your brightest. I want the ones who have the will and want to succeed. But I will take them all. There is a place in construction for every level, and with greater pay and better job satisfaction than any other industry. I want the women. Like I said construction is a great leveling field, you are recognized for what you can produce. Equality isn’t an issue and women can assume leadership roles. Hilda is the highly respected as head of Merit Contractors Association or our controller, Brenda, the one everyone comes to in our company for leadership.

Now one of the images of construction is that the work is seasonal. To be honest, most isn’t. We can’t afford to work only in summer; we need year around production to make it profitable. Some work, like paving, can only be done in certain temperatures. We can’t afford to lose good trained men so seasonal wages and with overtime make their yearly income well worth their while to maintain this profession. The image of construction with the plumbers crack, bullying foreman or unkempt people is no more. We are professionals who look and act that way.

Wages are important. Starting salaries are much better than any other entry level work. With overtime, and there always is overtime, yearly take-home pay is significant. Top level tradesman can expect around \$50,000 to \$70,000 per year and some make much

more. Entry level is about \$25 to \$35,000 per year. It took me 10 years after I went back to tech school to equal the money I made driving truck for ASL. Plus I had to pay off my student loans and I lost income for two years

The methods of construction work are constantly changing. New technology brings in better equipment and different materials. The best firms are seeking out new ways and training their people to be their best. Safety is also paramount. Injuries are too expensive, but more importantly we want our colleges to be safe and injury free. Safety training, safety manuals, safe procedures are all becoming the norm.

Drugs and alcohol. What a waste. Firstly, drug testing for employment is becoming more prevalent. We won't hire people who have failed a drug test. Secondly and more important is, if they are abusing drugs, then they are holding themselves back. Their careers simple will not flourish. One of the best benefits of construction is that you are making good money right away, not having to out lay huge sums to get a degree. If you can restrain yourself by saving and investing some money, your lifetime income will exceed a doctor's. If you choose to blow it every week-end, you will be living hand to mouth no matter what you make.

How do you get a job in construction? After high school, I failed getting a construction job. I had no concept of what they wanted, felt that I was totally unskilled and too small to ever to get a job there. I did not know that I had the best references in Canada. What was that? I was a farm kid. Talk about your endangered species. What are the next two, small town kids, then Saskatchewan raised, and the last comment I heard from Australia, "Of course will hire you, you Canadians work much harder than the locals". What is the common theme, work ethic. Farm kids have shown that they have the experience of how to get things done; the ability to problem solve, time management and how to utilize the resources you at hand. You don't get this from video games or even a soccer pitch. So what do you have to do to get a job in construction? Tenacity, the more experience you have, the easier it is to get a job. There are lots of jobs available, but they might not be your first choice. As your experience increases, so does your value. Every skill you learn will get you that better job that you want. Nothing is wasted. One of the things I have found is that broad background knowledge is essential. It doesn't matter if you are an accountant or welder, the more knowledge you have about all aspects of construction, the more valuable you are to your employer. Just remember to keep yourself focused on your goal, and you will make it.

Thank-you for your invitation and interest in hearing about careers in construction.