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An employer's guide to best practices
for hiring & retaining tradeswomen[®]

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For those who hire, supervise or work directly with tradeswomen.

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For HR, OHS leaders, organizational leaders and managers.



Contact Women Building Futures today!

The secret is out...
Discover what many savvy employers already know.

“Women are more than capable of doing the work. Anybody that’s ignoring half of the workforce is doing themselves a disavour.”

– Ron Genereux
Past President of Construction Owners Association of Alberta
Vice President, Construction of Suncor Energy

An Employer’s Guide to Best Practices for Hiring & Retaining Tradeswomen® is designed to increase the hiring and retention of tradeswomen by raising awareness of the critical factors that affect the success of female workers. It offers a straightforward approach to attracting more women into the construction sector and creating a workplace environment that will help retain them.



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//// Definitions

The following definitions describe some of the terms used throughout this guide:

Construction sector

For the purposes of this guide, the term “construction” includes residential, commercial, institutional and industrial construction, operations and maintenance; as well as mining, infrastructure, roadbuilding and other related industries.

Workplace culture

The assumptions, attitudes, roles and norms that shape the work environment. It is often informal, unwritten and unspoken.

Workplace norms

The expected pattern of behaviour in a workplace.



//// Introduction

The looming retirement of “baby boomer” tradespeople, coupled with economic recovery and project announcements in other provinces, means that Alberta’s supply of skilled labour may not meet future construction sector demands. As a result, immediate action is required to source and train all available workers, including women. Though employers have stated they are interested in including more women in their workforce, the rate of employment and retention of women in the construction sector is far from ideal and does not meet the potential.

(The State of Women in Construction in Canada, Construction Sector Council, 2010).

*Women are
interested
and they can
do the job.*

Business Case

The Demand

In the future, the construction sector in Alberta will require access to all sources of skilled workers, including women, to meet workforce requirements. Current and future outlooks continue to forecast labour shortages as a result of aging populations and economic growth. It is projected that by 2016, the annual growth of the labour force in Canada will be near zero. As a result, Alberta's Occupational Demand and Supply Outlook projects a cumulative shortage of 77,000 workers for Alberta by 2019.

A Local Labour Supply

Currently, women represent approximately 4-6 per cent of the construction workforce, yet they make up 50.7 per cent of the Canadian workforce.¹

More women than ever are expressing an interest in skilled trades careers. A national survey published by The Construction Sector Council in February 2010² showed that 18 per cent of the 1,290 women aged 18-34 years who were surveyed were fairly or very likely to consider a career in trades or construction management.

Interest is particularly high among women in Alberta. Over an 18-month period, 3,300 Alberta women expressed interest in participating in a program that provides information about opportunities for women in the construction sector and helps women determine their aptitude for this type of work.

There are approximately 357,580 women between 20-34 years of age in Alberta.³ If only 1.5 per cent of those women were to choose a career in construction, it would give the construction sector immediate access to almost 5,550 additional workers. Without question, women represent a large pool of potential workers for Alberta's construction industry.

Many women have the aptitude and the interest to succeed in the construction sector – Alberta is already experiencing success from recruiting well-prepared tradeswomen. For example, 90 per cent of women who complete the Women Building Futures pre-trades training program secure and retain employment in their trade of choice. Clearly there is a strong business case for hiring women who have made an informed decision to enter the trades and who have the focus, aptitude and determination required for success.

¹ Labour Force Survey Release, October 8, 2010, Statistics Canada

² State of Women in Construction, February, 2010, Construction Sector Council pg. 3

³ 2006 Census, Statistics Canada



Alberta could have immediate access to more than 5,500 workers.

Corporate Commitment

Companies that have launched strategic initiatives to attract and retain tradeswomen report the following steps as important to their success:

- > Make the recruitment and retention of tradeswomen a strategic organizational priority.
- > Establish a company-wide team that is focused on recruiting women and helping them to fit in to the organization.
- > Participate in and champion awareness training for employees.
- > Implement a mentorship program.
- > Develop a work plan to recruit and retain women which has clear goals, timelines and performance indicators.
- > Communicate the plan and goals across the organization.
- > Monitor and report progress.
- > Make sure those who interview and hire have a positive attitude about women in the trades.
- > Have resources readily available for women who have an interest in pursuing a career as a trades professional.



Recruitment

Hiring women as tradespeople isn't difficult. But it is in everyone's best interest to make sure they have prior experience or skill training and the safety certification needed to be successful in your workplace.

Getting Your Message Heard

**Do your recruitment attempts tend to attract mostly male applicants?
If so, try the following:**

- > Clearly indicate that the company is serious about recruiting women.
- > Use pictures of real tradeswomen from your company (rather than models or stock photography) in your promotional material.

Place your promotional material where women will see it, such as:

- > Women's trades training organizations
- > Women's community organizations
- > Trade schools
- > Community bulletin boards
- > Fitness and recreation centres

*“Every successful female hire
helps prove the case for more.”*

– JudyLynn Archer, President and CEO of Women Building Futures



Retention

It is a well-known fact that it costs more to recruit a new employee than it does to keep the ones you have. In an environment of looming labour shortages, devoting resources to workforce development and retention makes good sense.

While there is limited data available about the number of women who enter the trades and the number who leave on an annual basis, construction sector professionals believe the turnover among women is higher than men. Documented reasons about why women leave often have little to do with their skills or interest in the trade, but most often have to do with a lack of understanding about the workplace environment and culture.

Women want to fit in, learn their trade and become strong team players. They don't want special treatment. When asked how they want to be treated on the work site, most tradeswomen emphasize their desire to blend in – any practice that draws attention to them is unwanted.

Be proactive if you notice changes in an employee who otherwise has been performing well, such as:

- > A sudden request for a transfer
- > A sudden resignation by a female employee
- > Refusal to work with a certain individual
- > High absenteeism or a sudden change in the rate of absenteeism
- > Sudden changes in the quality of an employee's work
- > Verbal and physical altercations between employees
- > Segregation of one employee
- > Increased work site accidents or near misses





//// Best Practices

Tradeswomen who leave the construction sector often do so because they were not prepared for the workplace environment and culture. This guide presents 12 best practices that will help construction employers recruit and retain more women.

1. Try to hire women who have completed a pre-trades training program or have relevant experience.
2. When interviewing, ask everyone the same questions.
3. Understand and communicate your workplace environment and culture.
4. Post and implement a workplace respect policy.
5. Provide a comprehensive site and safety orientation.
6. Provide safety training and properly-fitting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
7. Adjust communication style to suit the situation and the person.
8. Treat issues of harassment seriously and immediately.
9. Register new recruits as apprentices and support the timely completion of their apprenticeship.
10. Apply job expectations to all employees consistently.
11. Evaluate tradeswomen fairly, without reflecting on past negative experiences.
12. Provide *She Works*® training (or equivalent) for those who hire, supervise or work directly with tradeswomen – include human resources professionals.

Try to hire women who have completed a pre-trades training program or have relevant experience.

Pre-trades training or relevant experience helps reduce orientation time, accidents and costly employee turnover. It also helps women earn the respect of their co-workers more quickly because they can demonstrate a familiarity with the industry and the job requirements. Some pre-trades training programs also include a workplace culture orientation that teaches women what to expect in a predominantly male workplace. This is something to ask potential candidates about and to look for on a resumé.

Pre-trades programs are offered by a number of organizations and institutions in Alberta, including:

- > Bow Valley College
- > Grande Prairie Regional College
- > Lakeland College
- > Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)
- > Olds College
- > Red Deer College
- > Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT)
- > Women Building Futures

When interviewing, ask everyone the same questions.

The decision to enter the construction sector is typically not one that women make lightly. If the candidate has previous experience or has successfully completed a pre-trades program, you can safely assume that the candidate has made an informed career choice and can be seriously considered for the job.

- > **Ask questions that are directly connected with the applicant's ability to perform the job and fit in with the workplace environment and culture.**
- > **Ask about transferable skills. While the potential hire may not have previous on-site experience, she may have other experience that demonstrates the skills and competencies you require in your workers.**
- > **Refer unsuccessful candidates to a pre-trades training program. This will give the candidate a better opportunity to prepare for success and potentially, return with the appropriate skills and competencies.**

//// Understand and communicate your workplace environment and culture.

Research shows that employers and tradeswomen report similar findings about what's not working:

- > **Women most often identify challenges related to personal safety, understanding job expectations and dealing with workplace culture realities.**
- > **Employers most often identify challenges related to women not understanding workplace realities and expectations.**

Assumptions, attitudes, roles and norms shape the culture of a workplace. Workplace culture is often informal, unwritten, unspoken and can be affected by the predominance of a gender group.

Because the majority of employees in the construction sector are men, the culture is male-oriented. Tradesmen easily adapt to this culture since it fits the traditional norms of their gender, and don't talk about it or write the "rules" down; they believe that everyone understands "how things

work around here." New recruits, especially women, may not understand this culture. This can lead to frustration and failure.

When orienting new tradeswomen, clearly explain your workplace culture and expectations, including:

- > **Formal and informal hierarchy**
- > **Start times, end times and breaks**
- > **How/when/who to ask for help**
- > **The role of the apprentice**
- > **Standards with regards to respect in the workplace and humour**

New female apprentices may benefit from workplace culture awareness training. Refer to the Women Building Futures Workplace Culture Awareness Program® for an excellent example – womenbuildingfutures.com.

//// Post and implement a workplace respect policy.

A workplace respect policy is an important step in addressing workplace culture and shifting norms that may be challenging to women (and others) entering the industry. Workplace respect policies promote a safe workplace by addressing violations of respect (i.e.: unprofessional conduct, harassment and workplace violence).

Productivity increases where workplace respect policies are established, practiced and enforced. When the work site is safe and respectful, communication is more effective and employees tend to be more productive. Improved workplace respect means site supervisors will spend less time managing workplace harassment issues and will have more time to focus on daily tasks.

For more information, refer to the COAA Workplace Respect Toolkit© at coaa.ab.ca/respect.

Provide a comprehensive site and safety orientation.

When creating a site and safety orientation, be sure to include:

- > Information and policies about safety, the workplace environment and culture, team behaviours and common practices that will help new employees to fit in more quickly.
- > A site map showing key locations (i.e. washrooms, muster areas, medical shacks, emergency equipment, break rooms, lockers).
- > A comprehensive tour of the work site.
- > Key emergency contact information.
- > Expectations regarding the new employee's role, specific safety and work procedures and relevant performance standards.
- > Acceptable standards of attire and conduct.
- > Introductions to co-workers and supervisors.

Supervisors and/or foremen should check in with new employees at the start and end of their shift (or more often if possible) during the first week of employment.

Note – new recruits may be reluctant to approach supervisors with questions or concerns because they often don't want to bring attention to the fact they don't know the answer. Encouraging open communication and questioning is vital to retaining new hires.

Provide safety training and properly-fitting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).



One of the primary safety concerns of women on job sites is improperly-fitting PPE. It is often designed for men and doesn't fit women well – which can present a safety hazard.

- > **Seek out suppliers that offer PPE designed for women. Many suppliers now have women's sizes available.**
- > **Make sure that all employees know how to appropriately handle hazardous material.**
- > **Provide clean and lockable washroom facilities.**
- > **Provide clear guidelines regarding safe work policies and practices – remember, new recruits may be reluctant to speak up.**
- > **Ensure new recruits know who to talk to about safety concerns.**

Adjust communication style to suit the situation and the person.

It is generally accepted that men and women learn and communicate differently. If the new female employee “isn’t getting it,” try explaining it in a different way or demonstrate what needs to be done. Like most new employees, she is trying hard to fit in and learn the job.

Your encouragement and support can make all the difference.

It is also generally accepted that men and women sometimes express frustration differently. For example, under pressure men’s voices can become loud or possibly there may be some swearing. Women may do these things as well, and women have also been known to cry when feeling frustrated or under pressure. Women do not wish to shed tears on the job and, if it does happen, will feel embarrassed. The best advice is to remember that for a woman, tears are often a sign of frustration or fear of failure and nothing more. Give her a moment and she will get back to the job at hand.

Overall, when providing direction or instruction to a new female employee, try to explain why it needs to be done a particular way. This is an important part of learning and will help make sure new employees do things the right way, from the start. **Encourage questions.**

Treat issues of harassment seriously and immediately.

Harassment, whether sexual or not, is often used to ostracize, bully or control another person.

It can take many forms, for example:

- > Insulting jokes
- > Workplace displays of sexual material
- > Vandalism of personal items
- > Intimidation and bullying
- > Crude comments
- > Physical confrontations

A zero tolerance approach supports both men and women on the job site.



Register new recruits as apprentices and support the timely completion of their apprenticeship.

Women want to fit in, learn their trade and be strong team players. They don't want special treatment.

Apprenticeship is the key to building a future trades workforce. Retiring journeymen can only be replaced through apprenticeship. According to the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum's *Return on Apprenticeship Training Investment for Employers*, every dollar spent on apprenticeship training results in a benefit of \$1.47 to the employer, or an average net return of \$0.47. Apprenticeship benefits employers.

Men and women are more likely to stay in the construction sector if they are given the opportunity to apprentice. Signing new recruits on as apprentices, and supporting the timely completion of their technical training, solidifies their commitment to the company and to their profession.

Apply job expectations to all employees consistently.

Keeping a woman on the job when she can't do the work is dangerous and damaging to the capable women that are already working in or looking to enter the world of construction.

The likelihood that women will be accepted and welcomed in the construction sector is almost solely related to the experiences employers have had with previous tradeswomen.

If she can't do the job, let her go – just as you would any other employee.

//// Evaluate tradeswomen fairly, without reflecting on past negative experiences.

Sometimes people make overall judgments about a group of people based on experiences with only a few people from that group. It is important to evaluate each female recruit based on her own merit, without stereotyping or reflecting on experiences with previous female hires.

//// Provide *She Works*® training (or equivalent) for those who hire, supervise or work directly with tradeswomen – include human resources professionals.

This guide provides basic information on 12 best practices for hiring and retaining tradeswomen. To expand learning, two workshops are available – one for those who hire, supervise or work directly with tradeswomen; and one for human resources professionals and other key workforce development decision-makers.

For workshop information and coaching support, contact Women Building Futures.

Resources

- > *Heavy Industrial Construction and Maintenance Workforce Challenges in Alberta; A Position Paper*. Construction Owners Association of Alberta. May 2011. coaa.ab.ca
- > Workplace Respect Toolkit®, Construction Owners Association of Alberta. coaa.ab.ca/respect
- > She Works: Best Practices Awareness Workshop® for those who hire, supervise or work directly with tradeswomen. womenbuildingfutures.com
- > She Works: Best Practices Awareness Workshop® for HR, OHS leaders, organizational leaders and managers. womenbuildingfutures.com
- > WBF Workplace Culture Awareness Program®. womenbuildingfutures.com
- > *Women in Construction Engagement Strategy, The State of Women in Construction in Canada, Women in Construction: Women's Symposium Report*. Construction Sector Council. csc-ca.org/en/catalog/recruitment/women
- > *Women in Trades Discussion Paper*, Dragana Vojakovic, 2008, Funded by the BC Industry Training Authority through the Labour Market Agreement between the Governments of British Columbia and Canada. itabc.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=1096

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WBF is an Alberta-based organization whose mandate is to position construction- and maintenance-related trades as “careers of choice” for women; and ensure that its graduates possess the skills, safety certification and work ethic they need in order to be successful. WBF attracts, trains and prepares women for success with a consistent job placement rate of 90 per cent or greater.

Find WBF at womenbuildingfutures.com.

The COAA Opportunities for Women in Construction Sub-Committee's mission is to enhance awareness that construction offers opportunity for women and that women are a viable resource for employers. This mission is attainable through learning and adapting best practices, enhancing supervisory training and increasing industry awareness.

Find COAA at coaa.ab.ca.

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