



MANITOBA  
CONSTRUCTION  
SECTOR COUNCIL



# WOMEN IN TRADES RETENTION STRATEGY

Manitoba Construction Sector Council



## Preamble

From young women's trades awareness events and post-secondary trades training programs, to employers of varying sizes, as well as government- and industry-funded women's organizations, the last 10 - 15 years have seen an increase in programming related to women in trades. The efforts in this regard have largely been on recruitment. Colleges, trade schools and industry have taken steps to increase interest and engagement on the part of women to consider trades and related occupations.

Combined with the current labour shortage, the dividends are great for those employers pursuing efforts to increase diversity hiring, particularly is it pertains to women in trades.

While the focus on recruitment is necessary and critical, there does not seem to be the corresponding energy placed on retention efforts.

According to the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, female apprenticeship registrations comprise approximately 4.5% in 2018. This number is national in scope and includes trades in construction, manufacturing and transportation. (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum Supporting Women in Trades (SWIT), 2018)

Despite a multitude of programs designed to create awareness and opportunity for skill development and other preparatory practices, the needle has not moved significantly in the count of women pursuing

trades careers including Red Seal certification in Manitoba.

In 2017 Skillplan coordinated research with several national and regional organizations that culminated in the *Enhancing the Retention and Advancement of Women in Trades in British Columbia: Final Report*. According to this report "women working in trades face a number of pervasive, systemic barriers that make it difficult for them to enter and remain in the trades as well as to advance in the sector." (Skillplan, 2017)

The barriers and challenges identified in the report and in fact, included in literature on the topic can be addressed by an increased focus on retention.

Recruitment without the complementary efforts on retention can lead to a "revolving door" of sorts. Some great career awareness and preparatory training programs have elevated the profile of trades careers among females from secondary school and up. Try-a-trade expositions, conferences and marketing campaigns highlighting tradeswomen are necessary and critical to building the talent pool from which employers can draw and improve the diversity make-up of their workforces. While many of these programs serve to open the door to entry of women in trades workplaces, retention efforts require the same energy.

In a recent article in Electrical Industry News Week, Reva Bond the Dean for SAIT's School of Construction indicates that while there is tremendous opportunity for the construction industry to grow a more diverse and inclusive work environment for

all, retention remains the biggest challenge to a “consistent or substantial increase in women in trades.” (Marchand, 2023)

The failure for industry to build strength around retention efforts can give the impression of “ticking a box”. Employers may claim success in the hiring of tradeswomen. However, if these women do not stay with the employer, industry or in the trades at all, the definition of success must be in question.

There exists a plethora of research on the matter of women in trades recruitment and retention – challenges and opportunities. This paper represents a review of the existing literature particularly on the topic of retention. Additionally, the Manitoba Construction Sector Council has engaged in dialogue on this topic at its Women in Trades Conferences and with tradeswomen working in the industry.

The resulting strategy is based on these conversations and on rigorous research on the subject of women in trades undertaken by a variety of organizations in Canada and the USA.

## Barriers

The challenges and barriers which tradeswomen face in pursuit of a career in trades and other related underrepresented occupations in the construction industry include:

- Persistent and ingrained gender-bias which leads to significant systemic barriers.

- Lack of policies and procedures for addressing cases of harassment and discrimination.
- Exclusionary practices that limit career advancement opportunities for women.
- A sense of isolation and disconnection given there are so few women working in the building trades.

In *Enhancing the Retention and Advancement of Women in Trades in British Columbia*, the report synthesizes findings related to barriers and challenges in a conceptual framework. This framework recognizes the multi-layered nature to these challenges in four areas (Skillplan, 2017):

- Individual knowledges, beliefs and attitudes;
- Interpersonal attitudes and behaviours of co-workers, family and peers;
- Organizational practices, policies, norms and standards;
- Macro-level structures, systems and cultural norms.

By recognizing the layered nature of these barriers and challenges, it becomes clear that a multi-layered approach to addressing them is necessary.

## RETENTION STRATEGY

A recruitment strategy is not complete without focus on retention. Organizations seeking to increase the representation of women in the skilled trades should ideally pursue efforts in the area of retention before embarking on recruitment activities. The retention strategy presented herein will only serve to strengthen the positive outcomes of a recruitment strategy.

Targeted diversity recruitment and retention require champions at the highest levels of the organization – the board, executive and all levels of leadership. Champions at these levels must promote the business case for women in trades and communicate a consistent message. In this strategy, we refer to the Champions in Leadership as an overarching element necessary for any strategy to be effective. The strategy also includes four critical pillars of success which are imbedded in the foundation of a respectful workplace. Planting these pillars on ground that is seeded with toxicity, cynicism and a lack of respect in its culture will not allow for the pillars to be effective.

### Champions in Leadership

For any DEI initiative to succeed, it needs champions at the highest levels of the organization speaking a consistent message: our efforts have a sound business case. When Manitoba Hydro embarked on its goal to increase the representation of Indigenous people in electrical trades careers, Senior Management and Executives including the President and CEO spoke a consistent message and they were genuine in doing so. Indigenous recruitment and retention were

essential for the company to reach its strategic goals. These objectives were imbedded in the Corporate Strategic Plan and were reflected in messaging.

The State of Women in Construction refers to several reports produced by Nova Scotia Hypatia Association and the WEE Society providing employers with support and guidance when implementing workplace diversity initiatives. While more than 13 years old, these points remain of critical importance to the success of any women in trade retention effort (Construction Sector Council, 2010):

- Get executive team commitment.
- Link diversity to the bottom line.
- Build the business case for diversity.
- Identify and develop diversity leadership.
- Create an organizational working group to lead the diversity initiative.
- Develop a diversity vision.
- Assess the current workplace culture.
- Develop a diversity strategy.
- Implement the strategies.
- Monitor, evaluate and adapt.

In dialogue with tradeswomen currently working in the sector, we learned that champions in senior leadership are largely supportive of efforts to promote inclusive, diverse and respectful workplaces. Company owners, boards and executive leadership may recognize the business case for the increased representation of women in trades and related occupations. While strategic plans and corporate goals may include such references, there continues to exist a significant gap in middle and front-line leadership. As a result, the direct supervisors and managers of frontline staff

are not effective in dealing with challenges associated with gender-bias, harassment and discrimination when they arise.

## Recommendations

- Develop the business case for improving the representation of tradeswomen in the workplace that communicates the value of their contribution.
- Consistently communicate the message internally and externally, particularly with supervisors, managers and front-line staff.
- Supervisory staff and managers across the organization participate in training

such as **Building Your HR Advantage**, as well as implicit bias, allyship and other training that supports equity, diversity and inclusion.

- Increase the representation of female leaders at all levels of the organization, particularly those functional areas that are largely underrepresented.
- Create a women-in-trades employee resource group (ERG) that can serve as both voice and sounding board with a communication channel directly to the senior leadership.





## Pillar 1: Education and Awareness

No real retention success can be enjoyed without the workforce itself being engaged and educated about the valued contribution of tradeswomen. Targeted recruitment can be a costly endeavor. Organizations should strive to protect that investment by ensuring the workforce is in a state of readiness for the inclusion of workers with diverse backgrounds. The literature on the topic of women in trades is rife with examples of tradeswomen entering workplaces that do not have the requisite degree of readiness. Too often they are not prepared in trade school for what they will face in the workplace. Excited for the opportunity to apply skills and begin their career, many tradeswomen have found themselves fighting an uphill battle without support. The stories range from social exclusion and isolation to direct discrimination and harassment. Women who have left the trades are more likely to leave due to workplace culture rather than difficulty with actually performing the job.

In A Future Worth Building: What Tradeswomen Say About the Change they

Need in the Construction Industry, tradeswomen leave well-paying, in-demand careers for common reasons: a workplace culture that does not support respectful behaviour and is permissive of discrimination and harassment. (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021)

According to one respondent cited in the report *“despite a lot of men who are great to work with the overall environment makes me miserable and exhausted. I want to feel valued and respected for my abilities. I can’t have that if I stay in the field.”*

At the heart of the challenge is a societal, ingrained gender bias that includes what constitutes “female” and “male” jobs.

When the Office to Advance Women Apprentices first launched its Manitoba Office in 2019, the Project Coordinator addressed a board comprised exclusively of men representing labour unions across the construction industry. When she introduced the Office and its mandate, one of the men shared a view which is not uncommonly held: “We do not need this program. Women don’t want these (construction) jobs. They have to face long hours, dirty work and no daycare.”

This view came up time and time again and it comes up in the stories shared by tradeswomen. This enduring belief that “these are not jobs for women” remains prevalent in the construction culture.

The Institute for Women’s Policy Research in the United States surveyed more than 2500 women working in construction for their report. (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021) Nearly half of the women

surveyed (47.7%) reported that they are treated differently from their male counterparts including being held to a different standard, facing discrimination and in some cases, outright hostile environments. Most respondents (59.4%) indicated that have experienced harassment based on gender while working in construction.

Implicit bias training can be effective in helping Journeypersons, supervisors and managers who assign work, deliver training and skill development, performance manage and provide advancement opportunities. Doing so creates an opportunity to reflect on one’s biases and recognize how such biases may be impeding a tradeswoman’s ability to progress in her trade.

The Manitoba Construction Sector Council has partnered with several national organizations to develop and deliver training to engage male workers and supervisors in their role as ally. Considered a best practice, BC Women in Trades have partnered with the BC Lions CFL football club to deliver More Than a Bystander training that aims to reduce gender violence. The YWCA Halifax has implemented Shift Change; an allyship program that focuses on working with male supervisors to shift workplace culture. Opportunities to participate in Manitoba-based programming will be available in 2024.

## Recommendations

Before embarking on targeted diversity recruitment, employers must ensure that

the workforce is ready and open to the inclusion of tradeswomen. By ensuring workplace readiness for diversity and inclusion, employers are in a better position to protect their recruitment investments.

- Undertake workforce analysis with a view to determining diversity readiness.
- Ensure all employees have a thorough understanding of the business case – the “why” of diversity recruitment efforts (meeting labour demands, increasing the competitive advantage, growth and expansion, etc.)
- Provide implicit bias training, particularly for individuals engaged in training and development and performance management.
- Build a cadre of allies to support diversity efforts by delivering allyship training.



## Pillar 2: Social Network

Because the numbers of women currently working in underrepresented trades is relatively low, it is not uncommon for a tradeswoman to be the only woman on her

crew or even the only tradeswoman in the organization. This can result in a sense of loneliness and disconnection. Building a social network where tradeswomen feel a sense of belonging and connection to the workplace is critical for retention.

Workplaces across industries have affinity or employee resource groups (ERG) for employees to find connection with others with shared experiences. The Royal Bank of Canada has a wide variety of ERGs representing gender, culture and generations. It may be difficult for smaller organizations to realistically implement even one ERG. As such, an industry-wide women in trades affinity group may meet the broad needs of small to larger organizations.

Currently, three Manitoba Sector Councils (film, construction and manufacturing) are collaborating on a broad social network for tradeswomen and women in other underrepresented roles with expected implementation by March 2024. This effort is part of the larger project EmpowHer which is a women in trades training program funded by the Province of Manitoba through the Sector Council Program Next Level Collaboration Project Fund.

## Recommendations

- Create opportunities for tradeswomen across the organization or industry to gather, share and provide one another with support.
- Provide employees paid time off to participate in an ERG.

- Develop a channel of communication from the tradeswomen ERG to the executive level leadership of the organization so that executives can receive feedback about organizational culture and improvement opportunities.



## Pillar 3: Mentorship

The literature is clear on the need for mentorship to support the retention of women in trades. Mentorship helps to create connection for the women but also creates opportunities for working through challenging situations, skill development and career progression. Both professional networks as well as formal and informal mentorship can be effective in addressing interpersonal barriers that tradeswomen face in the workplace. (Skillplan, 2017) A robust mentorship program that includes the training of both mentors and mentees, clearly articulated roles and responsibilities and a dedicated resource to facilitating pairing and supporting both parties can be effective in supporting retention.

Larger organizations may have the necessary internal resources to develop and implement a mentorship program internally. For those organizations lacking in the resources, it would be of benefit to create an industry-wide mentorship program that can be tied to the women in trades social network.

Currently, three Manitoba Sector Councils (film, construction and manufacturing) are collaborating on a mentorship program for tradeswomen and women in other underrepresented roles with expected implementation by March 2024. This mentorship program will include training, pairing and support.

Feedback from tradeswomen we spoke with indicate that mentors do not need to be female. Some tradeswomen have found support and helpful advice from male counterparts who have assumed the role of mentor.

The CWB Foundation Women of Steel™ Forging Forward program which is designed to “encourage more women to choose careers in welding and welding-related industries,” recognizes the need for mentorship as a critical element to the success of the program. WOS includes a Canada-wide Mentorship Network. (CWB Welding Foundation, 2023)

The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum in partnership with the Office to Advance Women Apprentices and the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium (EMC) have launched the National Mentor Development Program for Women in the Skilled Trades. This program will provide interested

mentors with the opportunity to engage in effective strategies and acquire practical skills to be mentors in their workplaces.

## Recommendations

- Develop a rigorous mentorship program that will pair mentors and mentees on a volunteer basis.
- Assign dedicated resources to training and supporting participants and monitoring and evaluating the mentorship program.



## Pillar 4: Organizational Infrastructure

Many of the challenges experienced by tradeswomen that can impact their decisions to stay with an organization or trade, have their roots in systems. Some systemic challenges can be addressed through the review of existing policies and procedures with a view to eliminating systems that create barriers and strengthening those that support inclusion.

According to much of the research on the matter of women in trades, the stories are consistent. When women experience

discrimination, harassment and bullying, too often there are no policies in place to deal with it or the workplace itself does not have enough rigor to effectively deal with the situation in a meaningful way.

The literature is clear on the need for a rigorous policy structure to ensure employees behave appropriately in the workplace and that behaviour inconsistent with the policy is addressed appropriately.

“In cases of bullying and harassment, many participants described receiving no or inadequate support from foremen, supervisors, or apprentice sponsors and – most importantly – no or inadequate support from individuals in a position of power or authority.” (Skillplan, 2017)

“Respondents also report being frustrated about the lack of effective follow-up when issues are raised”. Approximately 39% of respondents in this survey indicated that felt that they were not taken seriously when raising issues and as a result, contemplated or decided to leave the industry. (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021)

Gender-biased organization practices, policies, norms and standards present challenges and barriers to the retention and advancement of tradeswomen. The inherent gender-bias shows itself in all phases of the tradeswoman’s career from pre-apprenticeship (starting the career on uneven footing compared to male peers); apprenticeship (discriminatory recruitment and hiring practices preventing women entry and advancement in their trade); and, journey (discriminatory hiring and advancement practices as well as policies

and practices that fail to address harassment as well as gender-specific health and safety concerns on job sites). (Skillplan, 2017)

Employers must take seriously the reports of cases of discrimination, harassment and bullying. There must be mechanisms in place for effective investigation and redress. It should be noted that educational institutions responsible for training the next generation of tradespeople have as much responsibility as employers in recognizing and addressing gender-bias in the classroom. Too often, inappropriate and gender-based discrimination is not dealt with at the training level, allowing new entrants to the workplace to carry unchecked biases into industry.

A rigorous respectful workplace policy complete with meaningful enforcement mechanisms will support the retention of tradeswomen. Further, it can create a workplace that is inclusive of all employees and allow people to come to work in psychologically safe environments where they can thrive and leadership can protect its human capital investment.

## Recommendations

- Undertake a review of existing human resource policies, procedures, practices and norms from recruitment to retention and advancement.
- Ensure there is a rigorous respectful workplace policy in place that:
  - clearly defines discrimination, bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment;

- is tied to policies on progressive discipline and other consequences;
- clearly defines reprisal and ensures any acts of retribution for reporting a complaint are seriously dealt with;
- ensures each case is investigated.
- Employees including front-line supervisory staff and management receive training in the areas of implicit bias, human rights in the workplace, and building a respectful workplace culture, to name a few.

## CONCLUSION

Canada is facing labour shortage in the skilled trades and as such, it is critical for the construction sector to continue to expand the talent pool from which they will draw current and future workers. Recruitment efforts and awareness activities to promote career opportunities in the industry should continue with targeted recruitment of underrepresented populations, such as women. However, equally imperative is the need to focus efforts on workplace culture and eliminating the systemic barriers that prevent tradeswomen from advancing in their occupations before recruitment.

There has been a plethora of research conducted over the last 10 – 15 years on women in trades, informing industry of the barriers and offering practical solutions. Yet the evidence suggests that women are largely leaving careers in trades for reasons that have little to do with the work itself. It is almost always the workplace and industry culture which forces women to leave their trades careers.

Organizations must recognize the need to protect the significant investment they are making on the recruitment side, by ensuring the workplace is ready to receive the contribution of employees from diverse backgrounds. The investment of time and money in efforts to promote trades and related careers for women without the requisite investment in building workplace cultures that value them is folly.

This Retention Strategy is intended to provide organizations with information and tools to increase the representation of women in the skilled trades and to ensure a return on this investment by creating workplaces where tradeswomen can thrive, contribute and advance.

## RESOURCES

### **MCSC Workshop Workplace Inclusion: Women in the Construction Industry (Building Your HR Competitive Advantage)**

The intent of this workshop is to provide participants with the tools to identify opportunities for increasing workplace diversity, equity and inclusion. Topics covered include:

- Concepts associated with creating respectful workplaces such as equity, diversity, inclusion, unconscious bias, harassment and discrimination.
- Manitoba legal framework and the benefits to building inclusive and respectful workplaces.
- Identify barriers which can affect the entry and advancement of tradeswomen in the construction industry.
- Organizational assessment of workplace inclusion readiness.
- Best practices for the recruitment and retention of tradeswomen in the construction industry.
- Action Plan for increasing organizational effectiveness at recruiting and retaining tradeswomen.

### **MCSC Workshop – Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges**

The Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges course focuses on women entering or currently working in construction trades, their real-life challenges, and successes in the industry. It has been developed as a response to the feedback received at the Manitoba Construction Sector Council's Women in Trades Conference, February 2020. Local construction company owners and managers have contributed their knowledge and expertise to assist women in breaking down the barriers and building bridges that will promote the advancement of their careers.

#### **Shift Change**

<https://www.ywcahalifax.com/shift-change/>

This program will soon be available in Manitoba through the Manitoba Construction Sector Council.

#### **More than a Bystander Training, BC Centre for Women in Trades**

<https://bccwitt.ca/whatwedo/bystander/>

This program will soon be available in Manitoba through the Manitoba Construction Sector Council.

#### **On The Level: Working Women in Trades and Technology**

An employer's guide to creating respectful workplaces.

<https://ccwestt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/OnTheLevel-2009.pdf>

#### **The Manitoba Human Rights Commission**

The Manitoba Human Rights Commission is an excellent resource for awareness and education on the matter of the Manitoba Human Rights Code. The Commission provides sample respectful workplace policies and offers a series of workshops on the topics of human rights, responding to harassment in the workplace and applying the Code [www.manitobahumanrights.ca](http://www.manitobahumanrights.ca)

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