



A more demanding workforce

Over the years, I've been asked many times to research how the trades can attract more young people. What I have discovered, is that children of baby boomers, who haven't seen hard times, have a sense of entitlement. They want more money for less work. Why toil away for long hours in crappy weather when they could make a million bucks in their parents' basement?

The bubble has burst but the unrealistic expectations of this pool of young workers has not—they want lots of money and a good quality of life, both while they're working and long after they retire as well.

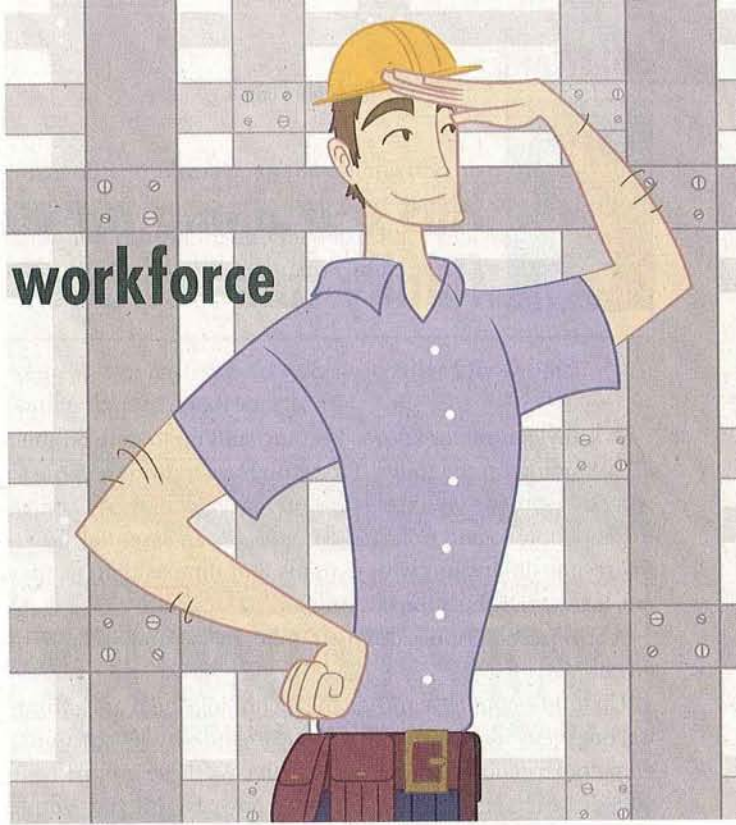
The workforce is changing and slowly dragging the construction industry along with it. The feel on the construction site is evolving from that of the stereotypical old school tradesmen to a cleaner environment with a quasi-professional air. Drive by any high-profile site in Vancouver, everyone looks so clean cut and kosher in their matching, well-maintained work gear that if you changed their clothing many could pass for accountants or lawyers—I haven't seen a braided beard in years!

The reality is that contractors who embrace change and meet regulations will survive, and smaller shops that continue to operate like they did in the 1980's—slinging things together with questionable work methods—will perish if they do not adapt.

Safety is key in ensuring a high quality of life for workers during their careers and into their retirement as well—something few tradesmen enjoy much past the age of 55 due to hearing impairment, knee injuries, bad backs and messed up elbows and hands. Let's face it; many mega-projects of past decades may not have been built under current safety and environmental restrictions.

Workers today expect the right tools at the right time. Each trade has a wish list: mud rooms for shoring contractors, an endless supply of coveralls for painters, decent living and tool allowances, a little privacy for remote workers, running water, coffee machines, lunch rooms, flush toilets, dust control, stereos and AC in cabs.

The topic of ergonomic training is coming up more and more often because evidence suggests work procedures and tools make a difference in a workers health as they age. Younger workers will benefit but the older workers likely won't take it seriously. They have typically put up with years of a sore "this" or an aching "that" never understanding how it might be work related. Younger workers are more open to new techniques and technologies, and are learning how to recognize potential injury. They also want specific worksite literature



and regulations that are developed with considerable and respectful input from the trades. The young men I interviewed don't see themselves retiring with work-related surgeries or injuries. They see themselves working longer and retiring with strong healthy bodies.

Money, training programs, better gear and a labour shortage during boom times have attracted a few women to the trades. Without any prompting, I was told women make great equipment operators because they have good hand-eye coordination and don't 'beat the shit out of equipment.' That said, with good people skills—many would rather see women in project management roles estimating and running jobs rather than in the trades.

Is the new guard asking too much, or have we been too tolerant in the past? There have been a lot of "pot shots" taken at the expense of the "soft" younger workers who expect big wages and all kinds of amenities, but offer little in return in terms of related work experience. That said, I believe there's a side to this story that hasn't fully been explored, and that is what are you getting out of it?

The pay off for conceding amenities is a more technologically savvy, articulate and dare I say: professional worker that appreciates environmental and cultural sensitivities. The expectation is that they will work smarter and eventually change the perception and culture of the worksite to a more inclusive place with critically thinking workers who are less resistant to change. ♦

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