



Cambridge Chamber of Commerce MasterMind Series
The Green Agenda and our Economy

Objective and Outcome: It is a known fact that Ontario, and Canada in general, are dealing with a severe shortage of skilled trade workers. In fact, the Conference Board of Canada estimates that Ontario will face a shortage of 190,000 skilled workers by 2020. This number is expected to triple to 560,000 by 2030. Left hidden among these staggering numbers is the fact less than 4% of all tradespeople in Canada are women. As outlined in a CBC report earlier this year, a Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey indicated as of 2018 approximately 34,800 women were working in industrial, electrical and construction trades nationwide. This represents an increase of 200 women, just under 3.9%, compared to a decade earlier. However, during this same 10-year span there were 38,600 fewer people of the overall 934,000 working in these trades in 2008. It is clear opening doors to more women in these fields will help fill this growing gap. How to accomplish this sparked some great conversations with our invited guests as we tried to determine what instills and inspires young minds to follow a particular career path, and what potential incentives can our government and education systems do to provide to entice more young female high school graduates to enter the trades? We also looked at what the Chamber of Commerce can do locally to encourage young females to seriously look at the trades as a viable career choice. The following talking points were raised during our discussion:

- **How can we promote the skilled trades as a viable career option for not just young females, but for all young people in general, at a younger age? What curriculum changes are needed to inspire students, even those just about to enter secondary school, to consider a career in the skilled trades?**

A common theme around the table indicated that some of our participants who currently work in, or with, the skilled trades industry first became interested as children by watching their 'handy' fathers do repairs and projects around the house. This clearly isn't the case for all young women. During the discussion, it became apparent there are concerns regarding the void of any real skilled trades learning being offered in the majority of high school curriculums. The days of 'shop class' have long since passed as cuts to education have resorted in some tough curriculum choices being made. The need to fund more skilled trades courses should be seen as a priority. Despite the fact the Doug Ford government announced earlier this year it was investing \$12.2 million to support the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program to help grades 11 and 12 students to gain skilled trades experience while getting credits, not enough is being done to encourage students at a younger age, particularly young females, to look towards the skilled trades. While it was stated that parents must play a role in laying out all possible career options for their children, additional support from the school

boards via parent information nights where representatives from the local skilled trade sector and the Chamber could chat about the benefits of working in that sector, could be utilized. It was suggested this kind of partnership could help to overcome the apparent stigma that still exists surrounding the notion that attending college to learn a skilled trade, as opposed to those who pursue other careers at a university, was somehow less desirable.

- **How can we provide more young females with a ‘hands on’ experience to introduce them to the world of skilled trades?**

At core of the discussion was the clear need for young females to have the opportunity to receive ‘hands on’ experience in order to pique their interest in skilled trades in hopes of getting past the notion perhaps ingrained in them at a young age that working with their hands is ‘crude’. They may also feel they aren’t physically strong enough, which is no longer the case due to the introduction of more automation and robotics in workplaces. The benefits of the ‘Jill of all Trades’ program offered by Conestoga College, in which female students between grades 9 and 12 participate in hands-on workshops led by female mentors, was touted as the perfect avenue to inspire young teens. However, it was suggested offering the program one day a year may not be enough. According to the Conestoga College website, the program provides space for 200 students from eight local boards. The group suggested funding be provided to allow Conestoga to host the program several times a year to ensure more young females have the opportunity to participate. Also, it was recommended that schools be encouraged to take their students on tours of local industries in hopes of showing students what possible career options exist. It was noted that busing costs shouldn’t be an issue due to the nature of the trip, considering the current provincial government is also investing \$18.1 million in pre-apprenticeship programs to help the skilled trades sector. However, despite potential solutions and suggestions surrounding curriculum changes, co-op placements and community partnerships, it was also noted that change will not come easy and that some educators and education officials can be ‘stuck in their ways’ and very reluctant to stray from their current lesson paths.

- **How can we create an inclusive workplace, especially when it comes to women working in the skilled trades? What are some of the barriers that remain to making women feel welcomed in career fields that have historically been dominated by men?** Through our discussion a point was raised that in today’s society, our workmates have become ‘pseudo families’ due to the amount of time we often spend working with them and that all co-workers, both women and men, need a sense of belonging. To ensure women in the skilled trades feel more comfortable they suggested the need for more appropriate PPE (personal protective equipment). It was noted there are many women working in the trades who must use equipment designed for men because there are few suppliers of appropriate PPEs (such as gloves, jackets, hardhats, and overalls) at a reasonable cost, explaining equipment specifically designed for women often comes at a higher price. In keeping with the notion of parity, pay equity was

another topic touched on by the group who insisted it was imperative that skill and performance levels be the key considerations regarding wages. The point was also raised that trade unions and Ontario College of Trades should be doing more to encourage women and promote the fact everyone is welcome, highlighting the financial benefits of choosing a career in the skilled trades. (According to the annual BDO Canada Affordability Index, which looks at how affordable life is in Canada, nearly 60% of Canadian women are living paycheque to paycheque). As well, the need for some societal shifts were discussed. It was noted there appears to be a lack of family supports in general, which in turn may make some women reluctant to consider a career in skilled trades. For example, shift work is often a part of many skilled trade professions which deters many from pursuing them as a career. In the case of many women, they could find scheduling childcare difficult and in turn will take a less lucrative paying job, perhaps in the retail sector, because it appears 'easier' to handle, even if they have a partner who doesn't do shift work. As a side note, it was suggested that having a female as the 'bread winner' in a family can still be difficult for some to accept.

- **What should our government be doing to encourage young women graduating from high schools to choose a career in the skilled trades?**

The general consensus during the discussion indicated changes are clearly needed in order to encourage more young female students and women to enter the world of skilled trades. However, it was pointed out the majority of employers appear willing to welcome more women but may fear this somehow will put them on an unlevel playing field with competitors. Only through legislation, it was agreed, would any substantial change occur. The implementation of stricter guidelines around health and safety was used as an example. Employers, of course, do not want to see their employees suffer injuries but it was noted only through mandated legislation that significant steps were made to keep workers safer because suddenly all employers found themselves on the same playing field. A similar approach, it was suggested, was needed to create change to introduce more women into the skilled trades sector. It was stated that policies can easily be developed, and politicians can talk about change, but unless there is legislation no real action will be taken. As well, the notion of incentives was raised to encourage change. These could include a potential cut in corporate taxes if particular gender balances were reached, and the implementation of possible corporate designations similar to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). It was noted that current 'global benchmarks' are in place regarding the issue of promoting inclusivity and diversity in the workplace, and that many countries are further along in this respect than Canada. However, it was unanimously agreed that while incentives are a reasonable course of action, extra care must be given to ensure employers hire women who are the best candidate for the job, not because they are trying fill a quota. It was noted in studies that treating a 'minority' group differently can often result in them feeling more alienated.

