

Improve Workforce Competitiveness for Rural Communities and Small Urban Centres by creating a Flexible Apprenticeship Program

Greater Peterborough Chamber of Commerce co-sponsored by Guelph Chamber of Commerce, Sudbury Chamber of Commerce, Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce

- ❑ Building a 21st century workforce through workplace training, utilizing newcomers' skills, and apprenticeship reform

Issue

The economic growth, competitiveness and prosperity of rural communities and small urban centers is being hindered by the current inflexible apprenticeship system. Rural communities and small urban centers are under greater pressure to attract and retain workforce talent and the current apprenticeship system further exacerbates this scenario, negatively impacting Ontario's economic output.

Background

Expanding Ontario's skilled trades labour pool is critical to the continued transformation of Ontario's economy. Skilled trades are fundamental to creating value as a base for economic activity in all businesses in the province. However, some businesses in the skilled trades sector are at a disadvantage as the journeyman to apprentice ratios do not reflect the reality of limited opportunities in the geographic region in which they operate. Discussion around rural and smaller urban centre opportunities vs. larger urban centre opportunities on this issue has led to a general consensus that the need is simply different in the smaller urban centers and rural communities and the opportunity to take on more apprentices is reflective of a different workload and pace between smaller and larger communities.

In 2016, the Ontario College of Trades will be conducting another round of ratio reviews for the 33 trades that are bound by journeyman to apprentice ratios. In the past, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce and other organizations successfully lobbied to have the ratios start at 1:1. This is now true for all but one of the 33 trades subject to apprenticeship ratios.

With this next round of ratio reviews, there is the opportunity to consider different options to meeting the needs of Ontario employers. Employers, particularly those in smaller urban and rural centers in Ontario are allowed to participate in the reviews, but ultimately are looking for flexibility to help grow their businesses and to help the next generation of skilled workers. The 1:1 ratio that currently exists now hinders that process. The main trades impacted are carpentry and electrical. However, to limit the recommended pilot project to these two areas would be short-sighted as there may be a need in a rural or smaller urban centre that has not presented itself as of yet.

In Nova Scotia, where they have a 1:1 ratio, employers can apply for a ratio increase for the number of apprentices per journeyman on a per project basis. A form is submitted online and reviewed by the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency (NSAA) based on the following criteria:

- Geographic location of the employer to determine if there is a limited capability to locate and employ journeypersons;
- Steps undertaken by the employer to hire more journeypersons;
- Whether the employer has previously requested ratio adjustments and has been denied such requests;
- Whether previous ratio adjustments were cancelled because of a violation in the terms and/or conditions;
- The availability of senior level apprentices; (note: senior level refers to final level apprentices);
- The attendance of registered apprentices in technical training.

This program has been in place for over a decade and the NSSA says it receives 40-50 requests per year. While the NSAA was unable to provide statistics on the program, they did say that ratio variances are generally approved. ¹

Flexibility in the apprenticeship system is also evident in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland where there is a one journeyperson to two apprentices ratio to reflect demand; and as highlighted in the Tony Dean Review, British Columbia has never had mandatory ratios.

Nearly one in three employers are looking for skilled tradespeople and are unable to fill a job because they cannot find someone with the right qualifications.”²

The Dean Review suggested a number of criteria that could be considered by the Ontario College of Trades ratio review panel included demographic and labour market information for the trade, and the demand for skilled trades in different regional/geographic areas of the province. While this recommendation is encouraging, under a review panel these criteria would be applied across the trade and that may not be necessary. However, an approach that allows employers to apply for a ratio increase based on specific criteria might help spur economic growth in smaller communities with geographic and regional challenges.

Currently, apprentices need to rely on journeypersons and employers to help them with their education and training, which in turn helps the apprentice to successfully write their Certificate of Qualification and to become certified in their trade. In smaller urban and rural communities where the pool of employers and journeypersons is much smaller, having a flexible ratio system is critical to workforce development in the skilled trades, and to long term and sustainable economic growth across Ontario.

Sustained changes to the apprenticeship ratio system are needed, but the proposed pilot project is an opportunity, in the short term, to gather data and assess the need of small and medium-sized employers in different regional and geographic areas of the province.

¹ Email correspondence with Kim Kennedy, Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency received January 7, 2016

² Press Release, Ontario Chamber of Commerce, November 20, 2015

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Implement a three year pilot project that would allow small and medium-sized employers in rural communities and small urban centers across Ontario to apply for an apprenticeship ratio increase.
2. Compile and assess the data from the pilot project to inform future ratio review discussions.

Entail a small cost to government (less than \$10M)