

## COMMENTARY ON THE WORKER AND APPRENTICE ATTRITION RATES SURVEY

The Building and Construction industry is aware that there are significant workforce issues for the industry with an aging population, and the failure of the industry to recruit and retain sufficient new entrants, particularly via apprenticeships.

The Building and Construction Industry Training Fund commissioned research to canvass the view of apprentices, current industry workers and of the general community at large. The research included interviews with over 1000 people.

The research provided confirmation that the industry is aging, with a high proportion of current trade's people near retiring age. The 18-29 year age group is seriously unrepresented with a 13% representation, compared to a 29% representation in the WA adult male population. Young people are not entering the industry in sufficient numbers.

The results confirmed the inclination of current apprentices to continue in their apprenticeship. There is a stronger commitment the nearer the apprentice is to the end of the apprenticeship and among those who are directly indentured. The likelihood of completion is related to age, and to trade. The over 24's are slightly less likely to complete their apprenticeship. Those in brick laying are more likely not to complete their trade, than apprentices in either carpentry or joinery or one of the licensed trades (electrician or plumbing and gas fitting). This implies that the licensing of trades is a strong incentive to complete the apprenticeship, and may offer a clue to the partial arresting of current wastage from apprenticeships in other trades.

There is also evidence from the responses of recently completed, current and cancelled apprentices to support the notion that a shortened term of indenture could have a positive impact on completion rates. Only 45% of current apprentices believe they need the full 4 year term to learn all the skills to become a full tradesman. 52% believe they could do it in 3 years or less, though there was some variation between the trades.

Many of the older workers surveyed indicated they would be leaving the industry to retire within the next 5 years. The significant loss of this expertise and experience will create further skill shortages and have implications for the passing on of knowledge to the next generation.

Apprentices were asked to indicate whether or not they'd be happy for a friend or relative to take up an apprenticeship in a particular trade. The licensed trades (electrical, plumbers and gas fitters) and carpentry are the most attractive in the minds of apprentices. The hierarchy may have to do with the licensing itself, which acts as a means of maintaining a "level" of skills benchmarking and adding a layer of extra "professionalism". Roof tiling, roof plumbing, concreting, plastering and brick laying received the least recommendation. This warrants further

**Action:** Devise strategies to attract young people to the industry through promotion and entry level training to school students.

**Action:** Investigate the apparent link between licensing, completion and non-completion of apprenticeships.

investigation, to identify ways of “elevating” the status of the non-licensed trades.

**Action:** Implement strategies to encourage / require subcontractors to upgrade their own skills and to train apprentices.

Apprentices who withdraw or cancel were asked what they had done once leaving and they said that they either stay in the trade, go to an apprenticeship with another employer or go into another trade in the industry. Most, *remain in the industry*. A similar ratio was reflected in the industry with only 6 out of 10 of the tradesmen sampled, reporting that they had completed an apprenticeship. It is apparent that many people end up as subcontractors where there is little reliance on a formal qualification. Subsequently, subcontractors do not have a training culture or the resources to train apprentices and this is a contributing factor to the current shortage.

The figures for apprenticeship completion among current industry workers are very different in the licensing trades where 90% reported completing an apprenticeship. Only 36% of tradesmen in the “wet trades” (brick laying and tiling) and 29% in “general construction” had completed an apprenticeship.

**Action:** Promote the benefits of training, the value of a trade qualification, and of maintaining standards. Develop short training in post trade skills.

From the research it was apparent that tradesmen working in the industry regard apprenticeship training as important, but the corresponding commitment to that ideal is not evident. Such findings indicate the need to promote the value and benefit of training to the industry itself and encourage greater participation in training and in the training of apprentices. Group training schemes help but are not the complete answer. Subsidies are having an impact but there is a need to develop other strategies.

**Action:** Need to consider promotional strategies to change attitudes towards particular trades.

70% of people currently working in the industry support their son or daughter taking up a career in the industry, or at least support the child’s decision to make their own choice. The community view is seen as a determinant in influencing the young person when considering or discussing a career choice, with views of teachers, friends, and those likely to influence such a decision, quite critical. The predominant view was positive, with 60% of respondents saying that they would support a son or daughter considering a career in the building industry. However, an obvious hierarchy emerged when asked to nominate the a particular trade, with preference for the electrical, plumbing and carpentry trades. Community attitude towards the bricklaying trade is rather poor, and may be cause for some concern with regard to attracting future entrants to the trade.

**Action:** Investigate the lower value ascribed to vocational programs in the educational system.

There was another issue of concern that emerged from the research. There was a persistent message coming from individual comments that industry workers and the community see a career in the industry and the trade pathway, as worthwhile only when their son or daughter does not have the academic skills to go to university or pursue a “professional” career. It is apparent that “Learning on the job” is not seen as “education” or a continuation of learning, and the non-university pathway has less status than an academic pathway.

The community places greater value on intellectual achievement and subsequent “professional” qualifications gained through academic study rather than skills accumulated through learning on the job or through

training. It can be inferred that the negative perceptions of young people towards the industry and related training are derived from the education system with the drive for a higher proportion of tertiary educated young people. The implication is that the two tiered system of education is driving the perception that a TEE qualification is the peak aspiration, and a vocational qualification (Certificate of Education) is not as valuable or worthwhile.

This perception has to shift to drive any sustained improvement in recruitment levels for industries such as the Building and Construction industry.

**Action** Promote the Industry as a “Smart” Industry and a career in the Industry as a “smart” move and not as a “second best” alternative.

The overall message of the three dimensional survey is that the industry is not viewed negatively by apprentices currently in the industry, the apprentices who leave their apprenticeship, workers in the industry, or the general community. There is however, a strong undertone of opinion that the trades are worthy of consideration, only if the young person is not capable of pursuing the university or academic option.

In addition, there is a definite preferential bias towards the licensed trades, particularly by apprentices themselves and those in the industry. This has serious implications for a number of the trades, in the future. Consideration needs to be given to how the interest in and the status of the non-licensed trades can be invigorated.

There is recognition of the need to undertake further investigation.