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Where did all our skilled workers go?

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Once upon a time, shop class was mandatory in most high schools. There was a belief that even if a student wasn't intent on becoming a mechanic or carpenter, having some basic life skills in these areas wasn't a bad thing.

Over time, however, shop began to look dated and irrelevant and was given less status. Somewhere along the way, it was drilled into students that the only way to get ahead in life was to go to university and earn a degree.

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Occupations such as plumbers and pipefitters were looked down upon. They were the bedrock of blue-collar careers and commanded little respect. The people who made the big bucks wore white shirts and ties and owed their well-paying jobs to the swishy institutions of higher learning they attended. Kids and parents were told that in the future, most jobs would require a BA at minimum.

Today, Canada is dealing with the fallout from its ivory tower preoccupation. (We produce more university and college graduates, per capita, than most countries in the world.) We have an acute shortage of workers who actually build and fix things. It represents an alarming structural deficit that could cost the economy billions.

Let me say that this is not a diatribe against universities and colleges. While there are many university grads who've had trouble finding jobs in the past few years, statistics indicate that degrees generally hold their value. People who have them earn more than those who don't.

But in our single-minded obsession with academia, we forgot that the millions of people who literally built our economy would one day be retiring – and that there would be new industries sprouting up that would need skilled workers, too. Now, it's not an exaggeration to say we have a crisis on our hands.

Some of the numbers are sobering. According to the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, by 2016, Canada will have 1.3 million skilled labour jobs sitting vacant because there is no one to do them. In the construction industry alone, there will be 219,000 workers retiring between now and 2020 and not nearly enough people to take their positions. In the agriculture sector, 90,000 additional skilled workers were needed this year, according to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

In B.C., things are particularly acute. The government estimates that over the next decade, there will be about 150,000 vacancies for people in the trades, in everything from bricklaying to welding. Two-thirds of the openings will be the result of retirements.

Things are so bad that a coalition of construction companies is heading to Ireland – again – in the hopes of hiring 600 trained workers. Given the miserable state of the Irish economy, it shouldn't be a problem. In Ireland, construction-related jobs are still highly valued and not considered demeaning work.

While enrolment in trades schools in Canada has been increasing, the rise isn't fast enough to tackle the dangerous skills chasm that needs to be bridged. Also, completion rates sit at just 50 per cent. Many believe that education is at the root of our problem: Students need to be exposed to the benefits, financial and otherwise, of the trades. And it has to start at a much younger age.

B.C. Education Minister Peter Fassbender believes we need to be talking to students as early as Grade 5 about the value of being trained in a craft and about how technology has changed the nature of many of these jobs. (They aren't as dirty as they once were.) Eventually, students also need to know that demand has pushed wages into uncharted territory.

He might be on to something. Skilled workers remain an essential component of our economic well being. Without them, we're in trouble. In fact, we already are.

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