



# POLICY BRIEF

---

## Apprenticeship style learning: A solution to skills shortages

---

### Janet Lane

Senior Fellow

Former Director, Skills, Innovation and Productivity  
Canada West Foundation

Janet has expertise in literacy and the competency-based approach to matching people with jobs and jobs with people.

### Jeff Griffiths

Director, Skills, Innovation and Productivity  
Canada West Foundation

Jeff is an expert in organizational and competency-based workforce development and Canada's member of the E.U.'s SKILLMAN organization which promotes leading practices in work-based learning.

## Problem

Canada has a highly educated workforce and, paradoxically, a pervasive skills shortage.

In a January 2025 survey of Alberta employers, 47 per cent said they were experiencing a moderate or significant staffing shortage.<sup>1</sup> This was mainly due to difficulty in finding people with the needed skills. What's more, of those with staff shortages, two-thirds reported that they cause a moderate to significant impact on production and sales.<sup>2</sup>

Virtually every job in the economy requires at least a basic level of both technical and cognitive (numeracy, problem solving, communication, etc.) skills. With advances in technology, the demands for both kinds of skills increase every year and typically the accepted pathway for acquiring these skills is through formal – generally post-secondary – education. While a university degree or college diploma can be a great asset, the skills required for many of the jobs available in the economy are not necessarily learned through these traditional pathways. What's more, there is growing evidence that some formal credentialled programs may not adequately prepare students to work in the related field – employers surveyed by the Alberta Chambers of Commerce reported that almost half of new graduates hired did not have all the required technical skills.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alberta Chambers of Commerce. "ALBERTA PERSPECTIVES SURVEY: HIRING INTENTIONS/ SKILLS TRAINING." Alberta Chambers of Commerce, January 2025.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

## For job seekers, lacking skills required to obtain work in their chosen field despite having accumulated student debt is both **heartbreaking** and **demoralizing**.

In Canada at the end of September 2024, there were 1.33 million people looking for jobs<sup>4</sup> and almost 600,000 jobs available.<sup>5</sup> Unemployment varied by level of educational attainment. There were almost four unemployed people with university degrees for every available job that required a degree, up from almost three people per job only a year before.<sup>6</sup> At the other end of the scale, the number of available jobs that required a high school diploma or less had fallen by 140,000 (in just one year) and there were almost two unemployed people with only high school or less for every available job.<sup>7</sup>

For job seekers, lacking skills required to obtain work in their chosen field despite having accumulated student debt to acquire higher education credentials is both heartbreaking and demoralizing. While post-secondary institutions have sought to incorporate more work-integrated learning into their programs to enhance student skills through on-the-job experience, employers still face difficulties finding qualified candidates and the resulting skills gaps and mismatches contribute to higher turnover (which is disruptive and disappointing for both employer and employee), lower productivity, reduced profitability and poor business outcomes. Employers have felt the pain of these mismatches for years and are looking for ways to address it.

**1.33 million**  
people sought employment  
in September 2024.

**4**  
people with university  
degrees for every available  
job requiring a degree.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. Table: 14-10-0017 *Labour Force Characteristics*

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada. *Job vacancies, second quarter 2024*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240917/g-b003-eng.htm>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

## Solution

Expanded apprenticeship pathways (beyond the current exclusive focus on skilled trades) could be the solution employers are looking for. While this approach demands a commitment from employers to hire and train apprentices, it develops workers with the specific skills required for the job. Apprenticeship combines structured and unstructured “learn-by-doing” approaches and mentoring in the workplace with more formalized learning offered through the post-secondary sector, or another learning provider, including industry or union training centres. And, because apprentices are paid for the work they do while they are learning, and time spent in a formal learning environment is minimized, apprentices acquire necessary skills without large student loans to pay for tuition.

Currently in Canada, the people most likely to find employment within their chosen field work in the skilled trades.<sup>8</sup> This is at least partly attributable to the focused, industry-specific training for these occupations that is the result of quality apprenticeships. Workers learn exactly what their job requires because the majority of their time (about 80 per cent) is spent learning by doing on the job. Many of these workers are in high-demand occupations and there aren’t enough slots available in formal learning programs to accommodate demand - Statistics Canada reports that skilled trades occupations have some of the largest shortages of workers.<sup>9</sup>

While the skilled trades and their employers have utilized the Canadian apprenticeship system to their advantage throughout our history, the approach has been and continues to be used globally to generate skills in many other occupations and professions. Internationally, apprenticeship approaches are being successfully applied to train people in hundreds more occupations than in Canada. And, while the regulation of skilled trades apprenticeship currently falls within the purview of provincial governments, **there is nothing that prevents an industry or even an individual employer from developing and running apprenticeship-style employee training for any occupation critical to their sectors.** In many places around the world, industry or professional associations regulate their own apprenticeship-style schemes.

**Because apprentices are paid for the work they do while they are learning, and time spent in a formal learning environment is minimized, apprentices acquire necessary skills without large student loans to pay for tuition.**

<sup>8</sup> Statistics Canada. *Job vacancies, second quarter 2024*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240917/g-b003-eng.htm>

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

## Discussion

While Canada's main experience with apprenticeship has been in the skilled trades, the medical, accounting and legal professions all train people using an apprenticeship-style approach where candidates complete some form of mandatory, supervised on-the-job training to acquire or perfect the practical skills needed to be considered fully competent in their field.

In Canada, skilled trades apprentices in most provinces attend blocks of formal instruction at a college or technical institution as part of every year of progression through their program (usually three or four years). Other countries incorporate formal instruction in ways that are more tightly integrated with workplaces. In Germany for instance, apprentices may attend school for two days and work for three days per week. Examples of this do exist in Canada – nursing students at Calgary's Mount Royal University begin clinical work one day per week during the second semester of their first year.

### **Employer engagement – the key to successful new apprenticeship style learning**

Any move towards expanded apprenticeship-style learning in Canada requires heavy involvement by employers.

Around the world, successful apprenticeship learning is industry and employer-led.<sup>10</sup> While colleges or other training providers are involved in the design, development and delivery of formal training, the knowledge, experience and commitment of employers, industry, or professional associations is the most important part of the process. However, in Canada, employers have not typically worked collectively to define the requirements (competencies and standards of performance) for training programs.

## **Around the world, successful apprenticeship learning is industry and employer-led.**

<sup>10</sup> Skills and Employability Branch Employment Policy Department. "ILO Toolkit for Quality Apprenticeships Volume I: Guide For Policy Makers." International Labour Organization (ILO) Geneva, October 2017

One process that has been used successfully to create the employer-led conditions for new approaches to skills development, including new apprenticeships, is the Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) process developed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. In use since 2014, TPM's systematic approach applies supply chain management strategies and practices to the development of human capital in ways that encourage employer leadership and engagement.

**TPM is an employer-led initiative throughout, involving a consortium of employers who:**

<p>a) Recognize a need to increase and improve their workforce.</p>	<p>b) Determine which positions are most in demand and how they have been hired previously.</p>	<p>c) Build consensus of how best to increase the supply of workers.</p>
<p>d) Identify the specific skills and competencies required and how best to teach them.</p>	<p>e) Implement training within their own workplaces in conjunction with local education and training providers.</p>	<p>f) Ensure that improvements are made continuously.</p>

The TPM methodology is at the heart of many of the state and federal apprenticeship initiatives begun in the U.S. since 2017. For example, the SHRM Foundation offers the Human Resource Registered Apprenticeship Program (HR RAP) to onboard or upskill HR Specialists and was developed using the TPM model.

Employer leadership allows new apprenticeship programs to be authentically competency-based, which ensures apprentices learn the knowledge and skills required for their jobs. Both formal and on-job learning can be designed to quickly build the necessary skills and those skills can be objectively assessed to industry-agreed standards.

## Opportunities for new apprenticeship style learning in Canada

Alberta has had one of the stronger apprenticeship systems in Canada. In 2012, during the most intense periods of building the oil sands projects, the province reported that it had “produced more tradespeople with an Interprovincial Standards Red Seal than any other jurisdiction in Canada.”<sup>11</sup> Of Alberta employers who responded to a 2023 survey, 41 per cent understood the apprenticeship-style learning model, and 52 per cent of respondents believed other occupations could be trained using this model. Most respondents recognized the potential benefits of on-the-job learning, guided by experienced mentors, especially for non-trade skills and occupations.<sup>12</sup> With all this in its favour, Alberta could be one of the better places to initiate new apprenticeship-style programs.

Further, Alberta’s *Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education (STAE) Act (2022)* opened up possibilities to expand apprenticeship to occupations beyond the skilled trades. Under the Act, the province retains the role of registrar of apprenticeships and controls the certification process. But as noted above, industry or professional associations could develop their own apprenticeship-style learning models for virtually any occupation that does not require a license to practice and certify individuals to standards they collectively recognize as relevant, without government oversight. In many cases this could be done with greater speed and agility than current approaches. In the current tariff-induced push to reduce barriers to inter-provincial trade, establishing industry-led and industry-managed apprenticeship programs across a group of provinces – say, across the New West Partnership (BC, AB, SK, MB) – would demonstrate an approach to collaboration and agility while also improving inter-provincial labour mobility.

Multiple industry and professional associations both nationally and internationally have turn-key, competency-based curricula for high-demand occupations in their sector that could be adapted for apprenticeship-style approaches with or without the assistance of the post-secondary system.

Rather than building curricula from scratch, existing apprenticeship programs, such as Saskatchewan’s Guest Services Representative apprenticeship program or the U.S. Manufacturing Skills Standards Council’s Certified Technician-Supply Chain Automation program could be adapted for use across Canada.

Successful apprenticeship-style learning programs can be implemented with relatively small numbers of students. Accenture’s apprenticeship program for management and IT consulting, which began with only five students, now has over 2,000 learners; Saskatchewan’s Guest Service Representative program started with 12 spaces; California’s hospitality program was launched with an initial cadre of only 20 apprentices.<sup>13, 14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board. *Statistical Profiles*. 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Alberta Chambers of Commerce. “ALBERTA PERSPECTIVES SURVEY: SKILLS, TRAINING, LABOUR MARKET POLICY.” Alberta Chambers of Commerce, January 2024.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.accenture.com/ca-en/careers/life-at-accenture/apprenticeships>

<sup>14</sup> [https://saskapprenticeship.ca/designated\\_trades/guest-services-representative/](https://saskapprenticeship.ca/designated_trades/guest-services-representative/)

Interest is growing. Industry and professional associations that represent occupations as diverse as process control and machine operators in the food and beverage processing sector, supply chain technicians, and CPHR (Chartered Professionals in Human Resources) have expressed interest in piloting apprenticeship style learning:

- The Alberta Food Processors Association has developed a “ready to go” program designed to ensure that people working in the field are productive and working to the highest standards of food safety. Uptake has been slow so far, but the association is interested in adapting it to become an apprenticeship program and to make certification the industry standard.
- Many Canadian community colleges offer diplomas in supply chain management, but there are huge numbers of workers in the sector who would benefit from an apprenticeship through which they could certify as technicians and eventually extend their apprenticeship to become supply chain managers. In the U.S. there is an apprenticeship program for supply chain technicians which could easily be adapted to the Canadian context – supply chains operate on global standards.
- CPHR Alberta chapter has recently changed its rules to allow apprenticeship-style learning to be counted towards its mandatory experience requirements. Meanwhile, a community college that offers a Human Resources diploma has expressed real interest in working with the association to develop and offer an integrated apprenticeship learning program.

## What it will take to expand apprenticeship beyond the skilled trades?

### **Accurate data**

Provincial and federal government data collection agencies, non-profit and private sector Labour Market Information (LMI) and business consulting services, and sector-specific organizations such as industry associations all provide workforce data. However, the best, most robust and most accurate data needs to come directly from employers – how many, of which type of workers, with what skills, are needed, where and when. This level of granularity is the hallmark of the TPM approach and is a big factor in its success.

### **Required Supports**

New approaches involve risk. Employers may be reluctant to absorb all of these risks themselves. Seed funding to assist in setting up and managing an initial program – pooled across provinces – will lower overall risk and may be enough to encourage first-mover adoption of these approaches in certain industry sectors.

# Conclusions

The majority of Alberta employers in a recent survey indicated that expansion of apprenticeship-style learning into occupations beyond the skilled trades would help to develop the workforce they need. The human resources, food processing, supply chain management, forestry products and tourism and hospitality professional/ industry associations have all indicated support for this approach for their Alberta members, and it seems likely that this sentiment is shared with their counterparts across Western Canada.

The approach is successful around the globe. Western Canadian employers and professional associations, with initial support from various levels of government could develop or easily adapt existing programs across a range of critical industry sectors. The TPM methodology can be adapted to assess and qualify existing programming to fit into an industry-led scheme that could be launched rapidly at minimal cost and improved over time.

Western Canadian employers must be part of the solution to skills shortages. Apprenticeship – beyond the skilled trades – is the logical, practical solution.

**The majority of Alberta employers in a recent survey indicated that expansion of apprenticeship-style learning into occupations beyond the skilled trades would help to develop the workforce they need.**

---

## FOR FURTHER READING:

**Building Blocks: Modular Credentials for Canada's Trades** – CWF  
Janet Lane and Jeff Griffiths, Dec. 2015

**Attracting more workers to residential construction begins with skill recognition** – Calgary Herald  
Jeff Griffiths and Janet Lane, Feb. 18, 2025

**More apprentices could solve Alberta's skilled-worker shortage** – Edmonton Journal  
Janet Lane and Lin Akkad, Oct. 2, 2023

**Expanding apprenticeships could get more Albertans back to work** – Calgary Herald  
Janet Lane, July 24, 2020