



Expanding and Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry (Virtual Recruitment Phase Two)

Summary Report

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OVERALL PROJECT OBJECTIVE: ENHANCING VIRTUAL RECRUITMENT CAPACITY

The goal of the Virtual Recruitment project is to design, develop, implement, and test solutions that can increase the number of individuals—especially those from underrepresented populations (i.e., women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, and youth)—initiating steps towards becoming an apprentice and joining the unionized construction trades sector. The project aligns with Future Skills Centre’s strategic priorities of creating responsive career pathways through collaborating with sectors and stakeholders to address labour market challenges and equipping people with necessary skills to pursue their selected career pathway.

As a sector, the construction trades are facing significant challenges meeting labour demands and is forecasted to lose 21 per cent of its workforce to retirement over the next decade.¹ It takes time and resources to recruit new members of the construction sector. Those looking to enter the sector must work to gain skills, experience, and expertise, and are often best supported through continuous engagement across their entry pathway. The Virtual Recruitment project aims to help address recruitment challenges prospective workers may face. Online recruitment offers a way to reach a larger number of potential and new recruits. Integrating technology and digital tools can provide the construction industry a more effective way to connect with prospective apprentices and can benefit potential recruits by offering access to flexible opportunities to upgrade their skills, navigate training pathways, and connect to jobs and opportunities.

The Virtual Recruitment project has developed an array of resources that can support recruitment into the unionized construction sector. National and provincial social media and advertising campaigns target both general audiences and multiple groups underrepresented in many skilled trades and invite them to explore their respective provincial Construction Trades Hub site. From this site, users can explore and learn about various trades, sign up for the integrated Build Your Skills Learning Hub for access to online learning resources in a range of trades-specific areas, and view and connect with active unions in their region for available jobs and training opportunities.

Through the development of these resources, the project has sought to address several challenges prevalent within the unionized construction skilled trades sector. These include how to increase the representation of groups traditionally underrepresented in the construction and building trades, as well as how to increase the recruitment capacity of the sector. The project, which was led by SkillPlan in partnership with Canada’s Building Trades Unions (CBTU),

¹ BuildForce Canada (2024). [Construction and maintenance industry: An assessment of construction labour markets from 2024 to 2033](#). Ottawa, ON.

Magnet, and SRDC and funded by Canada's Future Skills Centre (FSC), works in partnership with all provincial building trades councils across Canada to maintain and create regionally responsive resources that meet both local and national needs. This collaborative model fosters innovation and integrates technological advancements and emerging practices for improved quality and access to skills training and skilled trades opportunities.

With the completion of the first phase of the Virtual Recruitment project (which ran between 2020-2022), there was overwhelming industry support and interest from provincial building trades councils, unions, affiliated training schools, and employers to further enhance recruitment and engagement capacity for the unionized construction sector in Canada. Expanding on a Phase One pilot that tested the design and operation of online resources in the trades, Phase Two leveraged the established pan-Canadian partnership network, refined project resources, and engaged thousands of new users online between 2022 and 2024. Phase Two of this project also identified, prototyped, and implemented a comprehensive virtual recruitment and assessment system through a range of project activities. Phase Two initiated multiple paid social media and advertising campaigns; expanded the repository of marketing and social media assets that provincial partners could use within their local recruitment efforts; improved existing and established new provincial Construction Trades Hub sites; and launched an array of new training resources and new user pathways on the Build Your Skills Learning Hub.

A central goal of Phase Two was to enhance user experience with each virtual recruitment resource and improve pathway navigation between these components. This phase also implemented new ways to connect prospective apprentices to the training and union opportunities they might be looking for. Phase Two continued the pursuit of optimizing and expanding recruitment pathways into the unionized construction sector, especially among people from underrepresented groups.

RESULTS

Targeting resources for users at every stage of their apprenticeship journey

During Phase Two, virtual recruitment resources were enhanced and redesigned to target and offer tailored content to users at different stages of their recruitment pathway: **“Explorers”** who are interested in learning more about various trades and the process of entering the sector; **Pre-apprentices** who are preparing for training and may be considering joining a union; and **Apprentices** who are seeking supportive resources for their trade and would like to join a union.

Tailored resources included launching social media and advertising campaigns targeting these three groups, enhancing different features on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites to support people at different stages of their skilled trades career, and re-designing the Build Your

Skills Learning Hub to direct users to specific resources depending on where they are in their trades training journey. On the Learning Hub landing page, users can select one of three pathways that directs them to customized resources (see Figure 1):

Figure 1 Build Your Skills Learning Hub landing page



- **The Explorer Hub** section is where users can explore different trades, connect to training providers and unions, and learn more about the trades in a Frequently Asked Questions section. Once they are finished exploring, users can go on to access another hub.
- **The Pre-Apprenticeship Hub** is for those individuals gearing up for an apprenticeship and includes sections where users can assess their skills or start courses in general trades math, science, or reading and document use, as examples.
- **The Apprenticeship Hub** is for those looking to access learning and assessment resources specific to their trade (e.g., “Math for Electricians”), as well as links to higher level and supportive courses applicable to multiple trades (e.g., “Red Seal Test Prep”). In this section, users can also access courses aimed at improving diversity, inclusion, and equity in the trades, such as “Respectful and Inclusive Workplaces” and “Indigenous Awareness” courses.

Key outcomes

- Improved navigation pathways on the Build Your Skills Learning Hub
- Tailored advertising campaigns and resources targeting people at different stage of entering the skilled trades sector

Updating user navigation pathways

Major updates were made in Phase Two to improve overall navigation between virtual recruitment resources. During Phase One, virtual recruitment tools and assets were distributed over three digital interfaces: 1) provincial Construction Trades Hub sites; 2) an online portal managed; and 3) the Build Your Skills Learning Hub. People who were interested to learn more about the trades were first directed to their respective provincial Construction Trades Hub site and from there were asked to create a portal account to then access the Build Your Skills Learning Hub.

To streamline access to the Learning Hub, consultations and usability testing showed that users did not always have sufficient information about the purpose, content, and value of the portal. This led the project to transition away from the portal in Phase Two and redistribute content over other components of the virtual recruitment resources. For example, a sign-up form was added directly to provincial Construction Trades Hub sites to access the Build Your Skills Learning Hub.

In Phase Two, there was also an enhancement in how users could connect with unions. Union pages on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites were updated so that the benefits of union membership were clearly visible to users, contact information for unions in each region was accessible, and users had the option to provide their contact information to learn more.

Key outcomes

- Improved navigation between resources hosted on different platforms
- Easier access to learning/assessment resources and union information

Expanding social media and advertising reach

The Phase Two national digital marketing strategy advertised provincial Construction Trades Hub sites and Build Your Skills Learning Hub resources through all major social media platforms in Canada. It developed and implemented five advertising campaigns (see Figure 2) that targeted users in each province—often using unique filtering criteria such as location, age, gender, and interests. The project also experimented with Google search ads in the second half of Phase Two (sponsored ads that appeared in search results after users inputted relevant keyword searches).

Figure 2 Overview of Phase Two social media and advertising campaigns

Campaign 1 (March-May 2023)	Increased traffic to the national Construction Trades Hub site with content that targeted youth, women, newcomers and explorers.
Campaign 2 (March-May 2023)	Increased traffic to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub information page on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites.
Campaign 3 (October 2023)	Boosted traffic to group-specific landing pages on provincial sites that targeted youth, women and newcomers.
Campaign 4 (Nov.-Dec. 2023)	Grew the number of users visiting the Build Your Skills Learning Hub information page on each provincial site.
Campaign 5 (Dec. 2023-Jan. 2024)	Increased the number of users accessing the union information page on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites with this feature.

Overall, a large number of social media and/or Google users saw a campaign advertisement (impressions), viewed a video (video views), and clicked on an ad (clicks). Across all social media and advertising platforms, these campaigns generated almost 33 million impressions and over 348,000 clicks. Overall, the virtual recruitment digital marketing approach became more advanced throughout Phase Two, with both organic and advertising campaigns running simultaneously across different platforms. As will be shown further below, the campaigns supported the aim of enhancing awareness of the unionized skilled trades sector by increasing traffic to provincial Construction Trades Hub sites and growing the number of people using virtual recruitment resources.

Key outcomes

- Ongoing advertising campaigns recruited new virtual recruitment users
- Engagement with users through multiple platforms increased reach
- Varied campaign content that targeted underrepresented groups and users at multiple stages of entering the skilled trades sector

Increasing provincial partners' social media capacity

Adjacent to the advertising campaigns, provincial building trades councils also engaged in social media outreach over the course of the project through organic and paid posts that shared information about virtual recruitment resources. The social media presence of provincial partners was bolstered through the development of a repository of organic social media assets that they could use and adapt for their own marketing. Some partners, such as Construction

Training & Apprenticeship Ontario, had frequent posts about their provincial site throughout Phase Two, which greatly increased the number of new users on their site who came through social media channels.

Compared to Phase One, more provincial partners established and used paid ad accounts, primarily through Facebook and Google ads. Ontario, Manitoba, and Quebec ran paid advertising campaigns to drive traffic to their Construction Trades Hub sites during Phase Two, while other regions had intermittent “boosted” ads and shorter campaigns.

Along with providing provincial partners assets to support their own online recruitment efforts, Phase Two transitioned provincial Construction Trades Hub sites to be independently managed by each provincial building trades council. In Phase One, all sites (other than the Ontario and British Columbia sites) fell under the <https://constructiontradeshub.com/> domain. Mid-way through 2023, the structure was enhanced so that each site had its own unique domain (e.g., <https://manitoba.constructiontradeshub.com/>) to both reflect individual regional customization requirements and to enable the provincial building trades councils to independently manage their respective sites (with continued support as needed from the web development and project team).

Key outcomes

- Provincial partners led additional social media campaign that bolstered traffic to their Construction Trade hub sites
- Provincial partners had an increased ability to manage their sites and adapt their resources

Redesigning and launching new provincial Construction Trades Hub sites

Over the course of Phase Two, several updates took place on existing Construction Trades Hub sites and new provincial sites were launched in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nova Scotia. All sites were redesigned to improve navigation and usability. This included adding clickable icons on the main homepage that directs users to consider the various ways they can use the site—from exploring different trades to signing up for the Build Your Skills Learning Hub—and adding new customized video and animation content to increase engagement.

Navigation and content improvements on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites during Phase Two also aimed to increase the number of users connecting to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub and regional unions. This included adding and redesigning the Learning Hub information and sign-up pages so users could better understand learning and assessment resources and access the site. For provincial sites that include this feature, the Connect to Unions page was updated to include information on the benefits of joining a union and by adding video

content to make the page more engaging. In the later part of 2023, a sign-up form was also added for users who wanted to find out more about unions and training opportunities and connect with a liaison.

Key outcomes

- New provincial Construction Trades Hub sites launched
- All sites redesigned to improve engagement and quality of information
- New sign-up forms added so users could access Build Your Skills Learning Hub resources and learn more about union opportunities

Generating provincial site resources for underrepresented groups

During Phase Two, another provincial site upgrade was the creation of group-specific landing pages to specifically target newcomers, women, and youth. These alternative homepages were for use in targeted recruitment efforts and to allow users from these groups to navigate to different areas of the site. Design features include:

- Each landing page has a headline crafted for the specific target group; for example, “*Are you new to Canada and looking for a career? The unionized skilled trades can help!*”
- The text content on each landing page is also uniquely developed for the target group; for example, the youth landing page emphasizes high wages, debt-free learning, flexibility, and mentorship.
- Further down each page, trades page icons direct users to further information about specific trades—a layout that mirrors the main homepage for the provincial Construction Trades Hub site.

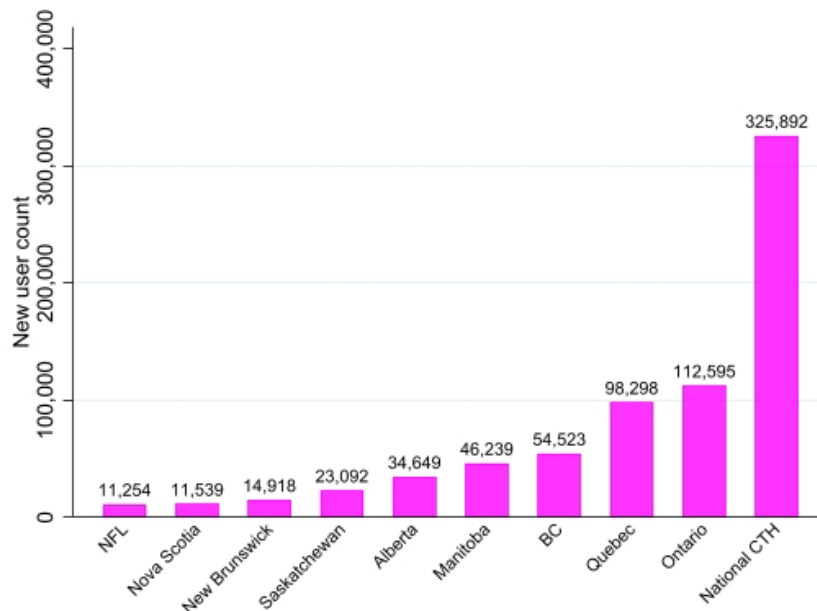
Across all provincial sites, these pages received over 83,000 page views, with the newcomer page receiving 25,836 views, the women page receiving 30,677 views, and the youth page receiving 27,305 views (from page launch to April 1, 2024).

Growing the number of users accessing virtual recruitment resources

With better navigation pathways, new and continuous social media and advertising campaigns, and updated resources, the number of users accessing virtual recruitment resources grew over Phase Two. Almost 733,000 new users visited the national or a provincial Construction Trades Hub site between January 2023 and March 2024. As shown in Figure 3, over 325,000 new users

first landed on the national Construction Trades Hub site. Provincial sites also had thousands of new users, rates that often correlated to their population size; although, as the Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick sites were not active until fall 2023, they therefore had a smaller number of new users.

Figure 3 Number of new users to national and provincial sites (Jan. 23-Mar. 24)



The number of new registrations to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub also had continual growth throughout Phase Two. In total, Phase Two signed up over 4,754 new users to the Learning Hub through provincial Construction Trades Hub sites. Among them, 45 per cent logged on to the Learning Hub at least once during Phase Two. Those who logged on tended to be highly engaged, with more than three-fourths accessing course material. Math and test preparation courses were the most popular.

Key outcomes

- The National and provincial Construction Trades Hub sites had almost 733,000 new users between January 2023 and March 2024
- Many of these users explored site resources and 4,755 signed up to access the Build Your Skills Learning Hub
- After signing up, 45 per cent logged onto the Learning Hub at least once—with three-fourths of these people accessing course material

Learning from users through usability testing and surveys

Phase Two engaged Build Your Skills Learning Hub users through usability testing, intake surveys, and interviews with instructors. Usability testing provided insight into the functionality of the updated Build Your Skills Learning Hub and its division into three separate sections (i.e., the Explorer, Pre-Apprentice, and Apprentice hubs). The intake survey engaged 1,314 people after they signed up for the Learning Hub, of which approximately one third (n=405) of these responses were from individuals who registered through a virtual recruitment provincial site.

Overall, people who engaged in usability testing of the Build Your Skills Learning Hub found it to be a useful resource that was easy to navigate. They appreciated the variety and quality of courses and quizzes, as well as progress tracking tools such as quiz reviews and badges. Most users said that the website met or surpassed their expectations, and they did not find other resources that provided content of similar breadth, depth, or quality on other sites. Most would also recommend Build Your Skills to other people interested in the trades. In terms of suggestions for changes, users recommended providing opportunities for users to interact directly with trades experts, adding testimonials from people who had to overcome difficulties to succeed in the trades, and providing accurate information to dispel common trades myths and misconceptions. They also highlighted that a feature that would allow users to identify key milestones in their training journey would be helpful.

According to the intake survey data, the virtual recruitment strategies were successful in drawing both explorers and underrepresented groups to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub to find out more about careers in the trades and access learning and assessment material. Among virtual recruitment users who completed the intake survey, 71 per cent identified themselves as exploring the trades. The survey results also showed that more newcomers to Canada and racialized groups came to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub through virtual recruitment channels compared to other Learning Hub recruitment methods. For example, 56 per cent of virtual recruitment survey respondents were newcomers to Canada.

Key outcomes

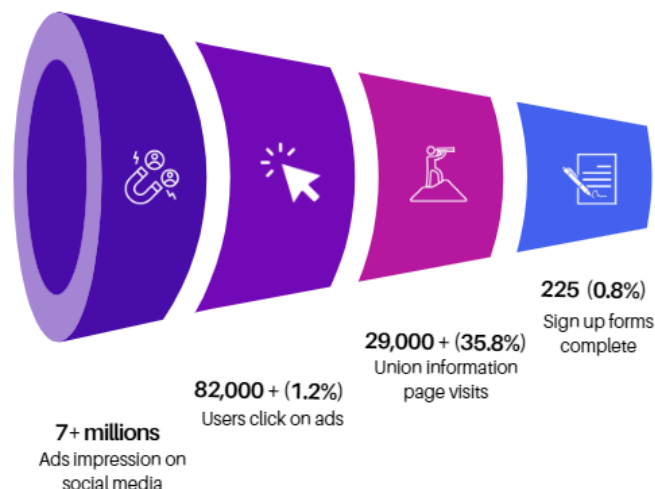
- People who engaged in Build Your Skills Learning Hub usability testing found it to be a useful resource that was easy to navigate and offered advice on additional resources that could be beneficial
- The Learning Hub intake survey found that virtual recruitment resources were able to engage a high percent of people exploring the trades, as well as those from underrepresented groups

Creating opportunities for users to sign up for union outreach

Phase Two implemented changes to diversify how users could connect with unions. As noted above, the Connect to Unions page on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites were updated so that the benefits of union membership were clearly visible and contact information for unions in each region were accessible. In addition, “connect to a union” sign-up forms were added to the redesigned Build Your Skills Learning Hub to provide multiple opportunities for people to declare their interest and receive follow-up response from SkillPlan or a provincial partner on possible union and/or apprenticeship training opportunities.

Opportunities for learning about and engaging with unions were also supported through an advertising campaign that specifically highlighted the benefits of the unionized construction trades sector. It developed assets that publicized the benefits of joining a union and drove traffic to union information pages located on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites with this feature. As Figure 4 shows, over 7 million people saw ads that included messaging around the benefits of belonging to a union (e.g., “high job satisfaction,” “excellent pay, pension and benefits,” “learn from the best trained and highest-quality workers”). Among these people, over 29,000 navigated to a union information page on a provincial Construction Trades Hub site and 225 completed the sign-up form to receive personalized outreach directly.

Figure 4 Campaign 5 funnel of engagement with union-specific content



Key outcomes

- “Connect to a union” sign-up boxes were added to provincial sites and the Learning Hub so users could receive follow-up responses regarding possible union and/or apprenticeship training opportunities
- An advertising campaign publicized the benefits of joining a union and drove traffic to union information pages located on provincial Construction Trades Hub sites

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE PHASES

Opportunities for future advertising campaigns

In evaluating the performance of each ad, the full report shows that certain organic and paid social media posts attracted more engagement than others. In terms of post type, both graphic and video assets typically had more views and clicks than carousel ads. Successful ads and posts typically had simple and clear messaging, an unambiguous call to action, and images of diverse trades people. Assets that began with open-ended questions and strong hooks also performed well. The results also suggested that videos with engaging music that featured a diversity of trades had high engagement. As results from both provincial partners and national campaigns suggested, a key lesson during this phase was implementation of consistent messaging, frequent posts, and diverse content in marketing campaigns.

Phase Two also explored advertising on a greater array of different platforms, including TikTok advertising. As the full report explored, the number of impressions and clicks were often highest on this platform compared to other platforms. However, due to the identification of traffic through TikTok's Pangle network in campaign one, the presence of bot traffic may have had an impact on these metrics. Therefore, a key lesson in this phase of the project was to pay close attention to user activity from various traffic sources. Monitoring engagement activity allowed the project team to exclude TikTok's Pangle network from future campaigns.

Key lessons

- Both graphic and video assets typically had more views and clicks than carousel ads
- Successful ads and posts typically had simple and clear messaging, an unambiguous call to action, and images of diverse trades people
- It is helpful to compare variation in user activity from various traffic sources
- Ongoing monitoring of user activity helped identify bot traffic on TikTok and enabled the team to exclude bot traffic from future campaigns.

Opportunities for provincial site enhancements

The final report shows that engagement on each provincial site varied considerably, largely dependent on the features of the site and where social media and advertising campaigns drove traffic. For example, in Ontario and Quebec, the largest number of page views were on trades information pages. In Quebec, this was driven by traffic from paid social media sources, while in Ontario it was driven by direct and trades partner sources. A key lesson from this finding is that, as provincial resources and advertising campaigns become more customized to their regional

needs and capacity, it becomes increasingly ineffective to contrast and compare engagement metrics nationally. Instead, the evaluation focused on producing provincial-specific results that stakeholders in that region could use to inform their own targets and goals.

Phase Two also experimented with new ways to connect directly with users to provide support in finding information and union and training opportunities.

While evaluating these regional tools was outside the scope of this phase, discussion at partner meetings continuously emphasized the need to connect users with unions and provide navigation support, but that capacity and the tools needed were regionally unique. Therefore, key lessons that will inform the next phase of the project surround the need to better understand the barriers interested users face in initiating steps towards apprenticeship training and union membership. The aim of the next phase of the project is to explore possible solutions to overcome these barriers and generate evidence on what recruitment strategy is most feasible and appropriate for wider implementation across Canada.

Key lessons

- The evaluation focused on producing unique provincial site results that regional partners could use to inform their own targets and goals
- Phase Two experimented with new ways to connect directly with users to provide support in finding information and union and training opportunities and the next phase of the project aims to better understand the long-term outcomes of these users

Opportunities for Build Your Skills Learning Hub enhancements

The evaluation found that 65 per cent of users who completed a virtual recruitment registration form on a provincial Construction Trades Hub site never logged onto the platform. This does not necessarily reflect the quality of the Build Your Skills Learning Hub and could rather be related to learner characteristics, such as motivations for engagement and prior subject knowledge, and points to opportunities for further engagement.² Understanding participants' preliminary expectations and motivations and what prior subject knowledge they have may help boost participant engagement. There is an opportunity to reach out in the future to people who do not log in to find out more about their needs and how virtual recruitment sources can provide further support.

² Watted, A. and Barak, M. (2018). [*Motivating factors of MOOC completers: Comparing between university-affiliated students and general participants*](#). The Internet and Higher Education (37, 11-20).

Once virtual recruitment users logged on to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub, they had relatively high engagement levels in courses, particularly in the multiple math and assessment options available. The re-design of the Learning Hub itself and the attention given to functionalities highlighted by users and project partners likely contributed to an increase in user engagement over Phase Two. Receiving feedback directly from users was a useful way to paint a more complete and nuanced portrait of user needs, goals, and preferences. It showed that the breadth, depth, and quality of learning content provided on the Build Your Skills Learning Hub makes it a unique resource for people who want to make a career in the trades. It also showed that users often still want to be able to “speak with a real person.” Resources like tutoring and contacts with union advisors are key assets to encourage people to join the trades and promote their long-term success in the sector.

Key lessons

- Understanding participants' preliminary expectations, motivations and prior subject knowledge may help boost participant engagement with the Build Your Skills Learning Hub
- Receiving feedback directly from users was a useful way to paint a more complete and nuanced portrait of user needs, goals, and preferences

Opportunities for longer term follow-up and support

The Virtual Recruitment project has built and established a range of resources to increase knowledge about different trades and provincial opportunities, as well as promote enrollment, retention, and completion of trades training. Importantly, the general steps to starting training or joining a union are not well known by the larger public. The Virtual Recruitment project has established itself as a way to reach a large number of people across all provinces to share essential information so people can take meaningful steps towards starting a career in the skilled trades.

While virtual recruitment resources have been successful in reaching new audiences, the project has not yet been able to track how many of these individuals go on to join a union or initiate steps towards starting a career in the skilled trades sector. In terms of moving from interest to action, connecting with a union or training opportunity is the most complex part of the recruitment process, one that may require both technical and human interventions. Indeed, over Phase Two, partners began to implement new ways to connect with users to help provide this type of support. In particular, the majority of provincial sites implemented a “Connect to a Union” sign-up form for people who were interested in learning more about employment and training opportunities. The next phase of the project will implement and evaluate new approaches to supporting pathways and following up with users who are seeking employment

and training opportunities to understand how the Virtual Recruitment project can support their goals.

Broadly, the overall goal of the project is to further refine recruitment and learning tools so potential recruits can more easily find and apply to skilled trades opportunities, be that connecting with a union or beginning pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship training. With a range of online resources now established across Canada, the project will seek to better understand the barriers interested users face in initiating steps towards apprenticeship training and union membership. With this information, the Virtual Recruitment project can continue to trial possible solutions and generate evidence on what recruitment strategies are most feasible and appropriate for wider implementation across Canada.

Key lessons

- A next opportunity in the Virtual Recruitment project will be to explore how best to track individuals who go on to join a union or initiate steps towards starting a career in the skilled trades sector
- Over Phase Two, partners began to implement new ways to connect with users to help provide this type of support, which will be the focus of future evaluation activities



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