

Project Insights Report

Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry



PARTNERS

SkillPlan: BC
Construction Industry
Skills Improvement
Council



LOCATIONS

British Columbia
Manitoba
Nova Scotia
Ontario



INVESTMENT

\$5,509,932



PUBLISHED

July 2025



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Executive Summary

The project's overall goal was to design and test virtual strategies to recruit more individuals, especially those from underrepresented groups (women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized people, newcomers and youth), to careers in the construction trades. The project team achieved this by developing a virtual recruitment strategy that relied on both national and provincial advertising campaigns to drive traffic to provincial construction “hub” websites, where prospective apprentices could get essential information.

While Phase One set the foundation for the strategy's eventual success, Phase Two improved and refined the approach and grew the numbers of individuals interested in the construction trades significantly. This was primarily achieved by simplifying the original website structure, improving the usability of content and adapting the approach across user types. In practice, this allowed the project to tailor content to learners just beginning the process of learning about the industry, and to those who were ready to sign up and join a union. As such, users across Phase Two were more likely to click on the content that mattered to them and their future. Phase Two also emphasized upskilling and credential preparation for users. This was achieved by creating regional Learning Hubs, or customized credentialing pages that were attached to each regional construction hub.

Phase Three built on the previous phases by identifying recruitment and learning tools tailored to the skilled trades, with a focus on understanding barriers to apprenticeship training. Unlike previous phases, no centralized paid advertising campaign was coordinated, and provinces instead managed their own campaigns. Campaign ads in Phase Three were viewed 453,000 times, generating 28,500 visits to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub page.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 During Phase One, over 4,400 users visited provincial sites at least once.
- 2 The social media and advertising campaigns generated almost 33 million impressions, and over 348,000 users clicked on an ad.
- 3 During Phase Three, advertisements led to 28,500 user visits to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub information page.

► The Issue

The construction trades industry is facing a significant labour shortage across the country, with 21% of the current workforce set to retire in the next decade. At the same time, the need for a strong and skilled construction workforce has never been greater given promises to build over four million new homes to address the nation-wide shortage of housing. In response to this, industry projections suggest the need to recruit over 266,000 new workers under the age of 30 over the next 10 years. At the same time, the apprenticeship and trades ecosystem is complex and differs greatly from province to province. Moreover, recruitment is often informal and based on short-term labour needs.

To fill these gaps, unions are looking to increase recruitment of workers from underrepresented groups, but traditional recruitment strategies for achieving this have been mostly ineffective. Online recruitment, or virtual recruitment, held the potential to reach a larger number of new recruits, as well as to allow messaging that appeals to the specific groups. A truly national virtual recruitment strategy has the potential to deliver more consistent messaging across jurisdictions, simplifying the process by which potential recruits learn about the industry.





What We Investigated

This three-phased project involved the development and implementation of a virtual recruitment system to increase the number of individuals—especially those from underrepresented populations (i.e., women, Indigenous and racialized peoples, newcomers and youth)—initiating steps toward becoming an apprentice and joining the unionized construction trades sector. The project also sought to increase the recruitment capacity of the unionized construction sector by providing recruiters (e.g., unions, training schools) with supportive resources. The overall aim was to not only support recruitment efforts but offer prospective apprentices and training providers with the resources needed to help candidates prepare for and succeed in their skilled trades careers.

To achieve this, during Phase One, the project team established partnerships with provincial construction unions across the country—including the Manitoba Building Trades Institute, the College of the BC Building Trades, Saskatchewan Building Trades, the Construction Trades Association of Ontario and Building Trades of Alberta—to create national and province-specific content for users. Each of the Construction Trades Hub websites allows users to explore and learn more about various trades; sign up to access online learning resources in a range of trades-specific areas; and view and connect with active unions in their region for available jobs and/or training opportunities.

Phase Two of the project, which identified, prototyped and tested additional and updated components across virtual recruitment resources, also included coordinated promotion of this content, including multiple national social media advertising campaigns and continuous paid and organic advertising to enhance Google search results. Multiple provinces also undertook their own paid and organic social media campaigns throughout Phase Two. During the initial stages of this phase, additional sites were also launched in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nova Scotia.

Building off the previous phases, Phase Three focused on identifying recruitment and learning tools that could be tailored to skilled trades. This involved examining the barriers that users faced in seeking apprenticeship training. Various forms of data were collected, including results of ongoing social media campaigns, interviews with provincial building trades councils, survey results of participants seeking union or training opportunities, and intake survey results from the Learning Hub. As a result of the data collection, a framework was created for a program management information system that was made available to provincial building trades councils. The councils can utilize it to improve data collection channels. Unlike previous phases, the project did not coordinate any paid advertising campaigns, and provinces planned their own advertising campaigns.

As the project focused on how to better recruit underrepresented groups to a sector that has historically not welcomed them, the most important question asked by this project was “Can online advertising and virtual recruitment stimulate interest in unionized trades?” Moreover, the project asked, “Using an approach that targets users based on their degree of familiarity with the sector, can the project team build ‘learning hubs’ that provide an engaging and useful experience for users, to the point where they are able to assess their current skills and upskill themselves as needed?”



What We’re Learning

During Phase One, 4,442 users visited provincial sites at least once. During Phase Two, across all social media and advertising platforms, the campaigns generated almost 33 million impressions (i.e., the number of times an ad loaded onto a screen), and over 348,000 users clicked on an ad. As a result of widespread knowledge mobilization activities during Phase Two, over 500 organizations were a part of the Build Your Skills Learning Hub network as of summer 2024, helping to promote resources among the groups they served. During the campaign in Phase Three, advertisements were viewed 453,000 times, leading to 28,500 user visits to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub information page.

Partnership coordination is possible

The virtual recruitment project is built on a pan-Canadian partnership model to help centralize and coordinate activities across the unionized construction industry in Canada. This type of model allows partners to share digital infrastructure and resources, as well as best practices in local recruitment. To facilitate this coordination, the project created ongoing opportunities to engage partners and bring them together to increase collaboration Canada-wide. Three types of network engagement took place during Phase Two: needs assessment interviews; an in-person meeting of all partners; and a series of knowledge mobilization activities. Along with engaging provincial trades councils, some of these activities also engaged networks of training providers and authorities, employers, governments and community service organizations that support equity-deserving groups. This broader ecosystem enabled opportunities for collaboration and responsiveness to local and evolving conditions that advance recruitment, training and advocacy efforts.

Advertising on social media has become integral to outreach across sectors, but evaluating its effectiveness across platforms is challenging

This project used paid and organic ads across multiple platforms—Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok—and all showed varying degrees of effectiveness. In general, the ads that were most effective were either videos or graphics, or messages that were short and to the point. Across most provinces, and at the national level, TikTok was shown to be the most efficient at achieving the largest number of clicks and impressions.

However, upon closer inspection, the project team discovered that this was in large part due to bot traffic. The team was able to pivot mid-campaign and eliminate any further bot traffic from this source. Learning how this can inflate numbers has proven invaluable.

Learning Hub usage was lower, but users that logged on had high engagement with the content

Each regional site had a regional Learning Hub designed to help provide additional training and credential recognition. Most users that signed on to the national or regional sites did not log on to the Learning Hub, but this appears to be, at least in part, due to the fact that the largest group of users was not already familiar with apprenticeships and unions. Users that were more familiar with these processes had higher rates of engagement and found the Learning Hubs useful, especially when it came to doing test preparation and obtaining additional mathematics credentials.

Focusing on simplicity was key to increasing engagement

The project coordinators learned from the complexity of Phase One; they eliminated the extra portal used for registration purposes and integrated the Learning Hubs into each regional site. This led to a more straightforward approach of directing users to their respective provincial sites from the start. This involved ensuring that each provincial website team had the internal capacity to support their individual paid and organic campaigns.

Program coordinators should expect attrition

Approaches that use platforms like the Learning Hub should cast a wide net to reach their target audiences and overall engagement numbers. Many users that sign up for virtual learning never end up completing their lessons—only 35% of users registering for the Learning Hubs logged on at least once. Given that the vast majority of users who sign on will never complete their lessons, program designers wanting to serve potential workers by integrating virtual learning into their programs should focus on recruiting large numbers of potential users in order to show impact.

★ Why It Matters

Canada has a long-standing shortage of skilled trades people, with every province and territory making efforts to attract non-traditional workers, such as women, racialized peoples and newcomers. The need for more trades people is particularly strong in the construction sector, where recruitment has been stagnant. Canada's success at building the housing it needs and the large infrastructure projects that are essential to the transition to net zero is contingent on having enough skilled tradespeople to do the work.

Unfortunately, not enough is known about what works, for whom and in what contexts to attract and retain more members of underrepresented groups to the trades. This project offers evidence to close this gap, with detailed information about how to create and mobilize consistent yet adaptable resources to meet the needs of a range of users.



State of Skills: Innovation in Training, Recruitment and Upskilling for Skilled Trades

Canada needs to address long standing shortages of skilled tradespeople to advance policy priorities around decarbonization, affordable housing and transforming industry to add more value to what we produce.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Virtual recruitment and upskilling online are important tools, but they have limitations. The Learning Hub was especially effective for users needing additional math credits and test preparation, but it could not replace the more intensive in-person training that apprentices need. Policymakers and program designers should take note of this when designing future programs. Adopting a hybrid approach that stresses both the accessibility of online learning and the apprentice's need for hands-on experiences will help.

Canada has long-standing barriers to more labour mobility for workers in the skilled trades, with each province and territory having its own rules and regulations. With the increased pressure from the tariffs, Canada has an opportunity to dismantle these barriers and make it easier for skilled tradespeople to be in the right place at the right time. However, this effort will require cooperation and coordination from a large number of regional actors. This project demonstrates that this kind of complex partnership is possible, and policymakers should take note of the role of a skilled intermediary and the focused relationship-building efforts required to facilitate collaboration and overall impact across a large group.

► What's Next

Building on the findings from the rigorous evaluation to date, the Future Skills Centre continues to partner with the BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council to improve the [virtual recruitment and training system](#). The next steps should focus on expanding effective practices and better aligning the virtual recruitment process with the construction sector.

Next phases will continue to support local unions and provincial building trades councils in connecting with new recruits, especially those from underrepresented groups.

Partners will continue to work with the Future Skills Centre to implement a responsive, formative and outcome-based evaluation and use research to inform the process of implementation and deployment.

The project has overwhelming industry support and participation from all provincial building trades councils across Canada, building trades unions (local and international) and their affiliated training schools. As such, the project is in an opportune position to further integrate the virtual recruitment and training system with colleges, secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, sector councils, Indigenous training providers and community organizations serving traditionally underrepresented communities.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

Dark, G., McDonough, L. and Richter, S. (2024). Project Insights Report: Expanding and Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry: Phases 1, 2 and 3, BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council. Toronto: Future Skills Centre.
<https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/national-recruitment-construction/>

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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