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Project Insights Report

Expanding and Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry

PARTNERS
Skill Plan: BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council

LOCATIONS
Across Canada

INVESTMENT
$7,757,996

PUBLISHED
July 2025

CONTRIBUTORS
Christian Noumi Laura McDonough Anita Dubey

Executive Summary

Canada's construction sector faces a persistent and increasingly urgent workforce challenge. The sector needs to attract, prepare, and retain more skilled workers. Prospective workers, particularly those who lack family, social or workplace connections to the trades, must navigate a fragmented apprenticeship system, uneven provincial requirements, and access practical information on how to access training, union connections, and employment.

Across four phases, SkillPlan and its partners developed, tested, refined, and expanded a pan-Canadian virtual recruitment and training system for the unionized construction sector. The project began by testing whether online outreach, provincial construction trades hub websites, and a learning portal could attract people from equity-deserving groups to explore careers in construction. It then evolved into a more integrated system with targeted advertising; regional hub sites; the Build Your Skills Learning Hub; group-specific landing pages; union information; and "Connect to a Union" pathways. In the most recent phase, it added apprenticeship liaisons who provided individualized support to users seeking training or employment.

Evidence from the four phases shows that digital recruitment can generate substantial awareness and traffic. Phase 1 showed that social media and paid advertising could reach new users and direct them to provincial sites, but also revealed that the initial pathway from microsite to portal to learning resources created too much friction. Phase 2 responded by streamlining navigation, redesigning the Build Your Skills Learning Hub around different user stages, and expanding provincial sites. It generated almost 33 million impressions and over 348,000 ad clicks. Phase 3 shifted the focus from awareness to moving interested users toward unions, training, and employment – a more difficult task. It showed that regional capacity and recruitment processes varied significantly across the country.

In Phase 4, two national digital campaigns generated more than 11 million ad impressions, nearly 400,000 clicks, and over 281,000 unique website visits. More than 7,100 individuals recruited through virtual recruitment channels registered on the Build Your Skills Learning Hub during this phase. Apprenticeship liaisons also added a human support layer: approximately 1,600 users received outreach and about one-fifth responded. Among users who received support, 69% were satisfied or very satisfied with that support.

Overall, the project suggests that digital recruitment, self-paced skills-development tools, localized trades information, and personalized guidance can work together to strengthen pathways into unionized construction trades. However, the findings point to an important caution: online recruitment can generate awareness and interest at scale, but the movement from interest to employment depends on user readiness, local labour market conditions, training availability, union capacity, and the quality of human follow-up.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Across four phases, SkillPlan and its partners built a pan-Canadian virtual recruitment ecosystem for the construction trade that moved from awareness-building to a more integrated model of online exploration, skills development, union connection, and personalized support.

2. More than 7,100 people registered with the Build Your Skills Learning Hub during its final phase, and the site saw over 281,000 unique website visits.

3. Users who entered the system with job-seeking goals took more concrete employment-related steps and were more likely to secure employment, while explorers often used the system as a lower-barrier way to learn about trades before taking further action.

The Issue

Canada's construction sector continues to face significant pressures, including skilled labour shortages, demographic change, a looming retirement wave, and sustained demand linked to housing, infrastructure, and broader economic development. In the next decade, 21% of the current workforce are set to retire, and industry projections suggest that over 266,000 new workers under the age of 30 need to be recruited over the next 10 years. Although skilled trades careers can offer strong wages, structured learning, and long-term pathways, the sector has struggled to attract enough new entrants, particularly from groups historically underrepresented in construction.

Awareness of opportunities is only one challenge. For many prospective apprentices, especially those without prior exposure to the sector, the pathway into unionized construction is difficult to navigate. Apprenticeship systems differ across provinces and territories, and union and training requirements vary by region and trade. Prospective entrants may need to identify a trade, assess their readiness, build foundational skills, find training, connect with a union, secure sponsorship, and then pursue employment opportunities. Traditional recruitment channels can also reproduce exclusion. Word-of-mouth networks and informal employer or union connections may work for those already linked to the trades, but are less effective for women, Indigenous Peoples, newcomers, youth, racialized people, and others without industry connections.



What We Investigated

The Virtual Recruitment project was designed to address this gap. It tested whether a coordinated digital system could reach new users, provide accessible information, support skill-building, and create stronger pathways to unions, training, and employment, especially when combined with regional customization and human support.

This project unfolded across four phases, with each phase refining the virtual recruitment and training system based on implementation and evaluation learning.

Phase 1: Building and testing the virtual recruitment pathway
A virtual recruitment and assessment model for the unionized construction industry was designed, implemented, and tested. Social media campaigns introduced equity-deserving groups to the construction and building trades, directed users to provincial microsites with local labour market and trades information, and then invited them to access a portal and learning centre with more detailed resources and union connections. The evaluation examined campaign performance, microsite engagement, user navigation, and early evidence of whether the model could stimulate interest among new audiences.

Phase 2: Expanding and improving the recruitment system
In the second phase, the model was expanded across a broader pan-Canadian partnership network, and the user journey was improved. Drawing on Phase 1 findings, navigation was simplified to allow users to access the Build Your Skills Learning Hub more directly through provincial construction trades hub sites. The Learning Hub was also redesigned around three user pathways: explorers, pre-apprentices, and apprentices. This phase included national and provincial advertising campaigns, new provincial sites, group-specific landing pages for women, youth, and newcomers, updated union information, and new ways for users to express interest in union outreach.

Phase 3: Understanding barriers between interest and action
The third phase shifted the learning focus from awareness and engagement to the more difficult transition to concrete steps toward apprenticeship, training, or union membership. It examined how users engaged with recruitment tools, what barriers they faced, and what regional sites needed to support users more effectively. Data collection included social media and website analytics, Learning Hub usage data, interviews with Provincial Building Trades Councils, user surveys, and the development of a Program Management Information System (PMIS) framework to support future tracking.

Phase 4: Adding personalized support and tracking user outcomes
Building on earlier phases, a more integrated model was tested in the fourth phase. The model combined paid advertising, provincial hub sites, the Build Your Skills Learning Hub, and more direct connections to union employment and training. Apprenticeship liaisons provided individual support to users who expressed interest in union jobs or training opportunities. Canada's Building Trades Unions (CBTU) and partners also conducted a targeted needs analysis of union recruitment requirements, developed recruitment procedures, and used a PMIS to track outreach and support, although integration into daily workflows remained uneven.

To evaluate the program, Social Research and Demonstration Corporation used mixed methods, including digital analytics, Learning Hub data, surveys, interviews, usability testing, administrative data, and partner feedback. An evolving evaluation design was appropriate because the project was testing a complex recruitment ecosystem with national partners, provincial councils, unions, training centres, employers, and prospective apprentices at different levels of readiness.

What We're Learning

The project showed that digital recruitment can expand awareness of the unionized construction trades, but that awareness alone is not enough to move prospective apprentices into training, union connections, or employment.

Digital recruitment reaches new users, but the pathway must be simple
Phase 1 showed that social media, paid advertising, and traditional channels could attract people to trades-related information, even those who might not have had interest in unionized construction. More than 4,400 users visited provincial microsites at least once. However, only about 5% transitioned from microsites to the learning portal, which suggested there were too many steps to the learning resources. This became a central lesson: users who are exploring the trades may disengage if they are asked to create accounts, move across platforms, or take additional steps before they understand the value of doing so.

User testing and regional adaptation were essential
User testing in phase 1 identified challenges with navigation, calls to action, mobile use, and the relationship between microsites, the portal, and learning content. Users expected information to be organized by their interests, such as trade, region, or stage of decision-making. At the same time, provincial partners differed in their recruitment needs, social media capacity, and labour market contexts. A single national model was therefore not sufficient. The project needed common infrastructure, but enough flexibility for provincial councils to adapt content, timing, and resources to local conditions.

Streamlining access expanded reach and improved the user journey
Changes made during the second phase paid off. Simplified access to the Learning Hub, improved provincial construction trades hubs, and user pathways based on their stage generated almost 33 million impressions and over 348,000 website clicks. Almost 733,000 new users visited national or provincial Construction Trades Hub sites between January 2023 and March 2024. More than 4,700 users signed up for the Build Your Skills Learning Hub through provincial sites. Among these users, 45% logged in at least once and engaged with course material, especially math and test preparation resources.

Through targeted content the project reached different audiences
Dedicated landing pages for women, youth, and newcomers, with tailored messaging and visuals, received more than 83,000 page views across provincial sites in phase 2. While the numbers do not show that users entered apprenticeships, they do indicate that group-specific outreach creates entry points for people who may not see themselves reflected in generic construction recruitment materials. Inclusion-oriented recruitment requires more than naming equity-deserving groups; it requires messages, images, and pathways that speak to different motivations and concerns.

Moving from interest to action is the hardest part of the pathway
By Phase 3, the project had built a substantial online recruitment and learning infrastructure. The learning focus shifted from reaching people online to determining if interested users could be supported into next steps. This transition was difficult to track and standardize. Provincial Building Trades Councils had different levels of staff capacity, recruitment needs, union relationships, and follow-up processes. Digital recruitment can create demand for support, but not the capacity to respond. If users express interest but regional partners lack the staff, tools, or processes to follow up, the pathway from engagement to training or employment can stall.

Outcomes remained difficult to measure, although there was continued Learning Hub engagement during this phase, with 2,841 new Virtual Recruitment registered users. A paid campaign generated more than 453,000 impressions and 28,500 visits to the Build Your Skills Learning Hub information page. However, recruitment and apprenticeship outcomes often unfold over weeks or months, depending on training intake schedules, hiring needs, upgrading requirements, and union processes. Short evaluation windows were therefore not well suited to capturing the full pathway into employment or apprenticeship.

Combining digital tools with personalized support had value
More than 7,100 individuals recruited through Virtual Recruitment channels registered on the Build Your Skills Learning Hub in the fourth phase. More than 11 million impressions, nearly 400,000 clicks, and over 281,000 unique website visits were recorded.

Phase 4 also added apprenticeship liaisons, who provided individual outreach to users interested in union employment or training. Roughly 1,600 users received outreach, and about one-fifth responded. 69% of surveyed users who received support were satisfied or very satisfied with the support.

Users' goals strongly influenced outcomes. Those who entered the system seeking job support took more concrete employment-related steps and were more likely to secure employment. Explorers often remained in information-gathering stages. This should not necessarily be interpreted as failure, since learning about the trades and deciding whether to proceed may be a meaningful outcome for early-stage users.

Barriers remained practical, informational, financial, and relational
Many users did not know anyone in the trades, lacked money for training, did not have appropriate trades experience, or were unsure how to find job opportunities, training programs, or union pathways, according to a phase 4 survey. This finding indicates that virtual recruitment can serve as navigation and support. Across all phases, data systems remained a central condition for understanding impact. The project generated strong evidence of reach, engagement, early outcomes, and user-reported actions, but less definitive evidence about longer-term apprenticeship and employment impacts. Future iterations will need more integrated data systems, clearer handoff protocols, and longer follow-up windows.

Why It Matters

This project addresses a central workforce problem in the construction sector: how to build a larger and more diverse pipeline into skilled trades occupations when existing recruitment pathways are fragmented, locally variable, and often dependent on informal networks. Through four phases, the project showed that online recruitment can widen the top of the funnel, but that awareness alone is not enough. The more important contribution is the gradual development of an ecosystem that connects outreach, information, skills development, union navigation, and human support.



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

For the construction sector, the project serves as a practical model for modernizing recruitment. Provincial Building Trades Councils and unions can use digital tools to reach people who don't attend traditional recruitment events or know someone in the trades. However, the project also shows that online tools need to be paired with regionally relevant content. A prospective apprentice in Québec, British Columbia, Ontario, or Newfoundland and Labrador may face different requirements, union structures, training pathways, and labour market conditions. A national system is useful only if it can accommodate those differences.

The project shows the value of different entry points for prospective apprentices and job seekers. People exploring the trades may not be ready to apply to a union or start training immediately. They may first need to compare trades, understand wages and work conditions, assess their skills, build confidence, and identify whether a skilled trades pathway fits their goals. Users who are closer to job readiness may need different interventions than those who are still exploring. Job transitions into the trades are more likely when users can move through different levels of readiness: exploration, skill-building, union connection, training, and employment. The project's evolution from a linear microsite-to-portal pathway toward a more flexible system of explorer, pre-apprentice, and apprentice resources reflects a more realistic understanding of how career decisions are made.

The project also reinforces that recruitment must be intentional to reach equity-deserving groups. Group-specific landing pages, targeted campaigns, diverse images, credible messengers, and clear explanations of pathways can help make the sector more visible. However, representation in advertising is only one part of inclusion. The barriers reported by users, including limited networks, financial constraints, unrecognized experience, and perceived hiring bias, show that recruitment systems must also address the conditions that shape who can persist after initial interest.

For policymakers and funders, the project offers a useful lesson on scaling digital innovation. Scaling is not simply building one platform and driving more traffic to it. Over four phases, the project had to improve usability, simplify navigation, expand provincial sites, adapt to regional capacity, strengthen employer and union connection points, and introduce human follow-up. The model became more promising as it moved from digital outreach toward a blended approach that included online resources and apprenticeship liaisons. This suggests that workforce technology projects need funding not only for platforms and marketing, but also for implementation support, staff capacity, data systems, and continuous improvement.

There is also a broader systems lesson. Apprenticeship and unionized trades pathways are not only individual journeys; they are mediated by institutions, regulations, local labour demand, training seats, union practices, and employer needs. A virtual recruitment system can make those pathways more visible and easier to navigate, but it cannot fully overcome regional bottlenecks, hiring freezes, training waitlists, or limited staff capacity among regional partners. The project therefore points to the need for stronger alignment between digital recruitment, apprenticeship planning, union capacity, training infrastructure, and labour market demand.

Finally, the project shows the value of staged learning. Phase 1 revealed that the first pathway had too much friction. Phase 2 improved reach and navigation. Phase 3 showed that the transition from interest to action required more support and better tracking. Phase 4 added apprenticeship liaisons and generated stronger user outcome evidence. This progression is important because it shows how innovation in workforce systems often requires several rounds of testing, refinement, and adaptation before a model becomes both scalable and useful.

What's Next

The project is continuing through a fifth phase, embedding the virtual recruitment system more deeply within the apprenticeship and training ecosystem. SkillPlan, CBTU, and Provincial Building Trades Councils will focus on strengthening the integration of the Construction Trades Hub and Build Your Skills Learning Hub into the recruitment, assessment, training, and apprenticeship-readiness practices of unions, training organizations, workforce partners, and regional systems.

Phase 5 will also test AI-augmented and technology-enabled enhancements to make the system more personalized, easier to navigate, and more useful for retention and progression. The project aims to engage more than 10,000 prospective apprentices with upgraded content, and to support 1,000 new or existing pre-apprentices and apprentices as they move toward training, union connection, employment, or apprenticeship opportunities.

The evaluation will address an important evidence gap to explore whether users progress into apprenticeships, union membership, certifications, and stable trades employment over time. The Phase 5 evaluation will use longitudinal follow-up data, platform analytics, comparison-group analysis where feasible, and GBA+ disaggregated analysis to examine outcomes nine to twelve months after users first engage with the system. It will also gather qualitative evidence to understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Overall, the next phase is about consolidation and evidence-building: strengthening the handoff from online engagement to real-world opportunity, supporting retention, and generating stronger evidence on whether a pan-Canadian digital recruitment and training infrastructure can support more equitable and sustained pathways into the unionized construction trades.

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
Noumi, C., McDonough, L. and Dubey, A. (2026). Project Insights Report: Expanding and Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry, 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

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Expanding and 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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