

OISE article on women in trades success stories

ONTARIO PROGRAM PROMOTES WOMEN IN APPRENTICESHIPS

Chances are greater today that the mechanic tuning your car's engine will be a woman. The number of female auto mechanics and apprentice mechanics in Ontario has doubled over the past three years. Much of this increase is due to the work of the Women's Access to Apprenticeship projects of the Ontario Ministry of Skills Development.

This article will briefly review the organization and mandate of the women's access projects, as well as some of the techniques developed by project co-ordinators to help place women in skilled trades, and to encourage women to consider careers in non-traditional occupations.

What are the Women's Access to Apprenticeship Projects?

The projects were established in 1989 as a community-based initiative to increase the number of women in non-traditional occupations such as plumber, electrician, machinist, and carpenter which require apprenticeship training.

The heart of the initiative is the 30 regional projects 25 of which are delivered through community sponsors, such as local industrial training committees, colleges of applied arts and technology, and women's training agencies.

The other five projects are delivered directly by the Ministry of Skills Development through field offices of the Apprenticeship and Client Services Branch.

Access project co-ordinators have three goals. First, they help women find apprenticeships.

Second, they spearhead the creation of training courses to help women strengthen their skills for training in non-traditional occupations.

Third, they attract women to skilled trades by changing attitudes about careers in skilled trades.

Helping place apprentices

Ruth Charron, co-ordinator with the Ottawa-Carleton Community Industrial Training Committee describes her approach to finding apprenticeship opportunities for women as "basically cold calling." "I call and sensitize employers to the idea of women in trades," she says.

Charron makes her calls when a training program is nearing completion. In early 1992, a course for women at a local community college on the basics of auto mechanics was coming to a close. Charron wanted to see if area employers would be willing to take the female graduates as apprentices. One of the employers she called was Bell Canada, which operates a fleet of 275 vehicles.

Bell had not hired apprentices for 30 years, but it had a policy of encouraging women who work in clerical and secretarial sectors to try assignments in non-traditional fields. Charron persuaded the corporation to hire two female graduates as apprentices on an eight-week trial.

Bell interviewed members of the graduating class and chose Susan Gordon and Sheila Haddad. Sheila Haddad had been working in retail services for ten years and was bored with her job. She had always been interested in cars and is happy with how the Ottawa project was able to help place her in an apprenticeship.

Both apprentices worked for a trial period that proved so successful that Bell decided to keep them on for another 12 months, with the possibility that they could complete their apprenticeships with the corporation.

Charron has found that even if she cannot interest an employer in hiring a female apprentice, getting women placed in entry-level positions can lead to apprenticeship opportunities later.

In another case, female graduates from a course in the basics of motor vehicle mechanics decided they would rather be service writers rather than work in the garage. Charron recommended the graduates to auto dealers as service writers, recognizing that if graduates were successful employees the employer would likely come back to her for other referrals, including apprenticeships.

#### Fighting the recession

Placing women in non-tradition occupations is a challenge and the recession has made placement even more challenging.

In Peterborough, Mary Lynch-Taylor, co-ordinator with Sir Sandford Fleming College, has unlocked funding for women who have taken skills training courses but were unable to find work. Several were on social assistance.

"These women made a commitment to training yet were no further ahead because of the recession," Lynch-Taylor says.

Lynch-Taylor learned that the Social Services Employment Program (SSEP), sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, provided employment incentives to help eligible employers, such as hospitals and school boards, hire social assistance recipients. Often these employers have skilled tradespeople on staff.

She approached the local employment liaison officer of the social services ministry and proposed that SSEP be used to hire skills-ready women as apprentices. The ministry agreed and Lynch-Taylor spent four months persuading eligible area employers to hire five female apprentices. She handled the recruitment of candidates herself.

"These organizations were aware that employment equity legislation was coming and recognized this initiative as an opportunity to set in motion equity plans," she said. Women's access co-ordinators in other districts have adopted the same technique.

#### Working with employers and female workers

Getting women placed in apprenticeships does not mean the end of a co-ordinator's work. Apprenticeship can be a challenging experience for both women and their male co-workers. Both must evaluate their values and career expectations.

Co-ordinators can assist when workplace difficulties arise. Many organize support groups for women in trades, and encourage female apprentices to build their own network of mentors and social contacts.

They also work directly with employers to help remove barriers to female participation in skilled trades. In one instance, more than half of the 66 women trained by Boeing Canada Technology Ltd. in Arnprior quit or requested transfers to traditional office jobs.

The 50 percent dropout rate was a significant problem for Boeing, but the company was committed to training women and had to meet federal government equity guidelines regarding the number of women in its workforce.

The corporation asked Diane Gordon, project co-ordinator with the Renfrew County Industrial Training Committee, to help investigate why women would not stay on the shop floor. With the support of the Ontario Women's Directorate, Gordon surveyed Boeing's female employees in non-traditional jobs, their male co-workers, their supervisors, and some of the women who had left those jobs.

As a result of her findings, Boeing developed an awareness program dealing with harassment, and put together a list of babysitters in the area who can care for children whose mothers perform shift work.

In addition, the company is considering implementing a program to help acquaint the women with basic workplace skills before they begin training for skilled jobs.

#### Reaching out to Aboriginal Women

Creating training opportunities for Aboriginal Women is an even greater challenge. The negotiation of programs requires the support of Aboriginal community groups and First Nations.

In the Parry Sound area, Marie Marchand, project co-ordinator with Skiltec of North Bay, helped register 11 Aboriginal Women in a Native Residential Construction program. This did not happen overnight. Creating opportunities for Aboriginal women to learn construction skills had been a priority for Marchand for eighteen months.

During those months links were established with the Parry Sound school board, the Native Employment Council of Parry Sound, the Canada Employment Centre, the Parry Sound community industrial training committee, the Indian Friendship Centre of Parry Sound, and the Parry Sound First Nation.

These linkages ensured that Aboriginal women were aware of training opportunities and had access to pre-apprenticeship training to ensure they had a good foundation in basic workplace skills.

#### Developing pre-apprenticeship training courses

Ensuring that women have basic workplace skills is critical to successfully placing them as apprentices. Part of the job of project co-ordinators is working with employers, workers, educators, and trainers to set up training courses that will give women the skills essential for becoming apprentices.

"Employers must play an integral part in developing successful pre-apprenticeship training courses," says Charron. To determine what kind of training courses are needed, she sends surveys to employers relying on specific skilled trades to determine employer interest in training programs.

The survey usually consists of a one-page questionnaire asking employers if there is a need for pre-employment training for trades in their industry, and whether they expect to hire or replace workers in the near future. It is followed by a request to join a committee to discuss and plan training for the community.

Involving employers at each stage of the process encourages them to take ownership of the initiative, which strengthens their commitment to hiring training graduates.

Once an employers' committee is set up, Charron meets with the local college of applied arts and technology to determine if the college is interested in running a course, and what funding they need to develop it.

She leaves interviews and student selection to employers. Usually, candidates write a math and mechanical aptitude test and attend an information session to introduce them to the trade, and learn how apprenticeship works.

When the college training course is nearly finished, Charron sends out flyers to a wide range of employers advertising that graduates will be available for work. She then follows up the flyers with cold calls to develop apprenticeship opportunities.

#### Training their own staff

But female apprentices need not come from outside an organization. In North Bay, Marie Marchand used an initiative called Bridges to create new training opportunities for women in the Northeast. She learned about the initiative by attending the national conference on Women-Into Trades and Technology.

The Bridges plan enables employers to encourage female employees to move from traditional positions, such as secretarial and sales help, to technical, trade, or labouring jobs. ~~It was originally developed by the City of Toronto to train its own staff.~~

"The program not only helps employers make greater use of the potential of their own female workers but also enables them to strengthen their equity participation without having to hire outside their organization," Marchand says.

In the fall of 1993, Marchand contacted staff working with the Bridges program and organized a workshop for North Bay. Letters were sent to 60 employers, including public and private sector organizations. Follow-up calls were made to encourage registration.

Twenty organizations registered, including representatives of the city's three hospitals, police and fire departments, the municipal government, Ontario Northland, the local and provincial utilities, the local community college, a nearby Canadian Forces base, the public school board, and the community industrial training committee.

Since the workshop, some of the participating organizations are considering partnerships to jointly offer training to female employees. The workshop also promoted the local Project which resulted in a female apprentice carpenter being hired.

#### Promoting non-traditional trades to women

In addition to persuading employers to hire female apprentices, project co-ordinators must find women interested in careers in skilled trades. In Ottawa, Charron finds the most effective strategy is to develop a reputation among community groups as a source of information about sponsored training programs.

In addition, to promote pre-apprenticeship training courses, she run newspaper advertisements with the caption "Interesting women will be interested in..." The ad and her reputation among community groups results in a steady stream of referrals.

Project co-ordinator Margaret Buchanan, who is based at Fanshawe College in London, uses the facilities of the college's School of Technology to organize an annual career day for women. About 40 women attend to learn more about trades through meeting female role models, listening to speakers, and touring the college's facilities.

In more remote areas, open houses and speakers cannot easily reach many communities. To overcome distance and demystify the life of tradeswomen, Marion MacAdam, co-ordinator with the Kenora Area Committee for Skill Development, decided to produce a photo journal. The journal, **Breaking Barriers**, profiles 12 women in non-traditional occupations and lists Northwest Ontario agencies and programs to help women access training.

It was printed in French and English, with headings and picture captions also translated into Ojibway, and distributed to community groups and schools throughout the North. Publishing the journal was a collaborative effort with support and co-operation from project co-ordinators in northern communities, unions, employers, and the federal and provincial governments.

#### Working with community groups

Partnerships with community groups can also create imaginative approaches to promoting non-traditional careers. With the support of the London Industrial and Training Association Board, Buchanan developed a partnership with Big Sisters of London to introduce Little Sisters to female role models in skilled trades. Little Sisters are public school students in grades seven and eight.

Day-long seminars are held every three months with each of Fanshawe College's technology divisions: civil/architectural, electrical/ electronics, motive power, and manufacturing sciences. Little Sisters spent a day with female students and tradespeople to learn that women can participate skilled workplaces.

"The seminars provide Little Sisters with the opportunity to meet female role models and broadens their career expectations," Buchanan says.

This year, 10 Little Sisters were involved and Buchanan plans to increase numbers in 1993. The outreach initiative has been running for a year and has attracted attention from other communities in southwestern Ontario. The Province of Alberta has also expressed interest in the initiative.

#### Working with schools

Co-ordinators frequently work with local public schools, colleges of applied arts and technology, and community groups interested in training issues to ensure women have access to the training they need to become apprentices.

Gordon speaks to technical teachers as well as career counsellors about the benefits of careers in skilled occupations, and encourages local high schools to participate in the ministry's School Workplace Apprenticeship Program.

The program provides a bridge between high school and the workplace by allowing students to begin an apprenticeship while earning their high school diploma. Two thirds of Ontario's high school students do not continue studies at college or university. They frequently enter the workforce with no workplace skills to offer.

By promoting the School Workplace Apprenticeship Program, Gordon encourages counsellors to consider promoting careers in skilled trades to female students.

### Working with the media

Media coverage expands the impact of seminars and speeches. Toronto co-ordinator Jean Miller, with the ministry's apprenticeship field office, produced a series of six half-hour cable television programs called "Working Women" that were broadcast in cities throughout southern Ontario.

The programs covered a number of non-traditional occupations, including interviews with role models in the studio and video taken at the work site. All of the careers featured were non-traditional for women, such as electrician, steamfitter and chef.

"I chose television to bring career information to women who are not actively seeking career counselling, but have the skills to become an apprentice," Miller says. "Television helps me go beyond networking to reach women who have not considered non-traditional careers."

In smaller centres, a specific event can focus attention on the achievements of women in non-traditional jobs. For example, Gordon alerted the local media after persuading the Renfrew Chamber of Commerce to allow female students in a carpentry program to build its tourist information centre. The story got wide coverage in local media and created interest in the local access project.

### The projects' achievement

Despite the recession, the number of women employed in non-traditional skilled trades in Ontario has increased by 70 per cent since April 1989. In several trades, there have been significant increases: 112 female apprentice electricians are registered now as opposed to 70 in 1990, and there are 186 female apprentice carpenters working compared to 95 three years ago.

But there is still a long way to go. Male electrical apprentices still outnumber women 73 to one, and male carpentry apprentices outnumber females by 30 to one. Women represent 50 per cent of the workforce, but less than five per cent of all-apprentices.

The success enjoyed by the community-based approach developed by the projects has made them a model for the Ministry's renewed outreach efforts that are a key part of the government's initiative to revitalize apprenticeship in Ontario.