



Writing Sample

WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE THE CHANGING FACE OF TRADES

The following article was written for the TradesLife corporate website. TradesLife is a service helping connect skilled tradespeople with job opportunities.

BY JESSE YARDLEY

How many tradeswomen do you know? As opposed to tradesmen, the average person can count the number of tradeswomen they know on one hand. That's because trades work has typically been a male-dominated industry.

Yet, recent reports show the number of women in trades is on the rise. The Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board's 2014 Statistical Profiles report shows a steady increase in the number of female registered apprentices. In 2014, that number reached 6,302, up from 5,846 in 2013. Among 25 trades listed the largest increase in registered apprentices were for welders, heavy equipment technicians, gassfitters, and landscape gardeners.

Despite the increasing number of female registered apprentices, women still make up less than 9 percent of the total number of registered apprentices. Women apprentices are also less likely to complete a trade program than their male counterparts according to Alberta Innovation and Advanced Education. In the 2013/14 school year, 74 percent of apprentices completed all their requirements compared to 65 percent of female apprentices.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives released its own report in July, 2015. It notes, "women's education levels are higher than men's in every area except the trades." So why aren't there more women in the trades? Ask different people and you get different answers.

Red Seal journeyman tile setter, Jill Drader (34), thinks the apprenticeship system is part of the problem and a major reason why there are so few women in the trades. Drader is an experienced educator and coach. She earned her first degree in International Development from the University of Calgary in 2005 and later secured her journeyman

tile setter and stone-worker ticket after completing the trades program at SAIT in 2009. Jill was then offered a position at SAIT, which involved curriculum development, instructional design, and instructing. In 2014 she was named to Avenue Magazine's Top 40 Under 40 list for her work helping women get their start in the trades through Women in Work Boots.

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"I truly believe that apprenticeship is a broken model," Drader says. "You have to go get a job, have that person support you and then [convince them to] allow you to go to school." According to Drader, it's a system that poses a significant barrier to entry.

"Imagine we allowed those who have a strong desire to be in this industry to sign up, get trained, and then go out and get skills and get work experience as we do with every other sector. You would have more women signing up," Drader says.

More skilled tradeswomen would improve the workforce by helping to address the shortage of skilled tradespeople, which continues to affect businesses.

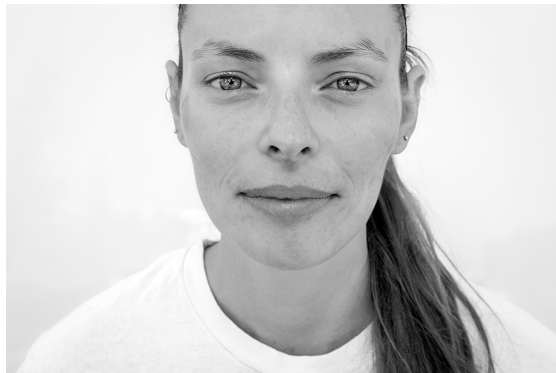
Another problem with the apprenticeship system, when compared with mainstream university or college educational

systems, is how it relates to external market forces. Drader notes, when the market is soft and jobs are scarce, people often take that time to go to school and upgrade their skills. However this is nearly impossible in trades because nobody is hiring.

Women are excelling in the trades

Notwithstanding, women like April Valentine (30), a journeyman electrician, are changing the face of the industry through hard work and perseverance.

Originally from Hastings, Ontario, Valentine developed an interest in trades work in 2005 when she moved to Whistler, British Columbia with her then boyfriend. He was doing a plumbing apprenticeship and it started the wheels turning for Valentine who started thinking about doing her own apprenticeship.



Then she saw a labour job advertised in the paper. It promised workers the day off if it snowed over a certain amount. "So I said, sign me up!" Valentine recalls.

After the winter season she moved back home. It was time to start focusing on her long-term career. She broached the topic of becoming a trade with her mom saying, "I wish that I could do that." Her mom replied, "Well, why can't you?"

So she started to explore her options, speaking to various tradespeople from carpenters, framers and electricians, evaluating which might be best for her. She settled on electrical work.

"I was kind of skeptical. I was thinking, maybe I can't do this. Maybe it will be too hard," Valentine admits.

Testing the waters, Valentine started applying for jobs. She sent out resumes and cover letters, but didn't receive any replies.

"Nobody took me seriously," Valentine says. "Some places I applied to multiple times. I got frustrated because some of my guy friends applied to the same places and got hired."

"They gave me a look up and down. They were cold towards me and weren't friendly at all."

Then in 2006, Valentine moved to Calgary where her luck changed. Within a week of arriving she had a job lined up. The company hiring was unique in that women workers formed the majority. However, if Valentine thought she'd get a warm reception, she was in for a surprise.

"They shunned me," Valentine recalls. "They gave me a look up and down. They were cold towards me and weren't friendly at all."

She changed companies. Through a few twists and turns, Valentine finally landed at Dynamic Building Technologies, a commercial electrical specialist focusing on electrical repair and lighting solutions. She still works there today.

"I enjoy getting up in the morning. It's a very rewarding job," Valentine says. How often do you hear someone say that?

Making the decision to go to school and get an apprenticeship has worked out extremely well for Valentine. In fact, she met her husband in trades school and together they now have a beautiful young daughter.

Valentine says she lucked out. The company she works for was very supportive about her maternity leave. It was a bumpy road through apprenticeship, but she thoroughly loves her job as an electrician.

Women face unique challenges.

Valentine thinks women who are considering a career in the trades can be scared away because it's such a male-dominated profession. Not surprisingly, gender prejudices and discrimination are still a reality for many tradeswomen.

Valentine says it's not unusual to be second-guessed by equipment salesmen who underestimate her expertise, or for clients to assume a male colleague is in charge even if she has seniority.

For Jill Drader it's been even more overt. She once experienced blatant sexism when a group of workers began cat calling her from afar. Yet, Drader graciously points out that women face issues in every field, not just in the trades. A few bad apples can give a whole industry a bad reputation.

"Some select individuals, who are immature, rude and

disrespectful, desire to maintain the landscape of what it might have been at one time,” Drader says, rather than adapting to the current times and “different face [of] the workforce.”

Kat Hassard (28), a pipe trades instructor at SAIT, says a double standard exists whereby women’s skills are underrated or overlooked by potential employers when men’s are not.

It’s something she’s experienced first hand. After two interviews with a company she had applied for, she was told that the company had never hired a female employee before and they were not sure how it would work. Despite the fact that she had the qualifications, she was passed over for the job.

“I was basically told to my face, that they weren’t going to hire me because I was a woman,” Hassard reports. “It had nothing to do with qualifications. It had everything to do with gender.”

As an instructor, Kat now spends eight to ten hours on campus in the classroom or in her office. She says she enjoys tutoring and mentoring students, preparing them for their careers in the trades. During the summer she works periodically to keep her skills current.

The industry is evolving.

There’s no question building a career in the trades is an uphill battle, especially when you’re facing roadblocks simply because of your gender. Yet, more women are signing up all the time.

“I don’t think this is a just trend; I think it’s a shift,” Drader says. “There’s quiet representation and power in numbers.”

Hassard says women need to support each other, whether it is in school or in the work place. “Use the buddy system. Find another woman that’s in the trades. Just having someone to vent to and bounce ideas off of makes a huge difference.”

Valentine agrees. She remembers the impact of having the support of a fellow student while attending classes at SAIT. “My first year I had a locker two down from another girl who was in fourth year,” Valentine says. “She said, ‘Good for you! You can totally do this! You got this!’” Now, Valentine makes it a point to pass on that encouragement to others.

“If you told me ten years ago I was going to be an instructor or a teacher, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“There’s immense opportunity for women and entrepreneurship in this industry, whether you finish the formal training or not, you can still own a business,” Drader suggests. “My core belief is that we will have more women in the skilled trades when we have more female business owners.”

The face of the industry is changing, and more women are stepping up to the challenge of becoming a skilled tradesperson. It may be daunting, but the opportunities are there for the taking.

With over 250,000 skilled tradespeople expected to retire over the next ten years, Canada is already feeling the shortage of skilled labour. To say the industry needs women in the workforce is an understatement. It’s time for the construction industry to move past its boys-only mentality.

“If you told me ten years ago I was going to be an instructor or a teacher I wouldn’t have believed you,” Hassard admits. “I love my job and I think more women can do it. I would just like to help more women realize that they can do it,” Valentine adds.

It’s true that change takes time. It takes patience, resilience, and a thick skin to make it in the trades. For a growing number of women, the rewards are worth the effort. But the system can only be improved when people join together, arm in arm to make it happen.

Drader sums it up nicely, “It’s about being the change you want to see in the world, as Gandhi said.”