

BY MARC FORGET

Building a Career in Carpentry



Level 1 students practice introductory hand-tool skills at Algonquin College, in Ottawa, Ontario (top). Above, a shop station is set up for trim work and tool familiarization.

Each of us has a unique path into the trades. It could be that summer job that never ended, a high school course that grabbed our interest, or a family connection that brought us in. On that path, we received training on the job and perhaps some instruction in a school setting. Here, I share some details about the program that provided me with training in my career and encourage you to seek out opportunities that will help you grow your own.

In Canada, we have more than 400 professions open to apprenticeship programs that are under the jurisdiction of each province or territory, while for 54 of those trades, the federal government provides an added framework that ensures that training standards are met across the country, with final certifications being nationally recognized under the Red Seal program. Those Red Seal trades include electrician, gas fitter, and carpenter, the latter being the program that I'll discuss here. Apprenticeship in a trade has a long history, going back to the 12th century with craft guilds in Europe. In much the same way, that system of learning skills under a master carpenter to become a journeyman, with some instruction or examination in the guild house along with on-site tutelage, continues today in Canada. To earn a journeyman certification, individuals can choose among three paths, the most important being apprenticeship.

In the first option, a prospective apprentice finds a licensed employer to sponsor them, and the two sign an agreement with the provincial government. The individual will then be added to a list to be called for school training when a spot opens. Usually, an apprentice will work for a year or so, then take a level of training, then go back to work for another year and do the next level of training until they are finished. An apprentice can have multiple employers over the time needed to acquire the necessary hours, as long as each agrees to be a sponsor.

A second route is to take a related post-secondary technician or technologist course that equates to one or two levels of the apprenticeship program and then find an employment sponsor to begin the path of apprenticeship for further training.

The final option is for workers who have been in a trade for many years and may not have had the finances or educational background for the in-school training. These candidates provide proof of the hours spent on the job and then challenge the final Certificate of Qualification (C of Q) exam that completes the apprenticeship. With preparation in building codes, calculations, and safety, many workers have been able to receive certificates later in their careers.

The apprenticeship program in carpentry requires 7,200 hours

Photos by Marc Forget



Starting with hand tools and bench skills, students work up to larger projects as the levels progress. Here, the students are making miter boxes (above left). Wall layout and framing is being practiced by the level 2 students in their teams (above right).

combined on the job and in school training—generally, a little more than 6,000 hours on the job and more than 1,000 hours in class. Most candidates take four years or so to complete the requirements. The in-class portions are four intakes, each seven weeks in duration. This training occurs at local colleges or at a union training center, with the curriculum being the same wherever it's taught. During the apprenticeship period, the individual carries a logbook that must be signed by a licensed or competent worker to certify that the apprentice has reached a level of knowledge on different aspects of the job—framing, finishing carpentry, form work, and site safety, to name a few. Once the apprentice has completed the in-school training with passing grades at each level, reached the required on-the-job hours with proof from their employers, and acquired the logbook signatures, they can sign up to write the Certificate of Qualification. This exam is created with input from colleges and tradespeople from across the country and administered by the province.

The exam consists of questions on many aspects of carpentry. Sections on framing, concrete work, interior and exterior finishing, planning and layout, common occupational skills (safety, rigging, site management, etc.), and renovations are all included. The exam has a time limit of four hours and a pass score is 70%, with a cost that varies by province (in Ontario, it is \$150 (Canadian) plus tax). With successful completion of the exam, the individual will have

an Interprovincial Certificate of Qualification Red Seal in carpentry.

To reach this point, an applicant will encounter some costs, although some support is provided. The schooling itself may be fully paid by the province or, at minimum, heavily subsidized by the government, but in some jurisdictions, the apprentices must pay a fee of a few hundred dollars for each or some of the training intakes. While training in school, apprentices are eligible for unemployment insurance, with possible added allowances for travel to the training facility and childcare subsidies. At present, grants of \$1,000 and \$2,000 are available upon successful completion of each level for completing the Red Seal exam, up to a maximum of \$4,000. Apprentices can also apply for loans and grants for tools and business expenses. These payouts have ebbed and flowed over the years depending on government policy.

While I followed the path outlined above, most carpenters don't. Unlike certain designated trades—for example, electricians or plumbers must be either an apprentice or licensed to perform the work—carpenters do not need certification to work. Most who have an interest in carpentry get a job and start earning and learning on the job without going through the apprenticeship system.

Because the apprenticeship program is so comprehensive, apprentices are required to learn skills that they may never directly use in their career. In a conversation I had recently with



The apprentices practice large-scale projects in an open shop. Not being subject to the weather is a nice change for them. While not quite the same as being on site, working in a controlled environment allows for mistakes (learning opportunities) to happen under supervision. Similar setups to this exist in colleges and union training centers across Canada.



The Red Seal indicates that an individual has spent the time and effort to meet a nationally recognized standard. While going through the various levels of the program, the apprentice can experience many different aspects of the trade they have chosen and then build on what they learned to further their career.

an accomplished carpenter who is not licensed, he bemoaned the training in stair building and calculations in the Red Seal. Most stairs are built in specialized shops and then brought to site, so why train for what most don't do, he said. In my case, I had to train in concrete formwork, which I never touched again in 20 years (mostly by choice). Instead of creating a generalist jack of all trades within carpentry, some argue, the program should be separated into sections like trim or forming. After all, that is often the way it happens for those in the work force. They start with a company, roofing, for instance, and then work and learn to be a roofer.

Outside of the apprenticeship, shorter courses do exist that specialize in specific parts of the trade, like framing and flooring. If such a program offers a quicker path to training in a specific area, usually with an opportunity for a job right away, why should a person dedicate time and money for training in all aspects of carpentry like the Red Seal provides? In large centers particularly, the trend is to have narrowly trained "installers" perform the work on site. The problem with this is that when that narrow skill is not in demand, the worker is not able to pivot to work that is available. While some of these specific training offerings can be useful and a start, they should be the beginning of your path, not the end. The



It was all about framing in the main shop during this visit by the author at his former school. Formwork, roofing, scaffolding, and more all happen hands-on throughout the program. A combination of practical training and in-class instruction fills the seven weeks of each level.

carpenters whose work I most respected over the years tried their hand at many different parts of the trade.

Here lies the point I would like to make to those who are starting out in construction: If you want to build a career and not just start a job, you need to seek out varied knowledge and experience. The broader skill set provided by the apprenticeship program allowed me to be nimble early in my career and, when the economy cycled, I most often stayed employed.

Other post-secondary courses exist outside of apprenticeship programs. If school isn't an option, then invest in yourself by searching out different job opportunities early in your career to broaden your knowledge. Most people specialize as time goes by; if you spend time working on flooring or framing, for example, you will discover whether it suits you. Some tasks you will enjoy more and will therefore want to do more of and get better at. Others you will find that you would rather avoid. The knowledge gained in the task—even just discovering that you don't like it—will turn out to be useful in situations that you may not anticipate now. Roofing, concrete forming, and stair calculations didn't turn into the focus of my career but learning about them did help me when I was running jobsites and then my own business later in my career.

For a ground level example—say, hanging a door—you will be better able to deal with any issues that come up if you know what is going on with the framing. That holds true for hanging board, laying hardwood, or installing cabinets. The projects you will work on are a series of parts, like foundation, drywall, and so forth, but all trades are about problem solving—it is the aspect that I enjoyed the most—and with more understanding of how each part affects the other, you will be more successful at solving the puzzles that come. As my grandmother would say, all knowledge is useful; you just don't know when you'll use it.

While this article provides an introduction to a program, along with its opportunities and process, that you may not have known about, more importantly, I hope it has also given you a better understanding that training in school or on the job is about building a base of experience. The wider and more varied that base is, the greater your ability will be to take advantage of opportunities you come across. That in turn should lead to more pay, more job satisfaction, and a better career. The quip “A jack of all trades is a master of none” is used as an insult against a person who has more than one focus to their work. What is forgotten is that the whole quote is “A jack of all trades is a master of none but oftentimes better than a master of one.”