

BUILDING TECHNOLOGY TRAINING FOR A NEW GENERATION

Bob Day

Introduction

Toward the latter part of last century the training environment in Australia undertook a slow but dramatic change. The apprenticeship system that had served our training needs so well began to collapse and a range of group apprenticeship programs emerged in an endeavour to keep alive a model of training that was clearly dying.

In the housing industry, trade contractors stopped taking on apprentices, there was a move toward specialisation focused on sub-elements of each trade and the completion rate for apprenticeships plummeted to a point where we now have a completion rate of less than 50%.

I believe it is time to engage in a serious discussion about the future of Trades Training in Australia with a view to putting forward alternatives that will address the skill shortages that are limiting the future growth of our industry.

Problem:

1. Australia is in the grip of an acute trades skill shortage.
2. The current apprenticeship-based training system is unable to meet demand and is in fact collapsing as it is not grounded in economic reality.
3. Trade contractors are not engaging apprentices because it is too expensive, too complicated and too risky.
4. The image and status of apprenticeship training has been in significant decline over the past 30 years.

Discussion

Apprenticeships have been with us for centuries. They began with simple, informal arrangements whereby parents would arrange for a tradesman (the Master) to teach the adolescent the skills of the trade. In return, the parents would pay the Master tradesman.

Over time, and as workplace regulation grew, the parents stopped paying the Master and the Master started paying the apprentice. However, as remuneration levels increased, trade contractors found the cost increasingly untenable and most stopped engaging apprentices altogether.

In some industries the tenability of this situation changed long ago. Where, for example, nurses once undertook the bulk of their training in the workplace and were paid for doing so, they now undertake most of their learning in a tertiary environment and undertake 'on the job' training as unpaid work experience.

Professionalised training of the kind undertaken by nurses, teachers and countless others has now become the norm as they acquire the skills for employment and pay for the privilege (eg HECS).

Solution:

A radical change in the way that people who work in the building trades are recruited and trained is necessary if skills shortages are to be addressed and if the capacity of our young people is to be fully realised. The changes I consider necessary are as follows:

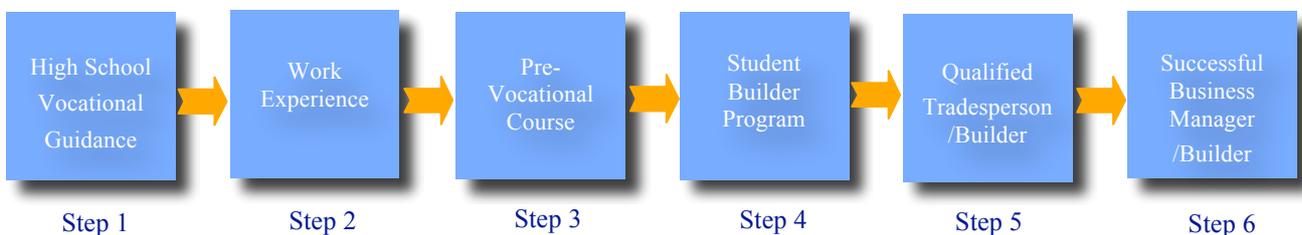
1. Eliminate the differentiation that exists between a career in the building industry and other career options.
2. Transfer the education and training of traditional trades from of the world of ‘employment’ to the world of ‘education’.
3. Replace the term “Apprentice” with the term “Student Builder”.
4. Re-badge building course subjects and titles to provide a broader and more positive image for a career in the building industry. eg
 - Building Technology – Timber
 - Building Technology - Metal Fabrication
 - Building Technology – Brickworks
5. Focus each training element toward the acquisition of a formal qualification as a builder through the attribution of status points for each subject and by including a wide range of elective subjects. eg Occupational Health and Safety for Builders, Business Management for Builders etc.
6. Make HECS available for those training for the building industry.
7. Shed the stereotypical, hard hat, blue singlet image of building workers and vigorously promote a fresh, forward-looking, multi-faceted image of ‘Careers of the Future’.

Whilst those in the housing industry understand the importance of a highly skilled trades workforce, young people will not be attracted to the industry if it does not recognise and respond to the limitations of its current positioning.

Ways need to be found to help young people and their families pass the “Dinner Party” test (*ie What others think when it is said “our son is an apprentice bricklayer” compared with “he’s a student builder”*) if the housing industry to have any hope of attracting people to the in the numbers required. Professionalising trades training and re-positioning the role and status of apprentices as Student Builders is important to this process.

Proposed Training Model

INDUSTRY RECRUITMENT PROGRAMME



- Step 1. High School vocational guidance programme.
- Step 2. Work Experience programme with host employers.
- Step 3. Pre-Vocational courses at Tech Colleges Australia.
- Step 4. Admission to Student Builder Programme.
- Step 5. Qualified Tradesperson/Builder.
- Step 6. Successful Business Manager/Builder.