

Welcoming Women into Trades and Technology Workplaces - A Checklist of Strategies and Employer Workshops

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Introduction

The Canadian workforce is changing dramatically because of a number of convergent demographic factors. The aging of the 'baby boom' generation will see a dramatic increase in retirements over the next two decades. Lower birthrates have contributed to the reality there will not be sufficient workers to fill these gaps. Booming energy and construction sector projects, particularly in western Canada, have exacerbated this situation especially in trades and technology fields.

Some numbers illustrate this reality:

- Canada will have a shortage of over 200,000 skilled tradespeople by 2015 according to the Construction Sector Council of Canada.¹
- 15.3% of the workforce is over 55 years old and increasing.²
- The average aged of a skilled tradesperson is over 41.³
- Oil and gas and mining (7.5%) and the construction sector (4.5%) were the fastest growing sectors between 2001-06.²

The flow of immigrant and temporary workers into Canada has not kept pace with these shortages. Thus employers are recognizing the need to recruit and retain employees from currently under-represented groups such as women and aboriginal peoples to meet this growing demand. In 2006 however, women, while 47% of the employed workforce, were still only 4% of the construction workforce⁴, and 2% of apprentices in the 15 predominant trades (in 2002).⁵

An important question then is how can we bring about the significant movement of women into the trades and technology workforce? Post-secondary institutions, sector councils, employers, unions, governments, and community organizations have been articulating the need to increase the participation of women in trades and have undertaken individual and

collaborative actions. The Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology (CCWESTT), with its specific mandate to advance the recruitment and retention of women in these fields, is playing an important role.

The Women in SETT Initiative

CCWESTT began its Women in SETT (Science, Engineering, Trades and Technology) Initiative in 2003 to strengthen policy and practice to increase women's recruitment, retention and advancement in SETT in institutions and across sectors throughout Canada. Primary work included input on important issues from CCWESTT members, consultations with stakeholders and institutional leaders, research, and building relationships with the assistance of eminent advisors. At the WinSETT National Stakeholder Forum in Calgary in 2006, we presented the business case for increasing women in SETT and proposed the development of the Canadian Centre for the Advancement of Women in Science, Engineering, Trades and Technology.

The proposed Centre will partner with stakeholders to:

- Collect best practices for the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in science, engineering, trades and technology (SETT);
- Prepare tool kits from these best practices;
- Provide workshops using the tool kits for human resource and other representatives from industry;
- Work with industry to develop innovative approaches to improve participation and achievement of women in SETT;
- Communicate and promote ways to make workplaces inclusive and welcoming for under-represented groups;
- Gather statistics and follow trends;
- Review and advise on institutional policy and practice; and,
- Monitor the success of its programs.

In 2007-08, as examples of the expertise to be provided by the Centre, the WinSETT initiative developed HR resources and piloted services in several sectors including construction. *Welcoming Women into SETT Workplaces - A Checklist of Strategies*⁶ was produced as a practical booklet for use in several workshops for employers and sector associations to identify the broad issues, examine current conditions, and take action to create work environments welcoming to women in the skilled trades and other SETT fields.

Checklist and Employer Workshops

Welcoming Women into Science, Engineering, Trades and Technology Workplaces -A Checklist of Strategies provides a compact (81 pp) and easily administered first step to raise awareness and initiate the process of effective positive change. It includes current research and effective practices spanning the topics of recruitment, selection, orientation, retention, career development, training, and health and safety, and provides a series of questions to help guide employers in developing their own action plans.

CCWESTT has been using the *Checklist* in several pilot workshops delivered to construction and resource industry partners in several geographical regions in Canada with the intention of dissemination more broadly across the country.

Workshop #1 – Saskatchewan, January 2008

The first of these workshops, hosted by the Saskatchewan Construction Association, was delivered to 12 industry participants in Regina, and by videoconference, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Attendees comprised company owners, HR managers of construction firms, and representatives from the Provincial Apprenticeship Commission and the Association itself.

Valerie Overend (tradeswoman, co-author of the *Checklist*, instructor at the Saskatchewan Institute for Applied Science and Technology, and strong advocate for women in the skilled trades) was the facilitator for this workshop. Participants were taken through five key sections of the Checklist – filling out the question sheets and then discussing the issues, situations in their work environment, and effective solutions. After the workshop, WinSETT Evaluator Susan Hollett facilitated a participant discussion evaluating the Checklist. Participants also completed an online survey to capture additional feedback on the resource and workshop to guide future modifications and delivery.

Outcomes

On the logistics, facilitation and process aspects of the session, there was very strong positive agreement that the workshop was well organized and delivered.

While there was immediate agreement on the need for better recruitment, integration and retention of women on their work sites (in view of labour shortages), participants acknowledged difficulties in doing so, and at the beginning of the session, lacked the recognition that there was a need to address gender considerations specifically. It was primarily through the references to the extensive research and the first-hand experiences of women that participants came to appreciate the unique challenges for women. By the end of the session, all agreed that the information was useful and they were planning on implementing a number of the practices.

- *This workshop has helped me to look at some ideas that I hadn't thought about.*
- *The Checklist will be a good tool to help us to recruit.*
- *Good book and good to have a facilitator even if only to go through a few sections and get them started on working through the rest of the book.*

From the survey –

- 100% agreed the reading level of materials was appropriate and it was easy to find and understand information in the booklet.
- 86% agreed the information was accurate and 71% agreed that all relevant issues were addressed.

- 86% responded that the material will make a positive impact.

One key learning emerging from the event for the organizers was that it was important that the facilitator, or one of the co-facilitators, have strong credibility in the sector. It was also important to partner with or be able to identify a local organization(s) working on women in trades/technology issues to provide future additional information, networks, and role models for the employers/employees. That local organization can in turn benefit from possible support from these industry partners for their programs and activities.

Another suggestion is to include in the participant materials a one-pager that highlights the economic and employment status of women to provide a backdrop as to why this is a key issue for women – women want to work, they are in the workforce, and many need to work.

Participants also wanted a follow-up source of information, including a knowledgeable person to consult with, to assist with the next steps in taking action after completion of the *Checklist*. This request points to the need to formalize that capability, and a workplace consultancy service is planned for the proposed Canadian Centre for Women in SETT. Participants also suggested that promotion of the workshop be through associations and sector councils.

Workshop #2 – St. John's, NL, April 2008

The second *Checklist of Strategies Workshop* is scheduled for delivery in St. John's NL in late April 2008 to representatives of unions in the Provincial Building Trades Council. The event is being hosted by CCWESTT member organization, Women in Resource Development Committee. WRDC delivers career information initiatives for high school females and notably the Orientation to Trades and Technology Program for women exploring training and career options in natural resource-based industries. The latter project has successfully resulted in the vast majority of participants entering formal training programs in the skilled trades. This workshop provides critical information and strategies for the logical next step – supporting women into actual employment in the construction sector and developing retention practices for women in their workplaces.

Valerie Overend is again facilitating with Susan Hollett providing evaluation, and their observations will be important in assessing any future modifications for expanded delivery. This event will also be combined with a train the trainer opportunity to develop the facilitation expertise of selected WRDC staff. Two individuals will attend the session to co-facilitate and provide local expertise. Several more facilitators will be involved in a follow-up training session after the event where the workshop will be debriefed and the reviewed. WRDC staff facilitators will then be able to deliver the workshop to key industry, government and post-secondary partners in various regions around Newfoundland and Labrador.

This event's partnership will also be the model for finalizing a consultants' agreement for CCWESTT's WinSETT Initiative to establish the working and financial relationships with member organizations for future delivery of resources and services.

Additional information on evaluation and outcomes from the second workshop will be provided in the presentation of this paper at the CCWESTT Guelph Conference.

Future Plans

Based on feedback from the two pilot workshops and other individuals' input, the *Checklist of Strategies* will be revised and undergo a larger print run. Discussions are planned with potential stakeholder partners for delivery of the *Checklist Workshop* in British Columbia and southern Ontario in late summer and early fall. Evaluation and testimonials from participants at these successful events will strengthen new proposals for support to expand facilitation and organizational capability to offer the resources and services across Canada, potentially through the Canadian Centre.

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Biographical Information

Valerie Overend, a Red Seal Carpenter, develops and teaches trades programs at the Saskatchewan Institute for Applied Science and Technology, and advises on policy related to women in trades in education and employment forums. Valerie has represented tradeswomen on several provincial and pan-Canadian Boards including the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, CCWESTT, and the Saskatchewan Labour Market Commission.

Carolyn Emerson, M.Sc., is Project Coordinator of the Women in SETT (Science, Engineering, Trades and Technology) project of CCWESTT. Carolyn has worked for over 20 years in initiatives to increase the participation and career success of women in SETT fields, is co-author of two books on women in the SETT workforce, and heads her own consulting company.

Susan Hollett, M.Sc., is Evaluator for the Women in SETT Initiative, and prior to establishing her consulting company in 1996, held senior management positions in government and post-secondary institutions. Susan has worked with many women's organizations and natural resource-based companies, and has been recognized with several awards for entrepreneurship.