



# Research Concerning Apprentice Retention and Employer Involvement in Apprenticeship in Durham Region



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A report from

**Customer + Citizen**

Relationship Strategy Group Ltd.

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Durham Region Local Training Board  
(lead partner)



Durham Region Local Industry Committees



Durham College



Landscape Ontario



KPR District School Board



Durham District School Board



Durham Catholic District School Board



PVNC Catholic District School Board



Durham Region Labour Council



Universal Workers Union  
Local 183



Regional Municipality of Durham,  
Economic Development and Tourism



Durham Region Employment Network



Vocational Pathways



Durham Region Manufacturers Assoc.

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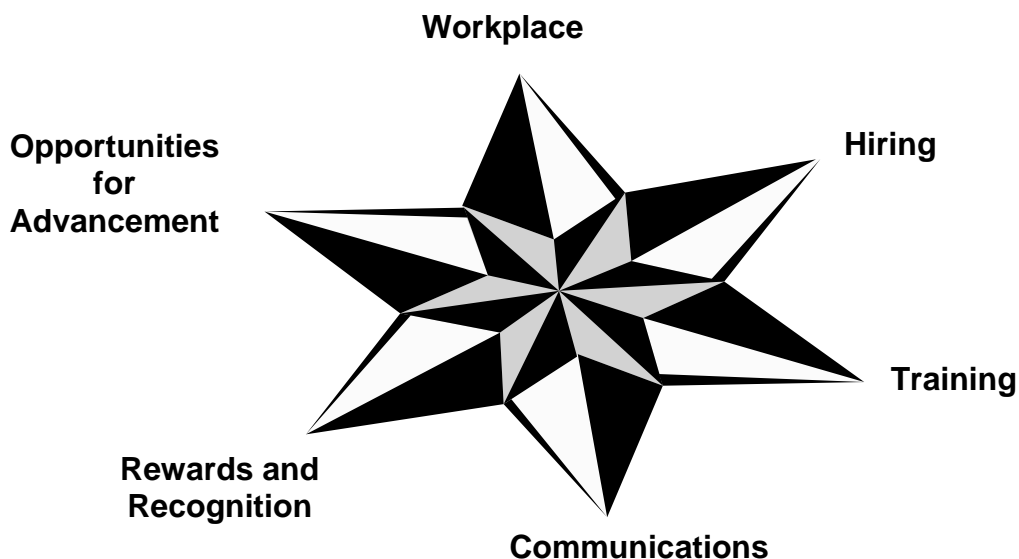


## 1.0 Executive Summary

### 1.1 Key Factors Influencing Apprentice Retention

A number of factors determine whether or not apprentices stay with their original employer for the duration of their apprenticeship and thereafter for several years as a journeyman. When asked unaided, most respondents and industry participants point to increases in hourly rates that apprentices are able to secure as the most important factor in apprentices changing jobs. However, in addition to money, there are a number of factors that are important for retaining apprentices and which merit consideration. We have reviewed over 20 factors with owners and managers in the course of this engagement and have found that the number of factors can be aggregated into 6 main groups as described graphically in Exhibit 1.1 below.

**Exhibit 1.1**  
**Key Factors Influencing Retention of Apprentices**



- *Workplace*

A pre-condition for retaining apprentices is for the apprentice to work in a positive workplace with managers who expect the apprentice to remain with the organization and are prepared to invest in the relationship so that this does occur.

Some employers consider low levels of apprentice retention to be quite normal in their industry. Others expect apprentices to remain with their companies over long periods. Both employers tend to get what they expect.

Retention naturally improves when individual apprentices enjoy the work environment, the company of fellow workers and the culture of the firm. Conversely, retention is weakened when apprentices are expected to do high volumes of routine work, when

they stop learning or see limited opportunity for learning or advancement, or feel isolated from their peers.

Owners or managers who build an organizational culture where apprentices feel supported by the company and their peers, and consider themselves part of a work “family” rather than simply awaiting their ticket so they can move on, are most likely to keep the apprentices they want.

Our interviews and discussions of the workplace considered the following factors:

- Having a workplace that promotes pride in one's work
- Stressing and recognizing quality work
- Placing health and safety in the workplace first
- Making it easy for apprentices to get class time off
- Fostering a positive working environment
- Not requiring apprentices to catch up on missed work while in school
- Completing paperwork well in advance of return to class
- Reducing interruptions in pay when apprentices return from school
- Allowing apprentices personal time off

Apprentices and employers viewed all of the abovementioned factors as important. In fact, they perceived them as being best practices. However, employers tend to view their performance more favourably than do apprentices, especially when it comes to promoting pride in one’s work, creating a positive working environment and making it easy for apprentices to get time off for their classes.

- *Hiring*

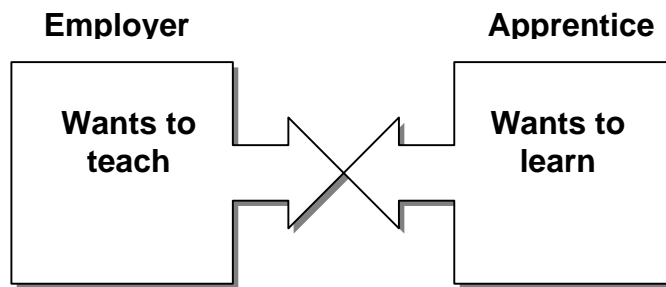
Good hiring decisions are obviously a key to employee retention. These decisions first require that managers have a large pool of qualified candidates from whom to select, and then that they choose the right people.

Fit is an important pre-condition to apprentice retention. Employers with a solid record of retention go through a careful assessment of candidates to ensure that the apprentices will adapt successfully to their company and remain with the firm.

Managers believe it best to hire for attitude and aptitude because they retain apprentices longer this way than hiring strictly for technical competence.

When employers were asked what makes a good apprentice, they responded that this is someone who wants to learn. When apprentices were asked what makes a good employer, they said this is someone who wants to teach, as suggested by Exhibit 1.2.

**Exhibit 1.2**  
**What makes a good employer and apprentice?**



Our interviews and discussions with employers and apprentices identified three factors as being critical to the hiring process:

- Hiring apprentices with attitudinal fit
- Hiring apprentices who will like and be liked
- Hiring apprentices with an appetite for learning

Our findings also suggest apprentices consider it more important to hire people who have an appetite to learn while employers focus more on attitudinal fit when hiring. Overall, employers tend to view their performance more favourably than do apprentices, especially when it comes to hiring apprentices with an appetite to learn and an attitudinal fit. Apprentices consider that employers perform higher than employers themselves when it comes to hiring people who will be liked.

- *Training*

Apprentices are more likely to be retained if employers are committed to their learning. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, such as through teaching, mentoring, job rotation, providing time for apprentices to attend school and helping apprentices to recover earnings that would have been lost from time off for education (although the latter deals more with rewards).

In addition, some employers are concerned that the training provided by the education system can be on outdated equipment, inappropriate for their sub-trade or inappropriately sequenced. For example, some employers believe it would be best for apprentices to have experience on the shop floor before being taught the subject matter, as the individual would be able to interpret what was being taught better with this reverse – and possibly counter-intuitive – sequencing.

Our interviews and discussions identified the following important factors related to training:

- Ensuring a variety of work
- Promoting continuous learning
- Providing apprentices with responsibilities equal to abilities
- Providing apprentices with a mentor
- Matching on the job training to skills acquired in class

In the course of the research, employers and apprentices alike identified all as important, but apprentices tend to view these issues as more important than do employers. Again, employers tend to view their performance more favourably than do apprentices for all the training issues and especially when it comes to ensuring a variety of work, providing apprentices with responsibilities equal to their abilities and providing apprentices with a mentor.

- *Communications*

Retention improves when internal interactions and communications with apprentices is a two-way dialogue and consistently informative, friendly and professional.

Apprentices appreciate both formal and informal opportunities to learn from and communicate with journeypersons and senior management. Apprentices want formal periodic, perhaps quarterly, reviews and would like these to go beyond the requirements of the apprenticeship program and include factors that affect their learning and progress. Interviews suggest that companies with lower levels of apprenticeship retention seem to have fewer or no formal performance assessment and reporting.

Our interviews and discussions focused on the following forms of communication and interaction between the company and its apprentices:

- Providing constructive feedback
- Conducting regular performance reviews
- Soliciting suggestions from apprentices
- Informing apprentices about the business
- Showing apprentices how their work contributes to the business
- Scheduling regular review sessions
- Informing apprentices about policies and procedures

All issues were identified by employers and apprentices as being important, although apprentices consider it more important than employers to be informed about company policies and procedures, and to be able to provide suggestions, and less important than employers when it comes to seeing how apprentices' work contributes to the company and being informed about the business. Here again, employers tend to view their performance more favourably than do apprentices, especially when it comes to scheduling regular review sessions, conducting performance reviews regularly and providing constructive feedback. Apprentices believe employers do not solicit enough suggestions from their apprentices.

- *Rewards and recognition*

Some apprentices point out that they and their peers are most likely to leave current employers when certified as journeypersons. Once accredited as journeypersons, they believe they may have an opportunity to earn substantially more than current employment provides. This gap needs to be minimized by employers wanting to keep apprentices and applies especially to those employers who have invested heavily in the apprentice relationship and count on retaining apprentices over a lengthy period to earn out their investment. Employers who understand the marketability and rate differentials of apprentices in different stages of the program and who plan appropriate rate increases, increase apprentice retention.

Some employers also provide financial rewards in forms other than hourly rates, such as the following:

- Providing opportunities for apprentices to earn back the time lost for income purposes when students are at school
- Using the company's facilities for private repairs or the company's vehicles for personal purposes
- Providing company clothing or other company-funded benefits to save apprentices money

While rewards are well known to be a retention factor, fewer employers appreciate how important recognition is. Apprentices appreciate being told they are doing good work just as they want to know how to improve. A simple "thank you" for efforts and results is more important to retention than some employers think. Apprentices rate employers' performance in this regard less favourably than do employers.

- *Opportunities for advancement*

Employers who anticipate what apprentices will want next and then plan to close any gaps in expectations before they occur have high retention rates. It has been mentioned how important it is for employers to increase hourly rates to match the increasing marketability of apprentices as they proceed through the program. In addition, employers should anticipate and plan for the learning and other needs of apprentices and newly licensed journeypersons so that the employee relationship evolves and deepens, improving rates of retention.

Employers and apprentices both consider opportunities for advancement to be an important factor that affects retention, but apprentices see this to be even more important than employers. Here too, apprentices rate employers' performance slightly less favourably than do employers.

## 1.2 Key Factors Influencing Employer Involvement

Employers generally participate in the apprenticeship program for one or both of two reasons:

- To create the supply of the skilled journeypersons they require; and/or
- To give something back to their trade.

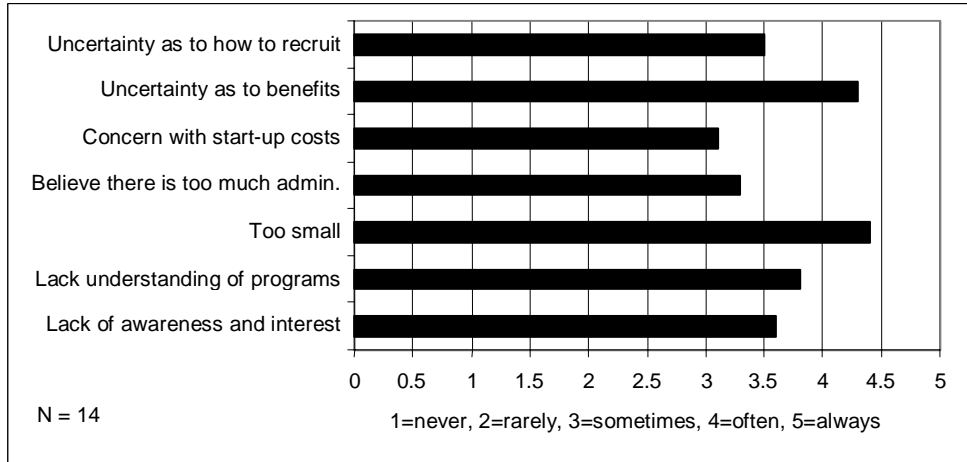
Employers viewing apprenticeship as providing an ongoing supply of journeypersons generally go through a series of steps that include becoming aware of the program, developing an interest in participating in the program, evaluating benefits and costs, exploring participating in the program in more detail and then adopting and participating in the program.

Employers participating in apprenticeship programs to give something back to their trade are not motivated by guilt. Rather, they see it as a personal and business quest to make a difference. These individuals and businesses are often looking for opportunities to learn and grow through their involvement. In line with this, some welcome the opportunity to contribute their time and expertise to Local Industry Committees

established to further interest and participation in apprenticeship among youth and local businesses.

When asked what factors limit their participation in Provincial apprenticeship programs, employers cite the reasons noted in Exhibit 1.2 below.

**Exhibit 1.2: Extent to which factors limit employer involvement in the Provincial apprenticeship program**



- *Awareness and Interest*

We believe most employers are aware of the existence of apprenticeship programs related to the skilled jobs they provide. Where employers have yet to participate in the apprenticeship program, it is due to their limited interest. An interest in apprentices will generally not be actioned if the employer does not understand apprenticeship programs, is uncertain of the costs and benefits of becoming involved, perceives they are too small a business and/or if they are uncertain as to how to proceed with recruitment and other aspects of the program.

- *Costs and Benefits*

Some employers not now participating in the apprenticeship program perceive that the costs exceed the benefits of so doing. Costs are seen to include salary and benefits and direct and indirect costs associated with training, mentoring (and lost productivity that can result) and administration, for example. Costs also vary by year of apprenticeship and the specific trade.

The financial benefits employers want relate to the economic role apprentices perform in their organization. Some companies are well placed to make effective use of apprentices while others, for scale reasons such as those outlined below, are less able to do so.

The scope of our study did not include a detailed review of the costs and benefits of employer involvement in apprenticeship programs. Nevertheless, our interviews also found a number of companies participate in the program without quantifying costs and benefits. These companies see apprenticeship as being aligned with their overall

business and personnel philosophy that includes building a sustainable flow of skilled labour in-house.

- *Scale*

Some smaller companies rely on a continuing supply of apprentices to provide them with needed skills. They cite larger companies, offering higher pay and better benefits, as having the ability to attract journeypersons away from other, often smaller, firms. For this reason, smaller companies may see apprenticeship as being a more important source of journeypersons than larger companies will.

At the same time, however, some smaller organizations perceive that they are too small to become involved in the program. Some among these companies may be overly concerned that their smaller size should limit participation in the program. This may occur particularly where owner/managers have inaccurate perceptions about the time and costs of being involved in the program. Where they exist, these perceptions need to be overcome.

- *Understanding and Administrative Burden*

The lack of understanding some businesses have of the apprenticeship program and their perceptions of the administrative burden can limit their participation. These employers perceive that significant time and effort must be expended to find their way through the complexities of the program, especially the first time. The development of tradeability.ca as a central point of information and referral should go a long way to alleviating this issue by demonstrating how easy it is to be involved in the program.

- *Recruitment*

Some companies limit their participation in the program because they are uncertain as to where and how to recruit the best apprentices. Additionally, they do not fully understand the various channels of apprentice candidates, including schools, Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), direct approaches by students, etc. They may also not be aware of the existence of Local Industry Committees (LICs) related to their trade and how they can facilitate the recruitment and placement processes. Furthermore, many companies do not have detailed criteria to assist them in making informed hiring decisions.

### **1.3 Strategies to Increase Apprentice Retention and Employer Involvement**

Our interviews and discussions with employers and apprentices lead us to believe that there are a number of strategies that tradeability.ca could employ to increase employer involvement and apprentice retention.

- *Recognize employers/trainers*

The good efforts of employers/trainers yield important business, and in some cases, personal benefits. Special contributions, however, are likely to go unnoticed by the local community. Recognizing the good efforts and results of local employers/trainers will not only encourage them to stay onboard, it will also give others inspiration and a clear idea of how they too can be involved. We, therefore, recommend that tradeability.ca develop

and administer a cost-effective recognition program that puts a spotlight on employer/trainer role model performances. Case studies on these performances would illustrate the costs and benefits of employer involvement and their best practices. We believe that the occasional round of applause associated with such an initiative will help motivate others and create a vital, energized environment surrounding apprenticeship in the Region.

- *Job postings for apprentices*

Prospective apprentices currently have limited tools to identify local employers involved in apprenticeship. Prospective employers/trainers do not fully understand the various channels of supply for apprentice candidates. Both parties would benefit from the development of a posting and/or matching service focused on apprenticeship. At a minimum, this service would list companies seeking apprentices in specific trades. Company information and their related openings for apprentices could be posted on the tradeability.ca web site. Subsequent development might include the ability for candidates to also post their profiles for authorized viewing by prospective employers.

- *Database of employers in Durham*

Employer involvement could be enhanced by directly marketing to targeted prospective employers/trainers. The targeting of prospective employers/trainers is not a casual exercise, but the rewards could be significant in terms of the increased numbers of employers involved in apprenticeship in Durham. A comprehensive listing of the businesses in Durham (such as that managed by the Economic Development Department) could be matched with a listing of employers currently involved in apprenticeship (perhaps provided by MTCU with company approval). Analysis of this data should help identify businesses employing skilled journeypersons that are not currently involved with apprenticeship. These companies could then be communicated with directly to both demonstrate that apprenticeship is a reasonable approach for ensuring an ongoing supply of journeypersons and also a viable means of giving back to their trade. Some among the priority candidates for this information provision could be companies operating at or near capacity in growth sectors.

- *Checklist for evaluating apprentice candidates*

Good hiring decisions are key to apprentice retention. To assist employers in making the “right” evaluations and communications with prospective apprentices, we recommend that employers be provided with a checklist for evaluating apprentice candidates. Such a checklist would help employers interview and assess candidates for personality, attitude and character in addition to their skills. Embodying best practices and practical tests specific to each trade, the checklist would help ensure a good fit between apprentices and employers.

- *Checklist for conducting review sessions with apprentices*

Our research suggests that many employers do not consistently hold review sessions with apprentices to address training and performance issues and to update training and performance goals. Such sessions are essential to informing apprentices on what they are expected to accomplish, how they can contribute to the objectives of the department and/or business, the status of their performance and the steps that should be taken, if

any, to modify their behaviours and training plans. We recommend that employers be provided with a checklist based on best practices that serves as a guide for addressing these issues during formal and informal review sessions with apprentices.

- *Checklist for apprentices to use when considering an employer*

Our research identified numerous instances where apprentices did little or no assessment of prospective employers/trainers prior to signing on with them. Employers alone should not determine the “right” employer/apprentice fit. Apprentices, too, should be armed and prepared to seek employment situations best suited to their needs and interests. We recommend that a checklist be developed to assist prospective apprentices in selecting employers. Issues addressed might include:

- Employer’s reputation for providing excellent training
- Reasons employers are involved in apprenticeship programs
- Ability to provide training in all areas of a given trade
- Proposed ways of providing apprentices with a well-rounded on-the-job training experience
- Other workplace, communications, rewards, recognition and opportunities for advancement issues as highlighted by our research findings

Such a checklist could be posted on the [tradeability.ca](http://tradeability.ca) web site to facilitate access by students and others interested in apprenticeship.