

# IS FIRST NATIONS THE SOLUTION TO JOB SHORTAGE?

By Ian MacNeill

On the surface of it, the future looks bright for Ponting Contracting. Although the Campbell River-based road-building company typically lays down an average of 30 kilometres of track a year for clients such as A&A Trading and Interfor. Next year, owner Mark Ponting says he's scheduled to build as much as 50 klicks annually, and there's more work if he wants it. "I could pick up the phone and add another 20 kilometres of road today," he says.

Unfortunately, there's something of a roadblock preventing him from doing it—a lack of qualified skilled labour to do the job.

"My biggest challenge is coming up with qualified employees to do the work," he says. The shortage is more acute, the more complex and important the job, with experienced excavator operators and driller/blasters in particularly short supply. It isn't that there aren't excavator operators and driller/blasters available; it's that more often than not they don't have the kind of experience Ponting

needs to work in the challenging terrain he faces on a daily basis.

"There are guys out there, but they don't have the kinds of skills and experience we need for working in steep, rugged and often dangerous terrain," he says. "The kind of work we do is different from construction where you're just doing cut-fills and everything is planned out for you. Although we have all the latest plans and geo-tech reports, we're constantly having to adapt on the fly, and under extreme conditions." He doesn't have to reach far back into the files to find an example of how problematic inadequate experience can be.

"I had a guy with 25 years of excavator experience who was a ringer," he recalls. "I moved him into an area where the topography is different; the first thing he did was have a landslide."

Making it worse is that he isn't the only one looking for qualified bodies. He tells of a recent meeting with a group of road building contractors ranging in size from 20 to 60 employees where every single

one complained of having the same issue. "There's a guy just up the road from me who's got \$5-million worth of equipment sitting in his yard and no one to run the machines."

Not surprisingly, where shortages occur, cutthroat competition follows. "We're getting into bidding wars with each other," he says. "I'm paying some excavator operators as much as \$170,000 a year. That's doctor's wages."

The competition isn't just coming from up the road either, it's coming from across Canada. Everywhere you look business is booming and qualified personnel are on the move, be it to, or from, the construction industry or the oil and gas sector. And the situation is not likely to change anytime soon because many of the more experienced workers are aging out of the system. A lot of them, he says, are men in their fifties who are more likely to be contemplating exit strategies into retirement than another job. And according to Statistics Canada, this reflects a national trend that isn't going to change anytime



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soon. In 2016, it says, individuals aged 55 and over accounted for 36 per cent of the working-age population, the highest proportion on record, but by 2026 it could reach as much as 40 per cent.

An obvious place to look for solutions is the trade schools, but again the problem is the experience level. You can't just take a trade-school grad and plunk him or her on a machine and let them go, you have to train them up to the position, which takes time, a year at minimum, and for the really tricky work, a lot longer. Ponting says it does represent a solution, but an expensive one. New hires typically work at about half the productivity level as long-time employees, and they tend to be harder on equipment, which means they have to be carefully supervised. "You have to have a competent person on hand to mentor, so there's another wage," he says.

And we're not talking about indentured labour here. Just because you train someone doesn't mean they're under any obligation to stay with you, and many do

not, lured away by bigger paychecks and steadier work elsewhere.

One solution to the problem, he says, would be to take some of the sting out of the cost of on-the-job training. Currently, the Truck Loggers Association is lobbying the provincial government to provide contractors with a tax credit that would do just that. A recent letter to Melanie Mark, Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, outlined contractor concerns and concluded that a tax credit could ease the financial burden of on-the-job training and "help ensure the next generation of workers acquire the necessary knowledge to be productive and safe, before the know-how is lost to retirement."

The good news is that according to TLA executive director David Elstone, the Premier "made a commitment to look at TLA solutions for skilled labour shortages during his speech" at the recent TLA convention.

The solution, any solution, can't come soon enough for Mark Ponting, who adds

that licensees and other clients could help in the short run by maintaining a steady stream of projects because it's often the downtime between jobs that leads to skilled workers moving on. "If one job ends and another doesn't start up for a month the guys go elsewhere, and who can blame them," he says. "It's important to pre-plan, get the right permitting, and settle issues with First Nations. We need to be able to transition from one job site to the next to keep the guys going on a steady schedule."

### First Nations to the rescue?

Could First Nations be part of the solution to the forest industry's labour-shortage problems? Mark Ponting of Ponting Contracting is optimistic that they could.

"We're already working with First Nations and we're very optimistic about them as a source of labour," he says. "They live in the areas and they have a vested interest in the land."

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They can also be useful allies when it comes to dealing with forces ranged against the industry. “They want the best

thing for the environment, but they also want economic benefit for their communities and people,” he explains. “They can

make decisions about the right way to go without the assistance of those who have an anti-logging agenda,” he says.

According to Lisa Luscombe, program manager for the BC First Nations Forestry Council (BCFNFC), the feelings are mutual. “We are very excited to promote forestry careers and business development opportunities to Indigenous communities,” she said in an email to *Truck LoggerBC* magazine.

A BCFNFC report published in 2017 underlines the point and even goes so far as to identify the emerging shortfall of forestry workers as a golden opportunity for First Nations.

“This projection was seen by the Forestry Council as an urgent opportunity for our First Nations to increase participation and employment in the forest sector provincially and also to address the current and future workforce needs of our First Nations communities and businesses, who are playing an increased role in the sector as aboriginal tenure holders and managers,” the report stated.

The report’s “action plan” calls for an increase in “the number of skilled and successful First Nations in the forest economy, and developing partnerships and business involving aboriginal people, forest companies and government.”

Obviously, there are a number of individuals from First Nations already working in forestry, but the goal now is to open the door wider and facilitate training. “What still needs to happen to help young First Nations make a career in forestry is for the BCFNFC and BC forest industry companies to work together to increase Indigenous forestry workforce strategy opportunities such as career promotion, internships, job placements, training programs, recruitment, retention and advancement in the forest industry,” said Ms. Luscombe.

Obviously not being able to find the kinds of employees needed today is a problem for the industry in general and contractors in particular, but the dilemma also presents an opportunity to forge new links with First Nations and access a labour force pool that’s increasingly enthusiastic about participating in forestry. Industry, government and First Nations now need to continue working together to make that a reality.▲



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