



## WHERE ARE THE NEW ELECTRICIANS COMING FROM?

By Don Horne

Back in the 1980s, the Ontario government was given notice that within the next 20 years, the number of skilled electricians in Canada would dramatically decrease.

Until the mid-1970s, Canada could always count on a steady influx of skilled tradespeople from Europe, leaving their respective mother countries for better pay and a better life across the Atlantic.

But soon Europe's standard of living began to catch up to North America's and by the 1970s, those same skilled tradespeople stopped emigrating.

The following three decades have been witness to a rapidly aging workforce of electricians and electrical professionals, and the toolbelts left hanging on the hook by those entering their 60s and 70s are not being picked up by younger, homegrown electricians. A recent Ontario Chamber of Commerce study found that 52 per cent of tradespeople are expected to retire in the next 15 years, without a comparable number of apprentices entering the field to replace them.

Apprenticeship programs have been an integral part of the European educational system, with business and industry working hand in hand with government to turn out trained tradespeople to keep the wheels of commerce running smoothly.

In Canada, the concept of apprenticeship remains in its infancy, and selling the message to teenagers that there is good money and guaranteed work in the trades (especially as an electrician) remains a tough nut to crack.

George Brown College's fifth annual Tech in the City competition is a unique way to both encourage students to enter a skilled trade while providing a helping hand with tuition.

Designed to introduce high school students from the Greater Toronto Area to the College's technology program, it helps convey the breadth of careers these students can pursue with a technology degree or diploma.

More than 800 middle and high school students toured the facilities and



participated in interactive competitions, and were encouraged to design, build and operate a range of products and inventions using mechanical engineering, microelectronics and woodworking. The payoff for the more than 100 contestants is a one-year paid scholarship to the school.

The lack of young blood coming into the profession can be blamed on misinformation. The perception of tradespeople is that of a group of the great unwashed (and underpaid).

Doctors and lawyers have been traditionally viewed as choice professions, where top dollar and "respectable" white collar recognition could be found. Children were encouraged to find jobs in the board room or operating room – avoiding "back-breaking labour". Let

your mind, not your muscle, work for you.

But the reality is quite different.

An electrician's income is 16.5 per cent more than the national average for Canada, and the explosion in ergonomically designed tools and products has significantly reduced the "backbreaking labour" label that many blue-collar jobs have been tagged with.

Becoming an electrician's apprentice doesn't hold the same glamour as becoming "The Apprentice" to Donald Trump – but it does promise a good income, steady work and the satisfaction of a job well-done at the end of the day.

Now it is just a matter of getting the message across to the high schools while there is still a chance to make a difference.