

Construction's Labour Crisis and the Overlooked Workforce That Could Fix It

In addressing Canada's construction labour shortage, employers should embrace neuroinclusion to unlock the potential of a highly capable yet untapped workforce.

A Generation Who's Aging Out.

Who's Picking Up the Hammer Next?

Amidst Canada's complicated and seemingly endless building crisis, the construction industry is facing a major challenge: a growing labour shortage.

With an aging workforce population and less and less people entering the field, there's now a need to recruit over 380,500 new construction workers by 2034 just to keep things running smoothly. If the industry wants to keep up with the construction demands (e.g., whether houses, buildings, roads, etc), it's clear that attracting fresh talent is more important than ever (BuildForce Canada, 2025; McMullin et al., 2004; Saad et al., 2022).

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In 2023, CBC reported a significant number of unfilled construction jobs across Canada (Nixon, 2023, July 14). Ontario alone was missing 20,000 workers. This highlights just how serious the labour shortage is.

So, where is the construction industry going to find the ambitious and capable workers needed to address this shortfall? Employers may not have to look far.

Hardworking, Loyal, and Profitable.

Why Aren't Employers Hiring Them?

An obvious way to tackle Canada's construction labour shortage is to rethink where employers are looking for workers. The traditional approach just isn't cutting it anymore, and the numbers help prove it. To truly tackle this issue, the construction industry needs to reach a capable and eager pool of potential workers.

Who's this group you may ask?

There are about 5 million Canadians with cognitive disabilities, many of whom face consistent employment challenges. While assumptions that these individuals are unproductive or too costly are common, (Nagtegaal et al., 2023), the challenges run even deeper. Discriminatory hiring practices often prevent individuals with cognitive disabilities from even reaching the interview stage, shutting the door on an opportunity before it can begin (Lindsay, 2011).

But the data tells us a different story.

In fact, including people with disabilities on the job site can actually increase profitability and they are often rated higher for productivity than their neurotypical counterparts (Lindsay et al., 2018). Also, companies that prioritize cognitive accessibility often foster more inclusive and collaborative site cultures, something that can improve communication across teams and strengthen relationships with clients and communities (Alemany & Vermeulen, 2023).

Who wouldn't want a group of workers who not only work hard but also benefit the company's bottom line?

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Cognitive Accessibility: The Workforce Solution Hiding in Plain Sight

It's time the construction industry shifted its focus to cognitive accessibility and opened up employment opportunities for these workers who are eager and ready to work.

Rather than focusing on whether different types of disabilities are suitable for construction sites, the construction industry needs to reframe the conversation to making construction sites more suitable to people of all levels of ability.

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The truth is, construction sites are already filled with people with cognitive disabilities, many of who may not even know or identify as such. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2023), 16% of employed individuals with disabilities in trades professions have cognitive disabilities. This number is likely underestimated due to structural discrimination (Moloney et al., 2019).

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Many employees might be struggling with cognitive accessibility barriers in the workplace, and employers might not even know it. Making construction sites more accessible could not only attract new workers, but also improve the productivity and well-being of those you already have.

Small Changes, Big Impact.

Simple Fixes That Benefit All Employees

So, why is making a workforce or construction site more cognitively accessible such an appealing solution?

First, it's about making simple yet powerful changes. Changes that won't cost a fortune but will make a world of difference.

For example, consider the efficiencies of providing visual aids alongside instructions workers could reference for task completion. Research shows that visual aids can significantly enhance engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking for people with cognitive disabilities (Qasserras, 2024).

Imagine the benefits of establishing stronger routine and consistency in your workforce. Studies indicate that individuals with cognitive disabilities perform better when they have a predictable schedule and clear expectations (Volmer, 1995).

These are a few (of many) small adjustments that will make your construction site more accessible to individuals with cognitive disabilities (and all other employees as well).

How to Build an Inclusive, Accessible Workforce.

How SMART Local 47 is Putting Inclusion Into Practice

At Open, we believe change happens when ideas move beyond theory and are tested in real workplaces. That's why we're collaborating with SMART Local 47 Training Centre for sheet metal workers and roofers to explore how cognitive accessibility can make their training and testing more inclusive and effective.

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Through this project, we're working directly with union trainers and persons with lived experience to identify cognitive accessibility barriers in current training approaches and to co-design practical solutions. From adapting communication methods to creating fairer testing practices, the goal is to ensure that individuals with cognitive disabilities have a genuine opportunity to succeed in the trades.

Once refined, this approach will equip union trainers to build more inclusive learning environments, ultimately opening doors for more skilled workers to join the industry.

Together with SMART Local 47, we are not only co-designing but also co-delivering cognitive accessibility training to union trainers. This means the people shaping the next generation of skilled workers will be equipped with practical tools to recognize and reduce barriers, adapt instruction, and ensure fair assessment. Over time, this ripple effect will multiply the impact—creating training environments where individuals with cognitive disabilities can succeed and thrive.

A Model for the Future of Construction

The labour shortage in Canada's construction sector won't be solved overnight. But projects like this one show that progress is possible when we expand our view of who belongs on the job site. By rethinking training through the lens of cognitive accessibility, organizations can unlock talent that has too often been overlooked.

Unions are uniquely positioned to champion cognitive accessibility. By their very nature, they exist to include, to safeguard fairness, and to ensure workers' rights are upheld.

SMART Local 47, part of SMART Canada—a union with a reputation as “one of the nation's most dynamic and diverse unions”—is showing how labour organizations can extend that commitment to neuroinclusion. With unions at the forefront, cognitive accessibility has the potential to spread across the industry in a meaningful, lasting way.

Open's work with SMART Local 47 is just one example of what's possible. Any construction organization—or industry facing a workforce gap—can benefit from a similar approach. By investing in inclusion, we don't just strengthen our labour force. We build a future of work that is fairer, more resilient, and ready for the challenges ahead.



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