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Mr. Ed Komarnicki

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. Welcome back. It's good to see everyone are still members on this committee as we go forward with our study on economic opportunities for young apprentices.

We had Mr. Mills and representatives from the Government of New Brunswick before our committee earlier. In regard to the Government of Saskatchewan, we weren't able to fully engage because of some votes that were taking place at that time. We had to abridge the study.

We wanted to hear from both governments in terms of what they're doing and some of the interesting things they have under way. The statistics I saw with respect to Saskatchewan were quite interesting. I'd be curious to see what you're doing.

We'll have each of you present. I'm assuming you can hear me all right.

Mr. Jeff Ritter (Chief Executive Officer, Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission, Government of Saskatchewan): Yes, I can hear you quite fine, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right.

The usual practice is to allow you to make a presentation, and then have a question and answer period.

We will probably adjourn at about a quarter to eleven, and then another group will be coming in, but we'll let questioning go forward on that basis.

Go ahead, Mr. Mills.

Mr. Dan Mills (Director, Apprenticeship and Occupational Certification Branch, Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, Government of New Brunswick): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning, everyone. Good morning, members.

I'll start where I left off last time. I think I was about 90 seconds into my remarks. I'll try to keep my opening statement to about seven minutes.

Unfortunately, we have come to call the apprenticeship program the best kept secret in New Brunswick. Our general public is not only unaware of the different routes into apprenticeship, but most are unable to recite more than five trades. When we tell people there are 72 trades in New Brunswick, the reaction is inevitably astounding,

so yes, increasing the visibility and appeal of apprenticeship programs is critical to change, particularly for the youth of New Brunswick, if not the youth of Canada.

The myths associated with working within the trades must be set straight. So too must the culture of work in the trades be modified in order to attract a broader audience of interest, including students, girls, women, first nations people, and university graduates who are underemployed or unemployed. They all need to consider the trades.

In New Brunswick we understand that change must begin in the K-12 system. With the reduction or removal of shop classes in many schools, it has become a priority not only to talk to kids about the trades, but also to get them on the tools. Currently we are partnering with high schools to facilitate a co-op experience for students and to offer trade fairs in conjunction with industry where hands-on experiences are provided.

Changing attitudes about the trades need to include parents and those guiding students in their career choices. Studies have demonstrated that misconceptions about the trades lead parents, teachers, and guidance counsellors to steer high school students away from the skilled trades in favour of university studies and generally white-collar occupations and professions.

[Translation]

In partnership with the Women's Issues Branch, New Brunswick offers evening trade shows at high schools around the province that include parents, guidance counsellors, female students, and female journeypersons volunteering as role models. Stations are set up that allow girls to get their hands on tools, often for the first time in their lives. We need more of this type of exposure on a larger scale.

[English]

As you will recall, in the 1990s governments began laying the groundwork for the information highway with the goal of implementing a knowledge- and information-based economy. In 1996 a report entitled “Building the Information Society: Moving Canada into the 21st Century” made policy recommendations to move Canada toward this goal with the promise of the creation of a new society that would address the needs of all individuals economically, socially and culturally.

Many years later we are a connected global community. Computer and information technologies have shifted the way we work, play, and think. Geeks are now glorified, and technology has been integrated into all aspects of life, including the trades. But are geeks so different from tradespeople? Both work with their hands and enjoy building things, fixing things, solving problems, and understanding how things work.

As philosopher and mechanic Matthew Crawford suggests, you can't hammer a nail over the Internet. Highlighting the connection between trades work and technology may entice more youth. As an example, how many youth know that with the use of computer technology, a truck and transport service technician can do a system analysis on a transport truck while it is still on the road and tell the driver what electronics to shut down to increase fuel efficiencies?

[Translation]

New Brunswick faces serious out-migration of skilled tradespersons in search of work and better pay due to the current reality of lack of work in New Brunswick. Employers are frustrated that once their apprentice becomes certified, they leave. This exodus has serious implications for the apprenticeship program, resulting in a decrease in journeyperson mentors.

This calls again for the need to consider standardizing requirements and curriculum in block training and certification exams regionally, if not nationally. Perhaps creating a virtual progress record book for apprentices could assist with tracking such an approach.

[English]

The federal apprenticeship incentive and completion grant programs, which you may be familiar with, are effective and necessary. Thinking strategically about new initiatives can only help the situation. Currently the federal government offers summer job placements for youth. As an example, could these programs be expanded to place direct emphasis on exposure to the trades?

In terms of other federal considerations, the employment insurance program plays a significant role in the life of apprentices. Retention may increase if the system could be modified to: standardize the required insurable hours for apprentices rather than the current requirement being dependent on the employment rate where the apprentice lives or works; remove the EI two-week wait period for apprentices enrolled in training for the first time; and develop a loan process available to apprentices.

Another federal consideration may be incentive grants for employers who register and/or complete apprentices. For some employers there is a willingness to hire an apprentice but a gap in the

ability to identify an apprentice. Again, a regional or national system for connecting the right apprentice to the right employer may lead to a long-term benefit.

In an attempt to assist with improving apprenticeship training and certification completion rates, we in New Brunswick have recently added learning strategists who are dedicated to providing assessment and arranging accommodations to those in need. With the influx of modified transcripts from high school we are seeing an increase in apprentices with learning gaps or learning disabilities. Results are preliminary but this preventive measure is anticipated to decrease the 20% repetitive failure rate.

For those requiring assistance with reading or calculating, iPads and apps are also increasingly popular. They are portable, considerably cheaper, and highly user friendly. An iPad on the work site might make the difference between an apprentice dropping out or finally finding enjoyment in their work. A national partnership with a technology producer to supply iPads at a reduced rate for apprentices would offset the costs that apprentices and governments regularly incur. Funding and support to develop regional or national blended learning models, including online formats and new technologies, training and examination formats, could increase success rates, decrease barriers, and increase inclusion for those who do not function best in a traditional learning and exam environment.

In terms of a summary and recommendations from New Brunswick, it is imperative that an aggressive skilled trades awareness campaign be developed that focuses on changing the attitudes and myths about a career in the trades and promotion of the skilled trades as a first-choice career. The audience must include the K-12 system as a whole, but also associations, professional training institutes, and the public at large.

● (1110)

[Translation]

Youth must be given the opportunity to have a hands-on experience with tools. Exposure in trade-specific federal youth employment initiatives may assist in this endeavour.

More employers are needed for apprenticeship training. Grants to employers may foster an increase in these partnerships. With economic challenges, out-migration is a forefront concern.

A national standardization of apprenticeship requirements would be beneficial to all provinces and would assist in maintaining an open door for apprentices to return to work in New Brunswick.

Additionally, a review of employment insurance support for apprentices may aid in the retention of apprentices.

[English]

Developing methods to attract non-traditional populations of potential apprentices should be a primary focus, including girls, women, first nations people, and university graduates who are underemployed or unemployed. The influx of apprentices with different learning styles and barriers to learning technology calls for change in how training and examinations are delivered. Technology has a role to play in this change.

In the end, the success of our actions will be measured in part when we can ask anyone, and I would suggest including this committee, if they would be able to name more than five trades.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mills.

I hope they can name more than five trades. We'll find out here in a bit, I guess.

We'll now go to our Saskatchewan witness, Mr. Jeff Ritter.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I should clarify that I'm not here representing the Government of Saskatchewan, but rather the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission, which is the commission responsible for apprenticeship in Saskatchewan.

I do very much appreciate the opportunity to present to you today. I also appreciate the interest this committee has taken in economic opportunities for young apprentices.

The Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission has a vision of a skilled and representative trades workforce which is industry trained and certified. The mandate is to develop and execute a relevant, accessible, and responsible apprenticeship training and certification system to meet the needs of employers, apprentices, journeypersons, and tradespersons.

I do want to take the opportunity to thank Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, HRSDC, trades and apprenticeship resources for their work with the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship, CCDA. HRSDC has provided much of the support work for the CCDA and its committees, and that effort is greatly appreciated.

Here in Saskatchewan, where this morning it is a balmy -49° with the wind chill, the number of registered apprentices within the system continues to grow along with Saskatchewan's economy. Unlike the temperature, the economy is very hot right now, resulting in increased needs for skilled labour.

Since June 2007 the number of registered apprentices in Saskatchewan has increased by 43% from 6,779 to 9,724. The number of apprentices in technical training also continues to increase each year, from 3,200 in 2005-06 to over 6,300 in 2012-13. Saskatchewan is quite proud to have a very high success rate on the interprovincial Red Seal examination, which is used as our certification examination. In 2011, 81% of Saskatchewan apprentices passed the Red Seal examination, in comparison to the national average of 78%.

In Saskatchewan we have put some initiatives in place to encourage young people to choose a career in the skilled trades. The Saskatchewan youth apprenticeship, SYA, program provides youth with a series of activities to encourage interest in careers in the skilled trades. Youth benefit in the form of trade time hours and registration and tuition credit for completing the program.

The Saskatchewan youth apprenticeship industry scholarship program was also created through funding from industry and the provincial government in order to provide 80 graduating high school students each year with a \$1,000 scholarship to be paid upon completion of one year of apprenticeship or post-secondary study in a designated trade.

However, there are a few issues regarding youth employment that have been brought to our attention. Often youth have difficulty in finding that first job in the skilled trade and an employer or apprenticeship sponsor because of some lack of experience.

The recommendation is often for youth to engage in a pre-employment program. As an example, the Regina and Saskatoon trade and skill centres have a direct connection with employers and employment, and youth have enjoyed much employment success following these programs.

Another commonly occurring issue is that apprentices who are eligible for technical training choose not to attend. One of the reasons given is that apprentices cannot afford to attend the technical training. Now while they are eligible for employment insurance, the time gap between applying for and receiving EI payments is sometimes too long and the apprentices cannot survive financially while awaiting EI payments.

The performance score card for service Canada reports that 83.9% of those who file for EI are either paid the benefit or a non-payment notification is issued within 28 days.

For apprentices who attend a five to eight week period of technical training, 28 days can be a significant delay. Those who receive a non-payment notification may have to wait an additional time period. Then there are those who do not receive their EI within this 28-day period.

To make matters worse, the SATCC can't process living away from home allowances for apprentices, because those are contingent upon EI approval. Special circumstances may also occur if an apprentice changes employers after the time of filing. They must then reapply for EI, leading to an additional time delay.

•(1115)

An improvement in service standards I think would help apprentices balance the issue of financial stability and technical training attendance. The federal apprenticeship incentive grant, AIG, and the apprenticeship completion grant, ACG, are very well received and are working quite well for apprentices. The AIG is paid at the completion of levels one and two. The ACG is paid at the completion of all training and upon acquiring certification.

The question that has come forward is why the AIG is not available for completion at the third level of apprenticeship training. The province funds and supports all levels of training, and apprentices would certainly benefit from an additional support throughout all levels of training.

It's important for the SATCC to encourage under-represented groups to partake in the apprenticeship system and to work in careers in the skilled trades. Part of our mandate is to increase the number of registered apprentices in under-represented groups and to provide more access to apprenticeship for them by removing barriers. One of the biggest barriers to apprenticeship is finding employment with an employer who will actually sponsor their apprenticeship. These groups include first nations, women in predominantly male trades, physically disabled people, and those with learning disabilities or differences.

We're also interested in providing additional supports and opportunities for those who are new to Canada and others with English as a second language.

Of particular note, it's difficult for first nations people on reserve to continue with their apprenticeship training through employment and attending technical training in another location. On-reserve training requires additional financial supports, as well as opportunities for paid work experience for employment transition.

We look forward to working with you on future apprenticeship initiatives. We're well positioned to work with the federal government to pilot any initiatives that come forward, especially those that may assist young people to engage in employment opportunities and enter and complete apprenticeship.

The principles in place at the Regina and Saskatoon trades and skills centres can in fact work for all under-represented groups. Key to that is a connection with employers, a connection with employment, offering quality training to industry standards, paid work placements, and a commitment to enter and complete apprenticeship.

I'd like to thank you for your time. I look forward to working with you and answering any questions you have.

•(1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that informative presentation, the pluses and the minuses. I'm sure there's room for improvement; that's why we like to hear from you.

We're going to start the first round of questions with Madam Boutin-Sweet.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelega, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to put my questions in French. My first question is for Mr. Mills.

You talked a fair bit about the adaptation of apprenticeship programs for students who have some learning gaps or learning disabilities. You also said that methods had to be found to attract non-traditional groups. Among others you mentioned women and first nations persons. I perhaps would add those who have a physical disability.

Can you tell me how we could adapt the programs for these groups?

Mr. Dan Mills: Thank you for the question.

With regard to learning disabilities, as I mentioned, there are new positions in New Brunswick for learning strategists, people who help apprentices who have some learning disabilities. Whether you are a university or college student, there is a laboratory where people who have learning disabilities may receive assistance. I think this does not exist in the usual apprenticeship environment because most of the training is provided by employers. So there is a challenge there.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Can you hear me, Mr. Mills?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Mills, could you hold on for a moment. Can you hear us? There's a bit of a delay. I know that Madam Boutin-Sweet wanted to interrupt you because she probably had a comment. Consider this an interruption. She has a comment. I'm not sure why there's a delay, but we'll have to work with it.

Go ahead, Madam Boutin-Sweet.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I think you were beginning to answer my question. I had understood what pertained to groups with learning disabilities, but I would like some information on under-represented groups. I would like to know how programs may be adapted for women, disabled persons and the members of first nations communities.

Mr. Dan Mills: With regard to women, I believe that the culture amongst employers is going to have to change significantly, particularly in the construction field. I think there are some pretty big challenges that must be met there. Employers need to be made aware of the situation of women. A book has even been written on this topic by an Alberta woman. She describes the work environment and culture in the construction field. There also have to be mentors to help women and provide them with information and training.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Thank you.

Mr. Ritter or Mr. Mills, I don't know which one of you could best answer my second question.

Mr. Ritter, you mentioned that it is difficult to provide training on reserves. Can you provide us with some further details on that?

Mr. Mills, is the training that you offer to first nations populations provided in first nations cities or villages?

[English]

Mr. Jeff Ritter: Thank you very much for that question.

First of all, it's important to know that in the apprenticeship system the majority of the training actually occurs on the job under the guidance and mentorship of a skilled journey-person. Probably around 85% of an apprentice's training occurs on the job.

For some of our under-represented groups living and working close to home, they're able to receive that mentorship. The challenge for some of them comes when it comes time to attend or receive the technical training, that remaining 15% that's often provided in the classroom and most often provided in our larger centres where the educational institutions are located.

It is possible to provide that training closer to where they live and work. Unfortunately, it's oftentimes more expensive. In Saskatchewan we have mobile training laboratories that basically can be loaded onto a transport truck and deployed to these communities, but the cost of providing the training through those facilities is very high compared to the cost of other training options.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up.

Mr. Mills, do you want to make a comment now as well? If you do, try to make it fairly brief.

Mr. Dan Mills: I'll just mention comments that are very similar to Mr. Ritter's in Saskatchewan, based on our experience.

We do have some examples of where we have offered training in the first nations community. There's a couple of key things in terms of success. If there is a vibrant economy where there are employers who can mentor those apprentices, that's certainly more successful.

Again, if you can offer the training within their community, it's much more successful. Our experience has been that there's a cost to it, but sometimes it is cheaper to move the instructor to the students than it is to move the students to the instructor and a college. Sometimes it can actually be cheaper in terms of costs. I'll leave it at that.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that comment.

I will move to Ms. Leitch. Go ahead.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, gentlemen, for your time this morning. I greatly appreciate it. I particularly appreciate Mr. Mills as our repeat customer.

I have a couple of questions.

First, one of the things you've touched on, Mr. Mills, is this issue of what is almost a stigma, in that students go to the dinner table and their parents are saying that they should be attending a university as opposed to entering the trades. Do either of you have some specific recommendations on what things we can do to deal with that college stigma, for lack of a better term? How can we better educate parents, guidance counsellors, and students themselves on what a great opportunity entering the skilled trades may be?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Ritter.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: First of all, the idea that the skilled trades are somehow a consolation prize for kids who couldn't get into university is a fairly long-standing stigma. I and colleagues across the country are working very hard to try to change that perception and promote skilled trades as a first-choice career option.

We were fortunate to participate within Saskatchewan in a survey involving Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions, a recent graduation completion survey. Of course, our graduates are journey-people and we are out actively promoting the results of that survey.

One interesting thing to consider is our newly certified journey-people in Saskatchewan earn more annually than respondents from any other institution in Saskatchewan. The average income for a main job in Saskatchewan for 2009-10 graduates was around \$56,000 a year. Those graduating from the SATCC make an average of \$79,864, and that's second only to those who are graduating with a Ph.D. or a doctorate. That group makes only an average of \$80,490. That's just over \$1,000 more than a graduating journey-person.

I think getting out and talking about some of the financial advantages as well as the lifestyle advantages that a career within the skilled trades offers is an important step to changing some of those perceptions.

The Chair: Mr. Mills, did you wish to make a comment as well?

Mr. Dan Mills: Yes, please. I have just two comments, Mr. Chair.

It's an excellent question. You outlined the people involved: the teachers, the parents, and the guidance counsellors. There are two ways in terms of addressing this because they are the influencers over apprentices or potential apprentices.

One, in my experience you have to meet them face to face. We send reams of information out and we never know if anyone reads it, looks at it, files it, or uses it or not. In my experience I have met with trades instructors, guidance counsellors, psychologists, all sorts of people. You really have to meet with them face to face. The way to influence their perception I think is to give examples of successful people.

As Mr. Ritter said, it is quite easy to demonstrate that you can have a very successful career as a tradesperson. I think that's one of the best ways to demonstrate that to the people who influence students' decisions.

•(1130)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Thank you very much.

I have a second question for both of you.

With which organizations has your province been the most successful in partnering? Are there specific industry leaders? Are there specific colleges or not-for-profit organizations that you've worked with and your apprenticeships have been the most likely to be involved with and therefore to graduate?

I recognize that part of this is individualized and that a young person may be more interested in a specific area, but have you had specific industry leaders who we could use as examples of best practices, to whom other industry leaders or not-for-profit leaders could look by way of example to emulate?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Mills. Keep it relatively brief here, about a minute, so maybe half a minute each.

Mr. Dan Mills: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have just a couple of comments on that one.

I would say one of our most successful partnerships is with the New Brunswick Building Trades Council and the Building and Construction Trades Department, which is generally made up of the unionized construction sector. Our records suggest that apprentices with a unionized employer are more likely to complete. It also suggests that it might take them a little bit longer. You can weigh the pros and cons of whether you want them to complete or you want them to speed it up.

In terms of a second partner that we've been very successful with, I can't narrow it down to one, but there are a number of not-for-profit groups, including the Y.M.C.A., the John Howard Society, people involved with corrections, people involved with youth, people involved with first nations communities. I would say there are a number of not-for-profit groups.

The Chair: Mr. Ritter.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: I can echo a lot of what Dan said.

In Saskatchewan our whole system is built on partnerships. I wouldn't narrow it down to any particular firm or non-profit organization. I can comment on my board of directors' strategic planning process, which does include a very active industry consultation component to make sure that the strategic plan developed by the SATCC board of directors reflects the needs and desires of the stakeholders we're trying to serve, which makes it very easy for me and my senior management team to develop an operational plan to try to accomplish those strategic goals.

I think the key is broad-based consultation and the involvement of many partners.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now move to Ms. Charlton.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Thank you to both of you for your presentations. I'm delighted that you're here today.

I very much appreciate your comments about all three areas that I think are of importance to us as a committee, looking at the

recruitment of apprentices, the retention of apprentices, and of course the placement, ultimately. I have questions on all three, although I suspect time won't allow.

Let me start with the observations you made about employment insurance and the support the apprentices need to be able to continue throughout their program.

I think it was you, Mr. Mills, and I think Mr. Ritter as well, who identified the waiting period as often being a significant challenge for apprentices as they try to make ends meet for their study period in the apprenticeship.

In addressing the waiting period issues with respect to employment insurance, are you suggesting there ought to be a special program designed for apprentices, or is the waiting period an issue that actually is the same for all workers who are on EI, trying to access their benefits?

The Chair: Mr. Ritter, go ahead.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: I would preface my answer by saying that the concerns I've heard have been from apprentices and journeypersons, not the general public. If I could contain my comments within that context, I think it would be best.

Part of this could be even a perception, right? Remember that the apprentices are working under the guidance of a journeyperson. Like everything else, perception becomes reality. As an apprentice hears stories from his journeyperson around potential delays in getting his own EI cheque when he went through the classroom training component, that can influence an apprentice's decision to attend technical training or not. It's not just the reality of the potential wait times; it's the perception that goes along with it that's passed down from journeypersons to apprentices.

•(1135)

The Chair: Mr. Mills, do you have a comment?

I think the question was on whether there might be a special way of handling apprenticeships, a way that's different from regular EI claims.

Mr. Dan Mills: It's a great question. I'll make just a couple of comments.

Recently our board chair of the Apprenticeship and Occupational Certification Board in New Brunswick did send a letter to some of the folks responsible for EI around apprenticeship. One of the suggestions was a dedicated 1-800 number just for apprentices. Whether that would work or not we're not sure, but we do recognize that apprentices need some way to get at the system very quickly and have their issue resolved. As Jeff says, the training is anywhere from three weeks to ten weeks, and we have stories of apprentices who finish before they get anything.

The other piece, which I'll finish with, is just a comment. I think over the years we've confused the employment insurance program with a training program. I know there's been talk in New Brunswick sometimes of whether apprentices should be able to access student loans, but because the training in school is short, generally the response to that has been no. I think there is confusion about whether EI...

In the case of an apprentice, EI is really support for training and not necessarily employment insurance. They work and then go to school, and then they go back to work. They happen to interact with the employment insurance system for three to ten weeks during school. I think that's where it gets complicated.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thank you very much. I appreciate your comments.

Mr. Ritter, I acknowledge what you're saying about the transfer of information from journeypersons to apprentices, but I think we've heard from a number of witnesses over and over again in this committee that the challenges around collecting EI are more than just an urban myth for many apprentices.

I wonder if I could ask you a different question, and this is particularly on the placement side. We've had some infrastructure investments. We could have a long debate about whether or not those investments have been enough, but nonetheless, we've had some investments in terms of infrastructure renewal.

I wonder if you've given any thought to whether there perhaps should be some contract compliance provisions in the infrastructure investments, whereby you would be told that in order for you to be the successful bidder, yes, of course the cost of doing the job matters, but perhaps one of the components to be considered could be hiring young people, creating opportunities for youth employment, thereby promoting skills for some of the infrastructure investments.

That's for either of you.

The Chair: We'll start with Mr. Mills this time. Go ahead.

Mr. Dan Mills: I would say that the short answer would be yes. In New Brunswick there is a requirement that, where applicable, government tenders for construction have apprentices as 10% of the workforce. So yes, that is a great idea and that has been implemented in New Brunswick in terms of public tendering.

The Chair: Mr. Ritter.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: I think that would be a fine idea. I'm not aware of the extent to which that has been implemented within the Government of Saskatchewan for public tendering.

Most of my experience has been in trying to encourage employers to recognize the benefits of having a highly trained skilled workforce. For many that means sort of renewing and affirming their commitment to apprenticeship.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Time is up.

The next speaker on the list is Mr. Daniel, but I'll move to Mr. Cuzner. We'll see if we have time left and we'll come back to you, Mr. Daniel. If we don't, we'll conclude with Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): I want to thank both witnesses for being with us today.

I wonder if both witnesses could expand on the EI component. It's been said by other witnesses that this is where the attrition rate has really spiked when it comes time for an apprentice to go back to school and with the hiccup they experience with EI. Could you expand on that a little bit as to what you've heard from apprentices about how much time elapses between starting school and actually

receiving an EI cheque? As well, what would you think would be the answer there?

Mr. Mills, you've identified doing away with the two-week waiting period. Do you have other suggestions as to how we can best go about addressing that lapse?

Those are my only questions, Mr. Chair.

• (1140)

The Chair: Okay, we'll start with Mr. Ritter. I see the full delegation isn't here so we may go to Mr. Daniel after that. Go ahead, Mr. Ritter.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: The best information I have on that really comes from the performance scorecard from Service Canada. On that scorecard they indicate that just about 84% of those who file are paid or receive the notification of non-entitlement to benefits within 28 days. That tells me that 16% don't receive that benefit within the first 28 days.

Within the SATCC we haven't done a lot of study into the actual performance measures and how those relate to an apprentice's decision to attend or not attend technical training. It is an area for further research that we're looking into, but it does keep coming up time and time again in discussions with both employers and apprentices.

The Chair: Mr. Mills.

Mr. Dan Mills: Again, I have a couple of comments.

Earlier someone mentioned the urban myth. My experience is that apprentices who are having issues with EI are most likely to connect with me in my province, or with their parliamentary representative whether it is provincial or federal. Based on the nature of our roles, we tend to hear the worst cases.

As Jeff said, there are a lot of apprentices who go to school, get their EI payment on time, get their schooling, and finish, but there are certainly some, and maybe the number is 16% or so, who are missing out.

In terms of what to do, I mentioned the two-week waiting period. That's imposed on their first trip to school, but not on their subsequent trips to school. Maybe that could be waived for their first trip.

The 28 days is also an issue. If it were, for example, 14 days instead of 28 days, that would speed up the system.

The other piece of that is training for both apprentices and employers. A lot of the time when there is a hiccup in the system it's either because the apprentice has not filed their information the right way, or the employer has not filed their information, or in some cases the employer has not even provided the information, for example, the record of employment.

I suggest to look at the two weeks, the 28 days, and some way of educating apprentices and employers about their role and how to get through the system as efficiently as possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mills.

Mr. Daniel, if you have a question, go ahead.

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you, witnesses, for being present and allowing yourselves to be grilled.

You've both raised the issue about opportunities for employers in terms of participating with apprentices, in other words providing apprenticeship places.

To either one of you, in your opinion are there any potential avenues for the federal government to encourage greater employer participation in the apprenticeship programs?

The Chair: Mr. Ritter.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: Certainly there's a promotional aspect. Our evidence suggests there is an actual positive return on investment for employers to engage apprentices and build a skilled workforce within their company. Helping with even the promotion of the importance of having a highly trained representative workforce would be of assistance, and certainly something in which the Government of Canada could participate.

We talked earlier about potential tendering requirements that would make that a condition. That would be a positive move.

I think both of those are distinct possibilities.

• (1145)

The Chair: Mr. Mills.

Mr. Dan Mills: I'll give you my four suggestions.

One, there is a federal government tax credit of 10% for employers. I would suggest that has been moderately successful. There may be ways to improve that, for example, by increasing the tax credit or expanding it to apprentices. It's limited right now to apprentices in year one or year two. There could be some expansion of it. The comment from employers is that it's a bit too complicated if you're a small employer, and some of them don't bother to fill it out.

Another option for the federal government in the way the federal government directly influences apprentices is through the grants. Jeff Ritter mentioned that earlier. These are grants for when they complete block one, block two, and then when they finish. There could be something put in place similarly for employers. It could be a grant directly to an employer who completes an apprentice or an employer who helps an apprentice progress.

Number three, in terms of federal government support, for the most part HRSDC does an excellent job at supporting the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship through the Red Seal secretariat. Ongoing support for that department and that group would certainly benefit everyone in Canada, as well as the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship, which represents the provinces, territories, and federal government. There could be federal support for that.

Finally, number four, I would echo Mr. Ritter's comments about promotion of the program. I think there's incredible opportunity. We've heard from industry, which wants to participate. We've heard from provinces and territories that want to participate. We've heard from the federal government that wants to participate. There's an incredible opportunity to promote the trades, to promote the Red Seal program, to promote certification and apprenticeship right

across the country. I think just about everyone would be willing to participate either in kind or financially to that.

Mr. Joe Daniel: I have one more question.

The Chair: Sure, go ahead.

Mr. Joe Daniel: The other challenging question is that in places like Britain and Europe, etc., generally apprenticeships start right out of high school. We've heard from many witnesses that generally the apprenticeship programs have more adults who are involved. This has caused some challenges.

Can you expand on any challenges that you see for people who are older and therefore not completing their apprenticeships?

The Chair: Thank you for that question.

We'll start with you, Mr. Ritter, and we'll conclude with the answers to that question.

Mr. Jeff Ritter: That is an excellent question.

The apprenticeship systems in the EU countries have existed for a very long time. They are part of that continuation of public education. The apprenticeship systems in the Canadian context were really structured for adults, mainly for veterans returning from World War II. In most provinces, vocational schools were first established in the 1960s for public school students who were not so academically inclined and whose success was built upon applying what they learned in a much quicker cycle.

The key to the successful element of the apprenticeship system is that it is a workplace-based training program that focuses on the employer or those who have a full-time job with an employer. To change that system would require a fundamental change to most of our educational institutions.

I think the system we have in place does work quite well, and we can build upon that success.

The Chair: Mr. Mills, would you like to conclude?

Mr. Dan Mills: Thank you very much.

I completely agree with your point. I haven't looked lately, but I think the average age of an apprentice in New Brunswick is 26, and the average age of an apprentice across Canada is 27 or 28. There's certainly a gap between the ages of about 18 up to 26 or 28. There are eight to ten years of a person's potential career that have been lost to something else, so there's definitely a challenge there.

I don't know for sure, but I suspect sometimes those older workers are actually more successful. They have a bit of life experience and are able to navigate the training system, the EI system, the employer system, that sort of thing, but there are a number of challenges.

I would go back to one of the points I made earlier. At the end of the day I think we do need to influence teachers, parents and guidance counsellors because they're the ones who interact with the potential apprentices from kindergarten right on up to grade 12.

Regarding the European example, I would say that of all the provinces, it is probably strongest in Quebec. Quebec does a much better job, I think, of engaging young people in grade 9 or grade 10, and directing them toward a path in the trades. Fortunately or unfortunately, the other provinces and territories do have more of a North American model where, as Jeff says, it's geared more toward adults.

I think there are some lessons to be learned from the Quebec model that exists already in Canada.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you very much for appearing before the committee and for some of those insightful comments. We'll certainly take them into account in completing our report.

We have another matter of business to conduct here, so I'm going to suspend until the next portion of our meeting at 12:45, or it may go a little longer.

Thank you, gentlemen. We'll suspend for a few moments to ensure we have our next delegation that is to appear before us. With that, I'll suspend this portion of our meeting.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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