

benefit trends

apprenticeship programs

by | **Justin M. Held, CEBS**

Already struggling to replace retiring tradespeople, apprenticeship programs are dealing with a host of new challenges related to external competition and apprentice mental health. Despite these hurdles, stakeholders say apprenticeship programs are successful overall, and they are anticipating a positive hiring outlook in the coming years, according to a recent report from the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans.

Top Trends in Apprenticeship Programs—2024 Survey Results examines the challenges faced by programs and apprentices, program initiatives, and the prevalence and impact of mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) issues within programs. The report reflects responses from 135 U.S. and Canadian apprenticeship programs.

Challenges

Programs

More than half (54%) of survey respondents said their apprenticeship programs are extremely successful overall, but they also face many challenges. The program challenges rated as very prevalent by the highest number of respondents fall into three categories.

1. **Communication difficulties:** This includes communicating the value of the trades to external stakeholders (51%) and prospective apprentices (65%).
2. **Filling the future pipeline:** Training programs report a shortage (41%) and a lower quality (32%) of potential candidates. In addition, 37% of respondents report finding qualified instructors and staff as a very prevalent challenge.
3. **External competition:** This includes competition from other business (24%) and educational (22%) models. These models could

include attending a four-year college or technical college rather than enrolling in an apprenticeship program.

Other program challenges (cited as somewhat or very prevalent) include difficulty in replacing the number of retired tradespeople (58%), keeping up with the rapid pace of technology (51%) and cybersecurity issues (41%).

Individual Apprentices

Child-care and/or elder-care issues are identified as the top challenge for individual apprentices in the U.S. and Canada, with more than four in five (86%) responding programs identifying this as a very or somewhat prevalent challenge. This is followed by drug testing/fitness for work issues (69%) (a new response option for this iteration of the survey), injuries due to the nature of work (67%), increased workhours due to reduced hires (67%), language and communication barriers (64%), transportation issues (63%) as well as unemployment due to cyclical/seasonal nature of work (63%)—a widespread challenge in construction industries.

Recruitment and Retention

Three issues were rated as significant recruitment and retention challenges by more than one-fifth of participating programs: low wages/benefit levels during training (23%), offers of more steady work in other industry sectors (22%) and the stigma attached to skilled trades work (22%). Also rated as significant is apprentice poaching (19%), in which outside organizations recruit apprentices away from the organization in which they completed their education. Lack of/ineffective formal mentorship initiatives (19%), the physical/hands-on nature of work (19%) and a lack of/ineffective preapprenticeship initiatives (17%) also are challenges. A similar proportion (16%) reports



Justin M. Held, CEBS
Associate Director,
Research & Education,
International Foundation of
Employee Benefit Plans,
Brookfield, Wisconsin

that a significant future challenge is the length of time it takes to produce skilled workers.

Apprenticeship Program Initiatives

Recruitment

As part of their recruitment strategies, apprenticeship programs are making efforts to target specific population groups. The majority of programs target military members/veterans (82%), women (81%) and people of color (76%).

Life Skills

Life skills initiatives are key components of a well-rounded apprentice educational experience. These programs extend instruction beyond job-related duties and focus on the personal development of apprentices. Frequently included components are personal safety (84%), mathematical skills (84%), work/jobsite behaviour (83%), CPR/AED training (79%), sexual harassment training (77%), union citizenship (76%), health care benefits (76%) and employability skills (74%), which commonly emphasize the importance of proper attire, adequate transportation and timeliness. In addition, programs often offer leadership training (68%) and include instruction in communication/social skills (60%), financial literacy (54%) and computer/technology use (54%).

Partnerships

Apprenticeship programs collaborate extensively with various external partners to provide education and

job assistance, facilitate recruitment/outreach efforts, establish articulation agreements, utilize facilities and pursue funding opportunities. Construction contractors (76%) and labour organizations (73%) are the most common collaboration partners, followed by high schools/school boards (53%), technical/community colleges (47%), community-based organizations (45%) and branches of the military (43%). Responding organizations also frequently partner with preapprenticeship programs (43%), vocational schools (42%), colleges/universities (39%) and government agencies (35%).

Focus on Mental Health/ Substance Use Disorders

As concern about the growth of mental health conditions increases, apprenticeship programs, as well as sponsoring unions and employers, are emphasizing awareness and education about apprentice mental health issues and SUDs. Respondents identified the following conditions as the most (very or somewhat) prevalent among apprentices.

- Adult hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder (ADHD/ADD): 79%
- Anxiety disorders: 77%
- Depression: 77%
- Alcohol addiction/use disorder: 76%
- Nonprescription drug addiction/SUD (heroin, cocaine, etc.): 64%
- PTSD: 54%

Among these conditions, alcohol addiction/use disorder had the highest “very prevalent” rating at 24%, followed by nonprescription drug addic-

tion/SUD (17%), depression (15%) and anxiety disorders (14%).

Impact of Mental Health/SUD Issues

This wide array of mental health conditions has had a considerable impact (very or somewhat impactful) on several components of apprentice performance. Nearly nine in ten programs (85%) said MH/SUDs often cause absenteeism and tardiness and that they are either very or somewhat impactful on overall job performance. Relationships with co-workers (82%) are another significantly impacted area of performance, followed by morale (78%) and *presenteeism* (78%), which is defined as the inability to focus on work/productivity. Responding programs also reported that mental health conditions have an impact on worker physical health (73%) and safety/accidents (59%).

Treatment Programs

All responding programs provide apprentices with referrals to community services from either their union, employer or training program, while the majority of programs have support groups on site (54% at the union/employer level and 26% at the apprenticeship program level). Support meetings may be hosted by Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or other organizations.

Education and Awareness Programs

The most frequently offered education and awareness initiatives at the union/employer level are:

- Access to online resources and tools: 75%

- Worksite education/information sessions: 73%
- Information posted in paper format or online: 72%
- Formal suicide prevention training: 61%
- Mental health-specific newsletters to apprentices: 57%
- Mental health crisis training: 57%
- Supervisor training: 38%
- Positive Jobsite Culture (PJC) training—a program designed to reduce worksite bullying and hazing: 33%.

Return-to-Work Programs

After a MH/SUD crisis occurs, responding programs are sponsoring initiatives to facilitate an effective return to the job or training site. Nearly half (47%) of programs offer communication preparation at the union/employer level; supervisors and co-workers receive tips to better communicate with the returning worker. This initiative is also frequently offered at the individual training program level. In addition, a large proportion of programs (45%) have planned communication with the returning worker, both before and after they return to work. Other common return-to-work practices include offering workers light duty for a determined period (40%), allowing workers to return on a flexible schedule (34%) and providing the manager or supervisor with education before the worker returns (27%).

Preventive Programs

Employee assistance programs/labour assistance programs/employee and family assistance programs (EAPs/LAPs/EFAPs) are the most prevalent programs for preventing mental health issues, offered by more than four in five apprenticeship programs at the union/employer levels. An additional percentage offers these programs at the individual training program level. A majority of respondents include a mental health component with their wellness plan at the union/employer level (57%). Other common preventive programs are incorporating mental health assessments into apprentice health risk assessments (45%) and stress management programs at the union/employer level (31%).

Top Trends in Apprenticeship Programs—2024 Survey Results is available for free to members at www.ifebp.org/apprenticeship.



pdf/324

Sponsorships and Exhibits Available!

EVOLVE

Benefits and Workforce Strategies Summit

June 25-27, 2024
Delta Hotels Calgary Downtown
Calgary, Alberta

HR, pensions and benefits leaders—This conference is for you! Learn innovative, impactful strategies and trends while connecting with your peers through unique networking opportunities. Session topics include using shared values to create an engaged and inclusive culture, preventing burnout, attracting and retaining talent, dealing with toxic behaviour at work, effectively managing change and more.

Preconference Opportunities: June 24-25

Total Rewards Certificate
Advanced Pensions Certificate

Sponsored Attendee Tables Available

Invite your clients and colleagues to share the experience.
Table of six: C\$6,000 (a \$7,700 value!)

www.ifebp.org/EVOLVE

ED248788

International Foundation

OF EMPLOYEE BENEFIT PLANS

CANADA