

Bridging the Gap | Executive Summary

Industries across Canada are seeing a large portion of their workforce retire without the ability to replace them, and the forestry sector is no exception. In Ontario, the forestry sector is experiencing a labour force and skill shortage, preventing it from realizing its full economic potential. If left unchecked, this shortage could negatively impact the socio-economic standing of communities across the province.

To address this issue, Forests Ontario – the province’s leading charity dedicated to the creation, preservation, and maintenance of forest and grassland habitats – and the Ontario Forest Industries Association (OFIA) collaborated on a project called “Bridging the Gap Between Ontario’s Youth & the Provincial Forest Sector”. Known simply as “Bridging the Gap”, it is an Employment Ontario research project funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario. The project was also steered by a volunteer advisory committee comprised of representatives from industries, organizations and educational institutions working in, or supporting, the forestry sector.

Bridging the Gap research and key findings are broken down into three reports, each with individual areas of research focus:

- **Training and Education Gap Analysis** | Focus: Assess current, forestry-related education and training to identify education, training and development gaps and/or capacity limitations, as well as identify interim pathways to recruit and train youth.
- **The Ontario Forestry Sector** | Focus: Investigate current forestry workers’ career paths, training preferences and needs, satisfaction with the industry, and expected labour shortages.
- **Youth’s Career Journey and Industry Perceptions** | Focus: Explore the career paths of youth, their influences and motivations, their perceptions of the forestry sector in general and as an employment option and uncover opportunities to communicate and attract youth in a relevant and meaningful way.

Priority takeaways from Training and Education Gap Analysis

For those looking to start a career in the forest industry, the education and training available varies, but is accessible across most of Ontario. However, finding the relevant education paths to any individual job can be challenging. Information that is streamlined, easily accessible, clearly defined, and updated regularly will help youth easily map out the journey to their desired career.

Training and education for certain woodlands sector jobs are largely unavailable in the Greater Toronto Area and Southern Ontario. Having fewer options for training and education in certain geographical areas can limit the

awareness and exposure that youth in those regions have to a career in forestry.

Currently, much of the training for jobs in mill operations is done on the job (vs. formal education), especially for jobs with lower qualifications. While there is a variety of education options across Ontario (most notably in Northern Ontario), some positions may be hard to recruit for, given the data collected on youth's negative perceptions of hard, manual labour. Additionally, several jobs in mill operations require experience in other positions within a mill first, therefore making it challenging to recruit externally. Providing training pathways for those interested in skilled positions will be critical to filling specific gaps within mills.

Several institutions offer education and training for Indigenous youth, with many focusing on GED and general employment skills. There are a number of programs in Ontario that are designed to prepare youth for the workforce. Those focused on certificates and pathways to trades provide the widest range of employment opportunities in forestry. However, there are limited types of trade certificates available. Development of custom programs in partnership with existing youth training organizations such as Outland Youth Employment Program (OYEP) may be necessary to provide a broader range of training qualifications and pathways.

Priority Takeaways from the Ontario Forestry Sector Report

An aging workforce and subsequent labour shortage is a challenge in Ontario and across Canada. To effectively compete with other industries and attract and retain a workforce that can sustain a growing industry, Ontario's forestry sector will need to work on all aspects of the engagement funnel, beginning with general awareness, followed by consideration, and lastly engagement.

- 1. Awareness** | A lack of awareness of the industry and the potential jobs available is a significant barrier to attracting a workforce. Solutions need to consider both the general population and youth entering the workforce. Without first increasing overall awareness, conversion to consideration among youth may be less successful.
- 2. Consideration** | The forest industry needs to feature early in career/job considerations among high school students while they map out their education paths. Solutions to increasing consideration involve both increasing awareness of training requirements and improving training pathways to those considering a job in forestry.
- 3. Engagement** | Among those already in the forestry industry, the cyclical and seasonal nature of the work, the sector's unpredictability, the high cost of entry for training requirements, and compensation that is considered below market, can impact engagement and retention. Addressing the issues that create uncertainty in the lives of workers will help retain employees and turn the industry into a more attractive career option.

Priority Takeaways from the Youth's Career Journey and Industry Perceptions Report

Low awareness and consideration of forestry | Among youth, the forestry industry suffers from a lack of awareness and knowledge about the industry and the types of jobs available, as well as overall negative perceptions. These are the overarching barriers that must be addressed to increase youth's consideration of the industry as a potential career path.

Values alignment is important to career choice | Knowledge about the industry goes a long way toward inspiring and increasing consideration among youth who already have an interest in various aspects related to forestry, such as working outdoors and passion for sustainability. Leveraging this alignment in messaging and outreach will be key to success.

Existing assets hitting the mark, but not the audience | When asked to review existing forestry recruitment assets (such as the Project Learning Tree Canada Career Facts Sheets [available online](#)), youth had very positive feedback. However, for recently recruited forestry workers, this was the first time seeing the assets, suggesting there is more to be done with exposure and outreach.

Other Priority Takeaways from Bridging the Gap Research

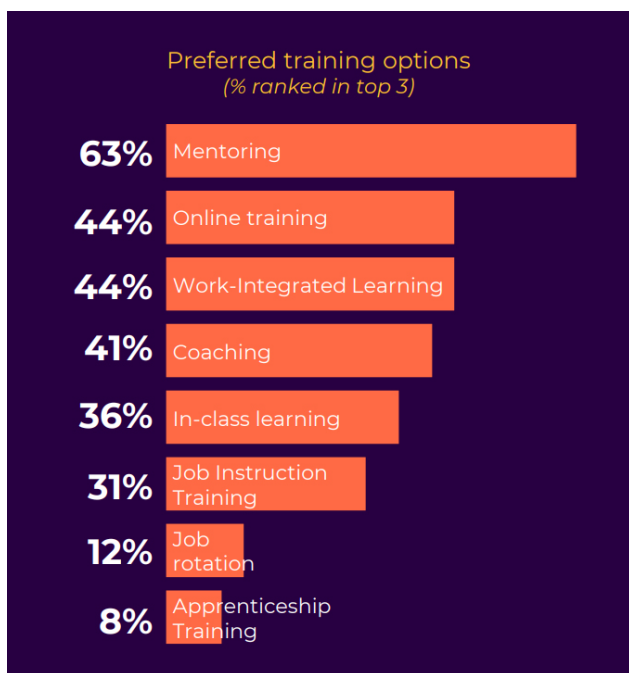
Word of mouth is the most important source of awareness about the industry, but the decision to pursue a career in forestry is driven by both personal interest and family influence. Alignment with personal values was identified as the top benefit of working in forestry by new forestry workers.

The top reasons for pursuing a career in forestry

The decision to pursue a career in forestry is partially driven by love of nature/passion, and partially driven by family influences. Women were significantly more likely to say that joining the forestry industry 'just happened' (23%), or that was it recommended to them (18%) compared to men (3% vs. 0%).



While a third of the forestry sector employees surveyed did not feel prepared when first entering the industry, most received on the job training to help them succeed. Workers generally felt the need for more training after their initial onboarding and could benefit from regular training opportunities with a focus on mentoring as the preferred training format.



Respondents predict that a wide range of jobs in forestry will become harder to fill, as is already the case in many current positions today. Jobs in woodlands and mill operations are expected to face the most challenges.

Positions predicted to be the most challenging to recruit in woodlands and mill operations



63%

Logging Truck Driver



53%

Forestry/Logging Labourer



16%

Logging Machinery Operator



63%

Heavy Equipment Operator



53%

Heavy Equipment Mechanic



16%

Maintenance Manager

There are many solutions that can help recruiting efforts among youth; however, without increased awareness and improved perceptions of the industry among the general population, efforts to recruit students will continue to fall short.

Overall barriers to recruiting are three-fold

While the labour shortage itself is a problem, the barriers to recruiting and retaining employees are three-fold:

- 1 Awareness of the industry**
Awareness of the industry and the potential jobs (range and type) available is a significant barrier to interest and consideration.
- 2 Training and education**
Training and education to become qualified can be a challenge for certain positions and among certain populations.
- 3 Cost of entry and nature of the work**
The cost of entry and the type/nature of work itself is an important barrier to creating interest in the industry and retaining skilled workers.

For an in-depth look at the potential solutions to these challenges, please see pg. 48-53 of the [Bridging the Gap – Ontario Forestry Sector Report](#).

Support among Indigenous peoples is strong

Indigenous leaders recognize the alignment between the forestry industry and their communities, and see the beneficial opportunities to create jobs locally. However, the industry will need to create social supports and training resources for Indigenous youth to succeed. Including Indigenous voices in the conversations and messages around forestry and the potential for employment opportunities is essential for successful outcomes.

Note: Full versions of all three Bridging the Gap [research reports are available online](#).