

Looking at the Future of Construction in Ontario



An Interview with Ian Cunningham
of the Council
of
Ontario Construction
Associations



Home at COCA

The Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA) has been headed by Ian Cunningham for the past 14 years. COCA is a federation made up of construction organizations representing more than 10,000 construction businesses and more than 400,000 employees. As such, it is the largest and most representative group of ICI (industrial, commercial and institutional) and heavy civil construction employers in Ontario.

Starting Out

Originally from Kingston, Ian attended Queen's University and afterwards became a small business owner. He eventually got involved in the Kingston Chamber of Commerce where he rose to the rank of Chair. His experience in Kingston brought him to Toronto where he got a job at the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC). There, he was the Senior Vice President and at times the interim President, a role involving a lot of government relations work. It was after this, while working at an association in Mississauga, Ian became aware of COCA, interviewed, and got the job as President. His greatest professional achievement was his involvement in the passing of the province's new Construction Act which came into effect between July of 2018 and October of 2019. Under his leadership, all parties were unanimous. As Ian says of himself, "I would describe myself professionally or work-wise as a professional association executive with a lot of experience in government relations work."

COCA is not dissimilar to the OCC in that it is a federation of other associations. The OCC represents approximately 150 other local chambers and boards of trade, while COCA is made up of around 30 construction associations. Some are local mixed trade associations, some are prime contractor associations, and some are provincial trade associations that are the employer bargaining agents with their affiliated unions. Between the OCC and COCA, the work is very similar, with government relations making up the bulk of Ian's workload. This includes working with the Ministry of Labour on occupational health and safety issues, Employment Standards Act issues with the WSIB, and The Construction Act which resides with the attorney general. He also liaises with his members and with senior officials at Queen's Park to make sure the laws, regulations, and public policy environment in Ontario supports success in the ICI and heavy civil construction sector. The goal of this work is to bring broad prosperity across the province. In doing so, COCA is involved with a lot of partnerships such as with Skills Ontario as well as many other organizations. Ian recognizes that collaboration is the key to success: "we understand that our views are our views, but we can't influence the government if we only represent our singular views; we have to try to persuade others, or align our issues with others, in order to influence the shape of public policy."



Council
of Ontario
Construction
Associations



Ever-changing Climate

The last few years have not been easy both socially and economically, but while many industries suffered during the pandemic, the construction industry fared better than any other sector in the economy. The only hiccup was early on when there was a full-scale shutdown, but soon after, the industry was deemed to be essential and bounced back at full speed. While the industry was very busy, productivity and profitability were hampered by the additional costs of PPE, sanitizing, and distancing. That being said, the industry as a whole embraced the new protocols and as such WSIB claims were exceedingly low during the pandemic.



Shortage of Skilled Labour

Perhaps the biggest ongoing issue facing the construction industry is the shortage of skilled labour. There are shortages in every trade such as masonry, boiler making, elevator technicians, carpenters, and the list goes on. The Ontario government's recent infrastructure investment to the tune of \$145 billion over the next 10 years, while an impressive amount, makes up only a small percentage of a huge industry, to put things in perspective. Part of the problem of growing the workforce lies in enticing young workers and high school students into the construction trade. Kids need to be shown what is available, what are the benefits, and what it is like to work in construction. Parents and teachers must also be convinced that skilled trades are valid career paths. Employers must be enticed to take on apprentices. Today, there is a very small minority of employers who take on apprentices. Completion rates also need to be improved. Community Colleges are in the business of selling seats, but do not always follow through to make sure those students end up in the trades. In addition, construction sites are not what they used to be; they are safer than ever. Perhaps one remedy is the mobile trades and technology truck from Skills Ontario, who have partnerships with every school board and college in the province. The trailer expands to about 500 square feet with virtual reality headsets so students can get hands-on experience in the trades.

Veterans: Sought-after Commodity

One source of new skilled labour are military Veterans. Veterans are fast becoming a sought-after commodity in the construction industry as Ian points out: "the reality is these people who come out of the military are highly disciplined, hard working, show up on time, and believe in a hard day's work." As such, COCA became involved with Helmets to Hardhats (H2H) and Good Shepherd Ministries through their support of an application for funding made by H2H to the Ministry of Labour to support homeless Veterans. As Ian says of H2H: "I can't help but think about how innovative H2H has been with its different programs to appeal to different types of Veterans and their families and cadets, not only in the trades but in administration and recently in management training. This initiative is creating management personnel for the construction industry."



HELMETS TO HARDHATS



DU RÉGIMENT AUX BÂTIMENTS

Promoting H2H

Ian's trusted reputation helps promote H2H amongst COCA's membership. He ensures that all the monthly data produced by H2H is circulated to COCA's huge membership network, some 10,000 general and trade contractors, who employ approximately 400,000 workers, both union and non-union. He meets quarterly for updates on the program with Joe and Brother David from Good Shepherd Ministries and then communicates those updates to the board at COCA.

Construction Life

For those who choose a life in construction, it can be hard work, and therefore not for everyone. The ideal candidate for a career in the construction industry is someone who enjoys physical work, teamwork, working with their hands, and someone whose learning style is not learning from a book or from a teacher, but from experience. Ian describes the journey of a typical construction apprentice as such: “the average age of a construction apprentice is 27 or 28. Their typical journey begins with leaving high school, maybe they try a year at university and realize it’s not for them. Then, maybe they go to a community college and don’t like that either. Finally, they bump into a friend or relative who has a construction company, who offers them a job. They try it out, like it, and register to be an apprentice, but the journey there amounts to almost 10 lost years of productivity.” Through such initiatives as Ontario’s Skills Development program, there is a drive to rectify this problem of lost productivity time.



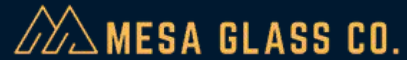
For more information on COCA, visit their website at <https://www.coca.on.ca/>

For more information on Ontario’s Skills Development Fund, visit <https://www.ontario.ca/page/skills-development-fund>



CANADIAN
CONSTRUCTION JOURNAL

Premium Sponsors



Brought to you by



May Issue