

Wise Project - Year 2 Report

Making it in construction



Sixteenth Letter
Collaborative

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Making it in Construction

Welcome to Construction

In the front room of a construction social enterprise, a thirty-something black immigrant who was working part-time for the organization as a trainer – who was also a red seal carpenter – is sitting with one of the social enterprise’s employment coaches. The “Trainer” (as we will call him) is looking for a full-time, ongoing position: “I should have never become a red seal carpenter,” he bemoans – to the aghast of the employment coach, an employment manager and myself, a researcher, visiting the social enterprise for the week.

A Red Seal, for those who don’t know, is considered a “top tier” designation in the trades. With it, a tradesperson's experience and expertise will be recognized across Canada. Getting your Red Seal is promoted by industry, government and nonprofit organizations alike as a sure way of always having a job. So much so, that the designation is often referred to as a “ticket” – inferring that a Red Seal is the ticket to job security and good pay.

But in May 2025, the local construction market was down and had been for six months or more. Many of the participants we interviewed living in the region at this time were dealing with the lack of job opportunities in construction. Union employment, according to our participants, was down¹.

Achieving a Red Seal takes years of hard work and sacrifice. Yet here he was, dealing with part-time and project-based work. In his words, trades are “laid off, hired, laid off, hired” (Observation Note, 2025 June 16).

The Trainer had a lot to bemoan: promised a steady job if he got his credentials, he found himself underemployed. (As well, pay rates for trades-training staff is often lower than construction wages.) He was meeting with the employment coach to discuss potential jobs. The job coach was there to support him through the process of looking for work, updating his resume and helping prepare for interviews.

¹ Previous to the slow-down, this CSE had developed a pipeline from their training program to various unions. According to the analysis of the Labour Force Survey by the Toronto Workforce Innovation Group (2025), between February 2024 and February 2025, the number of job postings in construction fell by 77% with employment numbers facing a slight decline. In other words, new jobs are hard to come by. Job losses in residential construction were reported in September 2025 and blamed on slow housing starts as well as the rising costs of construction resulting from US tariffs (Jeffords, 2025).

Updating the resume was another thing to protest, another thing that despite his years of work was a little unfair. As the Trainer explained, he didn't have an updated resume because for the last many years he would just get a call from the union and the next day, he would show up on a job site ready to work. He was a skilled tradesperson, but updating his resume was not among the skills he honed.

At another job coaching session, I sat in on a meeting between the job coach and a young Asian immigrant. He was looking for a job to hold him over until he could start additional training in the fall. The job coach identified some temporary landscaping positions as options for short-term work. When asked, the young man reports to the job coach that he has been out of work for two months, but later he explained that he took on a "side gig" renovating a basement for two thousand dollars. The job coach expresses some initial enthusiasm – work is work – but as the young man went on to explain, the money he was paid also had to cover the costs for materials. With time and materials, his hourly salary was looking smaller and smaller.

Welcome to construction. Construction is both difficult to get into and difficult to survive in. Exploitation is common, especially for those who do not know how to cost out jobs or who don't have enough skill to make piece-meal rates make economic sense (Interview, Employer, 16 May 2025). And, because most jobs are project-based, long-term employment is rare (Interviews, Employers 8 October 2024; 24 December 2024).

Grit and the Work of Construction Social Enterprises (CSEs)

Added to the above, the predominant structure of the labour market uses contract labour which means that the difficulty of progressing in the trades is embedded within that structure; that is, without steady employment (including subsequent contracts with the same employer), opportunities to gain skills are narrowed (Interview, Employer, 3 March 2025). Succeeding requires both technical training and ongoing apprenticeship from another tradesperson.

The job coach, offering sympathy to the young man for taking on a job that was turning out to be too good to be true, thus got down to business: talking about some job opportunities that he would qualify for on Indeed, updating his resume, and jumping into a mock interview. The job coach followed the same protocol with the Trainer: responding to each protest against the industry with a question aimed at updating his resume.

Making it in construction takes grit. Not just skill, but perseverance. Another persistent feature of the construction industry (and this has been found in many local labour markets in the US, UK and Canada) is that the industry tends to be stratified by race or ethnicity (Statistics Canada, 2015)². The going theory is that this is likely to be because hiring practices tend to come from site-based supervisors, who tend to hire within their network (Interviews, Employers, 8 October 2024; 25 December 2024; 3 March 2025). Questions likewise arise when hiring moves to head office (Pearce, 2025b), as even with diversity protocols in place, when firms look to hire for permanent roles, they tend to want to hire the most qualified and (assumed to be) most “stable,” a criteria that can reproduce whiteness via tenure in the industry or identity-based assumptions about racialized peoples (Interviews, Employers; Interviews, WISE Staff 8 April 2024; 6 March 2024; 28 March 2024; 17 April 2024).

For entrants into the trades who are non-white (in this study: Black, Brown, Asian or Indigenous people) and those who are recent immigrants, not having a prior network to tap into is thus a major cultural barrier to getting a foothold in the industry. This is where construction social enterprises attempt to step in: supporting participants to understand the ways the industry and training works, identifying companies who may have a reputation of either challenging racism or being actually diverse (Interviews, WISE Staff, multiple interviews), and mentoring participants to tap into and/or build a network of people who will eventually become the job leads they need to succeed. The social and cultural skills training provided by CSEs is thus a significant part of their overall training activities—training which tends to extend far beyond the technical end of their classroom- and shop-based training periods.

The work of construction social enterprises is thus slow, varied and works on various levels (individual, industrial, and cultural). Frontline staff teach the soft- and trades-based skills to individual participants, they also do the work of teaching participants about the realities and context of the trades (Observations). As noted, this teaching takes a long time; indeed, understanding how construction works is hard because there is a lot to learn! The work is varied because as much as frontline staff is focused on individual needs, employment

² Racism has been found to negatively impact racialized Canadians employment participation and wage prospects no matter the industry (Block and Galabuzi, 2011), findings that do not change when educational achievements are accounted for (Turcotte 2020). For example, young Black men in Canada have higher NEET rates (a measure that stands for Not in Employment, Education or Training), even when they had some postsecondary qualification (Turcotte, 2020, p. 8). Using data from the 2006 and 2016 census to look at the education and labour market integration outcomes of young Black Canadians found that the NEET rate for young black men was 20% (1 in 5) compared to 12% for all other young men (Turcotte, 2020). And, when the study accounted for different socioeconomic and family factors during childhood, black men “remained at a higher risk of being unemployed in 2016 than other young men (probabilities of 0.16 and 0.11, respectively)” (Turcotte, 2020, p. 7).

managers and executives are focused on industry connections and networks. They must understand, and build, pathways for participants' success in the industry. Alongside having participants applying for jobs, they do this through temporary employment agreements (i.e. subcontracting labour), offering employment subsidies to employers and promoting their "graduates" (Observations; Interview, WISE Staff, 7 March 2024). As put by one participant, CSEs "opens you up to how construction is" (WA10, Second Interview).

Contextualizing this Study, or Why a Deep Description is Needed

Government funding received by construction social enterprises aren't designed for nor can they account for the vicissitudes of the construction industry. This is what we mean when we say the work of construction social enterprise are cultural: they actively fill in the gaps for participants (as much as they can) by extending employment past the government subsidized training period; by hiring skilled "graduates" to work on their crews (offering longer-term employment to those who aren't quite ready to move on but who show potential or who are waiting for another project to start in private industry); or, as in the case of the Trainer, by bridging the gap between one project-based job and another. This "grit work" is about keeping racialized participants in trades-based employment – that is, providing a network of supported employment and ongoing coaching support – such that participants (and graduates) have time to learn how to manage the grit work on their own.

This study hasn't been designed to evaluate the success CSEs work. What is offered is a deep description of the work of construction social enterprises (CSEs), and the experiences of a small cohort of participants as they move out of the CSEs or work within them past an initial training program. Where can and do CSEs seek to intervene? Why are these good workplaces for racialized and Indigenous workers?

A deep description is needed, in part, because most evaluations of social enterprises who have a job- or career-focus (known in the policy literature as Work Integration Social Enterprises, or WISE) have tended to count success in ways that do not adequately take into account the structure of the construction industry (if they show any interest in the particular field of work participants work in at a WISE at all) (Pearce, 2025a). This is not unlike government funding evaluations which may over-rely on point-in-time results as a stand-in for success (i.e. employment results at the end of the training program).

Are there other ways, perhaps complementary to end-of-program outcomes, to measure "success"? What might "success" be if we take into account the racialized and stratified nature

of the current construction sector? And, how are CSEs “reshaping” employment within construction?

These questions matter—above and beyond (inadequate) measures of success – because of the generalized finding that what is measured tends to shape what is done; and, somewhat paradoxically, what is measured does not always give a good indication of what’s really happening. The classic example of this is what has tended to happen when standardized tests are introduced in schools (especially when results are tied to funding): students can become good at taking such tests without having a foundation in core concepts (Harford, 2021). A deep description is needed, I contend, because both funders and the CSEs themselves can get stuck in their funder-defined ideas of who they are and what they do “best.” A deep description is thus aimed at seeing what often goes unseen or is glossed over for easier narratives or narrow funding protocols.

Lest readers take this to mean my interest is simply pushing back on funders, the question of measurement – occupational trend analysis and forecasting, labour statistics and educational attainment analysis and the like – can likewise be challenged by and extended by deep description. As noted earlier, it is well known that the trades tend to be highly gendered and organized by race or ethnicity. In Canada, studies on the apprenticeship system have identified who is not making it in the ticketed trades (racialized men, Indigenous peoples, and racialized women)(Statistics Canada, 2021). But the “why” and “how” underrepresented groups who don’t make it is less clear. In the parlance of quantitative studies, there are “other factors” that statistics alone cannot account for. Lastly, studies of apprenticeship miss a large proportion of people working in the trades as general labourers (“wheelbarrow guys,” as one participant in this study calls them). That is, even the very best quantitative studies can’t fit everyone into neat boxes.

What reports like the National Apprenticeship Survey can show are some recent trends impacting equity-seeking communities. Immigrants and visible minorities are underrepresented in the trades: both immigrants and visible minorities are 14% of Canadian population but make up only 9% (immigrants) and 8% (visible minorities) of apprentices, respectively (Frank and Jovic, 2017, p. 6) Speaking directly to the importance of networks and navigation, the 2015 survey noted that whereas 26% of completers didn’t know about the Apprenticeship Incentive Grant, 55% of discontinuers did not know about it (Frank and Jovic, 2017, Table A.4.1 at p.64). Financial constraints was the most commonly cited for Aboriginal apprentices for discontinuing, 1 in 5 (20%) whereas for non-Aboriginal discontinuers, the most common reason for discontinuing was “job instability” (18%) (Frank and Jovic, 2017,p. 50). We see a

desire for job security being a common goal among immigrant participants in this study, as seen with the Trainer in our opening story and also in interviews. The existing data suggests that job security – and just getting a job – can be a real challenge for entrants who are immigrants. This is well-reflected in the statistics-based studies: “One-quarter of immigrant apprentices reported having difficulty finding an employer who was hiring apprentices when they were starting an apprenticeship” (Frank and Jovic, 2017, p.51).

So: both the measures used to evaluate most CSEs (point-in-time evaluation) and the desire of many who enter the trades don’t necessarily fit with the industry norms: for most workers in trades-based employment, periods of unemployment are the norm. For this reason, what is success and how can success be measured or evaluated is contested by those that work with or participate in CSEs, and paying attention to their discussions on such matters, help us understand what and why CSEs do what they do, as well as help understand their limitations, shortcomings or barriers in supporting participants to “make it in construction.”

“Success,” as the experience of the Trainer noted above indicates, is highly circumstantial and a matter of perspective. The Trainer’s achievement of a Red Seal would be a “success” for the CSE and apprenticeship bodies alike. But for him, in the spring of 2025, this success was failure – failure to secure a job with good pay and steady hours. Although a descriptive study can’t propose to define what measures of “success” should look like, what it can offer is insight into what organizations and participants working within them do, seeking to illuminate the context of their work.

In the remainder of this report, we will present some of the findings stemming from the second interviews with participants. We start with a brief discussion of research activities in Year 2.

Research Activities

During Year 2 of this study 47 people were interviewed who had completed or were on the cusp of completing time at a construction-based social enterprise. Of these 47, ten participants were newly recruited into the study (i.e. first interviews). The remaining 37 were second interviews.

Study Participants, Year 2 (N=102)	
Study Participants by Category	Number
<i>Participants</i>	61
First Interview in Year 1	51
Second Interview in Year 2	36
Recruited in Year 2	10
Attrition	15
<i>Industry</i>	10
<i>Staff at Construction Social Enterprises</i>	23

nb. N is number of unique participants

Based on recruitment in Year 1, the retention rate is currently 71%, with 29% attrition from Year 1. (The retention rate is subject to change when we aim to reach those recruited in Year 2 in January of 2026.) Most of the attrition stems from Manitoba, where two of the study organizations are located. According to leadership at both social enterprises, it is common for participants to change email and phone numbers within a short period of time. Learning this, we made changes to our research protocol to attempt to contact people via social media. This did garner a few additional interviews but after many attempts to reach participants we now consider 14 participants as having left the study.

We interviewed a total of 10 industry professionals, 7 located in Manitoba (2 of the 7 being national companies) and 2 located in Toronto. By the end of the study our goal is to interview 20 industry professionals. Insights from these interviews will largely be shared elsewhere.

In total, we recruited 23 staff participants and conducted 26 interviews with staff working in construction-based social enterprises. In the past year, we interviewed 5 staff with 3 being second interviews.

Observations at CSEs is essential for understanding the work of CSEs and provides important context that wouldn't otherwise be obvious in interviews. So far, the almost 200hours of

observations have been in the “training” centers or offices of CSEs. By mid-Year 2 we believe we have seen enough of the intake and early training process. Harder to observe are the conversations and sessions focused explicitly on coaching and getting participants to engage in active job search or approach employers.

The opening vignettes are two extended examples of observations where the focus was on getting a job. A lot of other observations are simply not as complete, but we’ve seen employment coaches responding to and making direct calls to employers; chasing down participants to get them to update their resume or arrange transportation to a job interview. These interactions—which we hope to observe more of in the coming year—are helpful for both better understanding what participants need support with and why.

Job and Wage Analysis

Participants at Second Interview

Twenty-two of 36 participants were employed the week prior to the interview (although hours worked in the previous week varied), 13 reported they were unemployed in the week prior to their interview, and 1 was in a pre-apprenticeship program.

	Black	Brown	Asian	Indigenous	Mixed	Total	Percent
Employed	10	4	3	4	1	22	61%
Unemployed	8	3	0	2	0	13	36%
In School	0	0	1	0	0	1	3%

nb. Ethnic and racial categories generated from participant interviews

The following job and wage analysis has limited insights at this point in the study, and we largely use it as an entry point into participant experiences as they get their first job experiences in the trades. We use the analysis as something of a “compass”: to identify some trends we can see in the study cohort and, adopting a concept from Stuart Hall he called “reading against the grain” (1980), which he used to highlight gaps, silences and contradictions in a cultural studies context, to read quantitative studies and other longitudinal and mixed-method studies.

Before we get to the job and wage analysis, we need to briefly contextualize the analysis within our study.

This study was not designed with a control group nor does it base its analysis on quantitative data (i.e. provide a statistical analysis), all markers of “scientific” sociology. But, by introducing a small set of quantitative questions (wage, hours worked in previous week and occupation) to participant interviews, we aim to collect basic quantifiables to enact conversation with existing studies particularly those analyzing labour market trends and trades progression, both of which tend to be heavily based in quantitative data and statistical analysis.

Our goal is not to “disprove,” contest or recreate those studies; instead, it is to investigate what may be missed from those studies and to use those studies, where possible, to help us interpret the data we are collecting.

We can offer two brief examples of what we mean as illustration: First, Statistics Canada and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), along with others have embarked on what's known as the Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform (ELMLP), which "allows longitudinal integration of administrative data related to education with other data sources to provide customized datasets for analytical purposes" (Government of Canada, 2023). This is an exciting advancement for understanding labour market trends and the role(s) of education in shaping the labour market. As the website rightly says, it "fills data gaps and enables a greater understanding of student and apprenticeship pathways, transitions to the labour market and outcomes over time" (Government of Canada, 2023). However, reading through the technical reference guide, it becomes clear that those who work as general labourers (estimated to be the bulk of those employed in construction, Interview, Employer, 16 October 2024) would be left out of the analysis, since the way apprenticeship statistics are kept rely on enrollment. This is a difficult gap, and it matters because other studies have shown that within construction there can be a segmentation between racialized workers and non-racialized workers: the former becoming segmented (or "trapped") at the lower end of the market (Statistics Canada, 2015).

But even though there is or may be that gap (the ELMP guidance does not name it as such), the National Apprenticeship Survey is a helpful resource in identifying early indicators of success in the trades (Frank and Jovic, 2017). For example, the 2015 analysis (the latest version) found that apprentices who find employment with an employer based in their trade are more likely to complete apprenticeship (89%) compared to "discontinuers" (those who do not complete apprenticeship). Discontinuers, in their survey, reported much lower instances of working with employers in their trade (40%), and 17% of discontinuers never working in a job related to their chosen trade (p. 33). Indeed, those that become "discontinuers," tend to do so in particular within the first two to three years, with discontinues at 20% after years one and two (See Table A.2.6, below.) This seems to indicate that getting employed in one's trade is important early on. As we can already see in our collection of occupations, not all participants were working in the construction trades the week before the interview; some were working in "allied occupations," be it as general labourers, and also as building superintendents. The National Apprenticeship Survey, even with its limitations, is thus an example of external research that can help us interpret what we are seeing in this study.

Table A.2.6
Distribution of years until apprenticeship program completed or discontinued, by apprentice status (2011 to 2013) and Red Seal trade, Canada

	Apprentice status, 2011-2013			
	Completers		Discontinuers	
	%	standard error	%	standard error
Years until apprenticeship completed or discontinued program¹				
Less than 1 year	8.0	0.5	12.3	0.6
1 year	7.6	0.4	20.2	0.7
2 years	10.1	0.4	19.9	0.7
3 years	14.5	0.5	12.5	0.6
4 years	21.7	0.5	9.5	0.5
5 years	16.1	0.5	7.2	0.4
6 years	8.7	0.3	4.9	0.3
7 years	4.1	0.2	3.8	0.3
8 years	2.7	0.2	2.5	0.2
9 years	1.4	0.2	2.0	0.2
10 years	1.3	0.2	1.2	0.2
11 years	0.9	0.1	0.9	0.1
12 years	0.6 ^F	0.1	1.0	0.1
13 years	0.6 ^F	0.1	0.5 ^F	0.1
14 years	0.3 ^F	0.1	0.4 ^F	0.1
15 years	0.2 ^F	0.1	F	...
16 to 19 years	0.5 ^F	0.1	0.2 ^F	0.1
20 years or more	0.6 ^F	0.2	0.7 ^F	0.1
Sample size of apprentices used in calculations	17,301	...	10,512	...

... not applicable

^F use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

1. Respondents who completed or discontinued their apprenticeships between 2011-2013.

Note: Results reported in the table are weighted with the NAS survey weight and variance estimation is based on 1,000 bootstrap weights. Sample sizes represent the unweighted number of observations used in the calculations.

Source: Statistics Canada, National Apprenticeship Survey (NAS), 2015.

Source: Frank and Jovic, 2017, p. 58

By study end, assuming we can continue to collect the basic wage and occupation data from participants, we may start to see some trends amongst the participants. More importantly, we hope to be able to learn more about what is happening for participants as they are getting these first jobs and as they also navigate employment for themselves.

About the Data Collected

Twenty-seven participants reported their wages and current or just previous occupation during their second interview. (Some unemployed participants did not answer questions we had about the wage they last made. Two employed participants were excluded from this analysis because one made piecemeal wages and another did not share their current wage.)

Drawing on reported occupation title, wage and their description of participant's jobs, we compiled a table of National Occupational Classification (NOC) based on publicly available data. According to the Government of Canada, the NOC "is the national reference for occupations in Canada" that provides systematic classification (Government of Canada, 2025). We then used the labour market information available through the Government of Canada's Job Bank, to look up occupation profiles and wages by regions. We compiled a table of that

showed participant reported wages, the NOC and the low, median, and high wage range in the participant’s region (i.e. Toronto Region for a participant based in Toronto; Winnipeg Region for a participant based in Winnipeg). We then conducted a wage analysis comparing the participant’s reported wage with the comparative occupation in their region. We will first present the data drawn from interviews before presenting a wage analysis.

Participant Employment by Occupational Category(N=27)		
NOC Code	Occupation	Number
14400	Warehouse Receiver	1
22310	Electrical Technician	1
54100	Lifeguard	1
64100	Retail Sales Representative	1
65312	Custodian	2
72102	Sheet Metal Workers	1
72310	Carpenter, Framing or Form Builder	7
72320	Brick and Stone Mason	1
73201	Handyman	2
74200	Maintenance of Way Employee - Railway	1
75110	Construction Worker	9

Sources: Participant Interviews (2nd Interview) and Government of Canada (2025)

We categorized occupations based on the description of their main occupation / employment experience and the title they gave of their role. Note that the difference between 72310 (Carpenter) and 75110 (Construction Worker) in our analysis is that the latter tend to be in “helper” positions such as general labourer and, moreover, are not apprentices³.

As can be seen from the chart, the majority of participants that we had occupational data for are finding employment in the trades (81%), which is expected given that the WISEs are based in construction / trades, and do considerable work to guide exiting participants into both apprenticeship and general construction.

³ Normally, the second digit of NOC codes represents the training, education, experience and responsibilities of a given occupation; the higher number indicates that more training is needed. Data from the interviews however suggested the opposite; that those categorized as 75110 reported being what a participant described as being a “wheelbarrow guy.”

Next, we calculated the standard deviation between the market range and the participant’s reported wage. This tells us how broad the range of wages are in the given labour market category. According to the US Department of Occupation Statistics (2015), it is common to see large differences in high- and low- wages across different occupational categories. What we can note is that even though the standard deviation across the categories is high, they tend to be lower among the “dirtier jobs”: low pay sectors like retail, custodial work or labourer.

We used the standard deviation to calculate a z-score of the difference between the participant’s wage and the median wage. The z-score standardizes data across a data set so rows can be compared. A positive z-score indicates the participant’s current wage is above the market median, whereas a negative score indicates that the participant’s wage is below the market median. Lastly, we applied a heat map to the z-scores, which visualizes the data for interpretation. The chart below is a summary table of the larger data table (which had both low- and high-wage as well as the standard deviation calculation).

Participant Wages and Z Score of Occupational Market

Participant Wage	Median Wage by NOC	Z Score
\$15.00	\$21.60	-1.05
\$17.55	\$28.00	-0.92
\$18.00	\$17.20	0.21
\$18.55	\$28.00	-0.85
\$18.80	\$18.00	0.09
\$18.95	\$22.50	-0.39
\$19.00	\$23.00	-0.50
\$20.00	\$20.00	0.00
\$20.00	\$35.00	-1.12
\$20.00	\$28.00	-0.74
\$20.00	\$35.00	-1.12
\$20.00	\$35.00	-1.12
\$20.00	\$28.00	-0.74
\$20.00	\$21.00	-0.14
\$22.00	\$35.00	-1.01
\$23.00	\$28.00	-0.49
\$24.00	\$28.00	-0.40
\$24.00	\$33.00	-1.09
\$24.99	\$34.19	-0.89
\$25.00	\$35.00	-0.82
\$25.00	\$32.96	-0.65
\$26.00	\$40.00	-1.22
\$27.00	\$28.00	-0.10
\$27.00	\$21.60	1.03
\$28.67	\$28.00	0.07
\$35.00	\$28.00	0.72
\$36.00	\$28.00	0.76
\$37.45	\$35.00	0.21

Source: Participant Interviews (2nd Interview) and Government of Canada.

A few comments about the results of this analysis. The majority of participants are new to employment with 35% also being new to the Canadian job market. With a lack of experience

alone we should not be surprised to see their wages are closer to the lower end of the market by occupational category. This was not lost on participants, including those who were employed and unemployed at the time of the second interview. Lack of experience and your overall lack of “value add” to job sites was recognized by most participants as something they didn’t have to offer employers—yet. Their limited experience and skills, many said, was an ongoing challenge, “Because when you're asked to do something, and you're doing it for the first time. It's kind of a challenge” (WA10, Second Interview).

What is perhaps notable in the wage analysis is that all had earnings less than 2 standard deviations from the median wage in their occupational category. This suggests their wages were largely a reflection of their “entry level” position, rather than an indicator of discrimination.

When we analyzed the standard deviation among the occupational categories, those with the lowest deviations fall among those occupations that are taken to be “less skilled” and less well paid: occupations in retail, superintendent, custodian, and general labourer (construction) have a lower standard deviation than other occupations in our dataset. Over time, participants working in these occupations are likely to reach the ceiling of their earning potential sooner than those employed in occupations with higher earning potential.

Eight of 27 participants had a positive z-score, and only one had a z-score above 1, meaning this set of 8 largely had wages that were average for their occupational market. We also looked at the details behind their positive scores to see what, if anything, from their interview indicates why they would be making at or more than the median wage for their current occupational category. Two of the participants who were making more had much more experience than the other participants, including working at a non-union construction company off-and-on for three years, working at the social enterprise for a decade before starting their own business. The other two employed participants with a positive z-score (both 0s) were in warehousing and retail respectively, occupational categories that have a narrower range of wages, meaning the difference between the entrance wage and the top rate is shallow.

Employment satisfaction

40% of employed participants expressed that they were currently satisfied with their employment situation (ranking their satisfaction as a 10 on a 10-point scale), with 65% of employed participants ranking their satisfaction between 8-10 on the same scale. (One person did not provide a ranking.)

Of those that indicated they were not entirely satisfied with their current employment, 3 of 20 scored their satisfaction at 5 (the lowest score employed individuals gave). As this is the midway point between unsatisfied and satisfied, it would be tempting to group these participants as expressing a “neutral” satisfaction about their employment at the time of the interview.

Drawing on the content of their interviews, however, a better description may be “discontented” – having some needs met while others are unmet. One of the “discontented” participants described why they rated their satisfaction as such: “It’s hard to just find a job. And if you do find a job, it’s hard to meet your expenses” (WA13, 2nd Interview). Here, a tight labour market meets the reality of everything outside the labour market – i.e. wages against the cost of living. This participant was working through a union but all their construction jobs were project-based. When asked later in the interview about any ongoing obstacles, they elaborated how project-based work was by design insecure:

The biggest obstacle is just getting laid off. Construction is a good job and good pay. When you lose that pay, it's a big obstacle because that's what you're working towards. I would say job security is an obstacle (WG13, 2nd Interview).

At the same time, though these were clear challenges to working in the trades, this participant expressed determination to tackle job insecurity with a high level of tenacity and grit:

What I realized is you have to bring something to the table. I'm willing to reset and actually gain a skill so that if I do get hired by the union, I can at least be outshining, not to be boastful. When you get hired and there's people around you, people will get ahead of you if they have more skills than you. They will look at the person more willing to say, this guy deserves my money rather than this person that's not experienced. I don't think I need him, so I'm going to have to lay him off. That's the harsh reality. I'm saying I'm willing to gain skill, then go into the union (WG13, 2nd Interview).

The second “discontented” participant was working as a lifeguard at the time of interview and picking up project-based work as an electrical apprentice when and where they could find a job. (Working as a lifeguard was a stable source of income and point of pride, they told us, but their goal was a career in the trades). Finding success as an electrical apprentice is so difficult that we’ve observed CSE staff dissuading participants from trying to enter the trade (Observations); this participant’s experience could be a case study on why that is – it is hard to progress without a stable employer.

Even so, at the time of the second interview, this participant was still committed to remaining in the trades and had positive things to say about the role of the CSE in supporting them to remain connected to a network of people working to find their foothold. Again, though their situation at the time of interview was a “5” they expressed hope about their longer-term employment prospects in the trades. Their hope was tempered by the reality of the job market and their prior experiences working to maintain an apprenticeship.

The last “discontented” participant was also trying to become an electrician. This participant was very recently unemployed (i.e. subject to project-based work and needed to be apprenticed to get their next job). Even though they had been making \$25 per hour, they reported that it was “not enough, but manageable” with a family. Even so, like the other discontented participants, they remained committed to long-term success in the trades, crediting the CSE they worked with for explaining how to navigate trades-based employment in Canada.

The challenges this small group of “discontented” participants faced were not unique to the rest of the participants – the difference was that at the time of the interview, they were unemployed from the trade of their choice whereas those that scored their satisfaction higher were employed in their trade of choice at the time of interview.

Participant Experiences by Segment

Unemployed Participants

Unsurprisingly, those who were unemployed at the time of the second interview were the least satisfied with their employment status. Thirteen of 36 participants (36%) who did a second interview were unemployed at the time of the interview. One reported they were starting an interview the next week, and five were employed in the two weeks prior to the interview. Seven of 13 (54%) had been laid off due to a shortage of work and/or the project they were working on ended. 8 of the 13 hoped to find work in the trades in the future. Three were dealing with health and wellness issues. Only two had not worked in the trades since leaving the CSE.

Those who were unemployed at the time of the second interview faced challenges if they were an apprentice (getting an employer to apprentice them), naming job security, transportation, and the cost of living as barriers. Those who planned on remaining in the trades described barriers such as having a hard time finding someone to apprentice them, lacking enough trades experience (including being “low” on the union list), and more than one participant who was unemployed described common pathway blockages, such as leaving a manufacturing job to take a trades-based position only to end up laid off. Those who were unemployed were resoundingly not unlike those who were employed at the time of the second interview.

Race, Ethnicity and/or Citizenship Status

Refugees and Immigrants to Canada

Employment by Citizenship Status (%)		
	Citizen (n=19)	Immigrant and Refugee (n=17)
Employed	68%	53%
Unemployed	26%	47%

nb. Citizen column does not equal 100% because the lone participant in school is not shown

At the time of the second interview, those participants that were citizens were more likely to be employed than unemployed by nearly 40 percentage points. In comparison, those who were immigrants and refugees were near evenly split between employment and unemployment at the time of the second interview. Overall though, immigrants and refugees make up a higher percentage (nearly 50%) of those who were unemployed at the time of the second interview, compared to nearly 30% of unemployed participants who were citizens.

Participants who were refugees, especially if they did not yet have status, were well-aware that their citizenship status was impacting their employment prospects at the time of the second interview. Almost all refugees viewed their experience at the construction social enterprise to be valuable and important for their future employment prospects. More specifically, participants who were refugees valued the connections to employers the construction social enterprise offered:

I noticed that here in Canada...I mean, first jobs, they are gotten through connections. Maybe if you rely on your own, on the online opportunities, you may end up not having something. But if you have somebody on your back, it may be very meaningful (WA11, Second Interview).

And

If there are referrals, sometimes it's easier to reach out to like jobs because they already build a name for themselves. Sometimes applying individually doesn't work as much, because most of the jobs I've worked at, it's through referrals, like direct application doesn't go as far (WA2, Second Interview).

At the same time, refugees were more likely to express they would have liked the program to be longer compared to other participants. As put by one participant, "there is not enough time to learn" all that might be needed to enter the trades and work in Canada (WA11, Second Interview). Despite ongoing barriers to entering the trades specifically (permanent residency is needed to become apprenticed), participants who were refugees expressed gratitude even when their employment situation was not going well:

Researcher: Well, you could say you're not happy with the current situation, if you're not making any money.

Participant: Yeah. I can't say that because I came to this country empty-handed, and I received support from social organizations in the beginning to make my claim, get my legal aid, and I got many help from [construction social enterprise] as an employer. I

mean, as an employee with [construction social enterprise], I really got a lot of help....as a beginner, I mean, I'm still struggling, but yeah, I can say that I'm quite happy and optimistic for the future (WA25, Second Interview).

Indigenous People

Two of the unemployed participants were Indigenous, and two were employed. Of those that were unemployed, one was experiencing serious medical issues, which was keeping them from working; and the other had left the CSE program before their training program was completed so they could seek treatment for additions. The former had a long history of working for the CSE and had even gotten their first year apprenticeship, but had become a “discontinuer” because they were unable to find someone to apprentice them:

It was just, I don't know if it's discriminatory or whatever sometimes. That's what I wonder about, yeah. It's like they want to take under who they want to take under. Right. It's not like obligatory for them to do it (WG5, Second Interview).

The two Indigenous participants who were employed worked for CSEs – one at the same CSE they started at, and the other at a secondary CSE. Both reported positive employment experiences.

Obviously, and somewhat due to attrition, this is a very small sample. In addition, not represented in this report are the Indigenous participants who are now a part of the permanent crews working at CSEs who were recruited this past year (n=6). In total, the eight Indigenous participants who are part of this study who remain working at their CSE report very positive social and employment outcomes, finding belonging at work and repairing family systems outside of work⁴.

⁴ The outcomes for Indigenous participants at CSEs, who stem from 3 of the CSEs included in this study, will be reported in more detail elsewhere.

The Legacy of Construction Social Enterprises on Participant Success in Employment and Industry

Now that most of those recruited in year 1 have more experience, we asked participants for their reflections on their experience at the construction social enterprise.

Participants still in contact with the Construction Social Enterprise (the majority), reported receiving help to apply to jobs, reference letters, and work clothes or equipment. They also sought and received help when leases ended, to get ready for a test, and access mental health supports.

Construction social enterprises are designed to take participants from having little to no experience in trades to having basic knowledge of tools used in carpentry construction sites and basic safety certificates. It's meant to be a "first step" (Multiple WISE Staff Interviews). One participant's description of achieving basic knowledge and confidence is a best outcome for all the WISE locations in this study:

I had this confidence, because I could use most of the tools. So I wasn't green, I was able to stand with confidence, with whatever thing, like whatever they were taking us through, I was not so green. I knew most of the things, most of construction terms, tools, it gave me some kind of confidence (WA16, Second Interview).

Another participant noted that employers noticed their training from the Construction Social Enterprise and that it was "good for their resume" (WA18, Second Interview). And as another participant noted, most people get jobs via a referral (word of mouth) so connection to the construction social enterprise was seen as valuable (WA2, Second Interview).

Major employers – be they union or non-union – normally provide additional training (Interview, Employer, 3 March 2025). At the same time, multiple participants said of any change they would have liked at the construction social enterprise, it would be "more hands-on experience on the job sites" (WA19, Second Interview), or what others described as "more time on the tools." By this, participants meant specifically using tools onsite (as opposed to in the classroom). The desire for time of the tools speaks to the shortcoming would-be employers find with most of the participants: one-year out, participants as a whole lack experience; "time on the tools" can mean the difference between getting a call back or not.

For others, they wished the training portion covered more breadth, specifically in painting or drywall. Both painting and drywall are specific trades, but multiple interviewees intoned that having the basics in these areas would increase their job prospects.

The connections to employers and access to the trades – difficult as they are – do come with rewards that are more than monetary. One former trainee, a black refugee, described being taken by the Construction Social Enterprise to the local union training centre, which they later were able to join:

“...It was the most fulfilling thing...when I joined Local 598. They took us through the program, and in my mind, I was like, ‘Now I have an opportunity to have a solid career. I have a place to start. I got an opportunity to join [a] Canadian construction industry.’ You know, that feeling of you're joining—you have been integrated into the Canadian workforce” (WA16, Second Interview).

A few participants wished there was more emphasis on non-union jobs. The social enterprise they participated in was, at the time, highly focused on linking people to union employment, specifically because unions tend to have strong equity policies and commitments to career pathways. The problem, as noted earlier, was there was a slow down in union hiring. As put by one participant:

[I] would [have liked] know a bit more about getting jobs in construction outside of the union because I think I was pretty well on the track to go with union jobs when I was with [Construction Social Enterprise]. But then once I got with the union, the jobs kind of cleared up and I was mostly unclear on how to get with the privatized jobs (WA7, Second Interview).

Overall, however, all but two participants expressed a positive opinion about their CSE and what they got out of their involvement. Multiple participants named the “ethos” or what we called “the grit” or social skills needed to navigate construction – asking for help, networking – to be the most helpful thing they learned at their Construction Social Enterprise.

Why Grit Matters

The Tough Road of Making it in Construction

Barriers described by all participants were the outcome of social infrastructure and personal decisions. For example, one unemployed participant spoke about giving up his car to save money (he talked about his wage when he was working, even though it was \$24/hr as still not enough to cover the costs of rent). Giving up the car was strategic, as this individual was aiming to find work in an allied trade shop, rather than in construction, because jobs are in one location (the shop) and largely accessible by public transit. As noted earlier, trying to get a job in construction could be a barrier if you work in another field, as one participant who had been employed in a manufacturing job found. In his case, he made the strategic choice to leave his job to try to find something in construction:

I left that company to look for opportunities in construction. Because yeah, it's better to focus on one area rather than jumping from one sector to another sector, one company to another company. That's why I thought maybe it's better to leave that company, yeah (WA19, Second Interview).

Others balanced their trades-based employment with part-time work as an Uber Driver, work in manufacturing or allied trades. (Again, this was not that different from those who were "employed" at the second interview.)

Only a few participants overall had not found employment in one form or another in the trades since leaving the CSE. Not including those who were dealing with health-related issues, participants who had not found any success in the trades expressed a lack of flexibility: they wanted to be one kind of tradesperson and would not try other trades, even when the trade of their choice was impossible due to lack of apprenticeships.

Unemployed participants noted barriers common to new entrants: the lack of experience, lack of network and lack of transportation. But many were able to contextualize their current position within some of the dynamics of the current labour market (experiencing a slowdown), and their "place" on a pathway to a career in construction – in other words, they understood that in construction (especially apprenticeship streams), success can only be achieved through time in the industry. Both ideas are reflected in the following participant's story of unemployment:

I'm still waiting for that union dispatcher to call me back. They seem overwhelmed, because that's what, even I was in a parking lot with the groceries, and there's someone, I was wearing my jacket, Local 30, and this guy was like, 'oh my God, you're local 32,' and I was like, 'Yeah, I've been laid off,' and he was like, 'Yeah, me too.' Since like, it seemed a lot of people were laid off, and that's new to me, because I'm first year, but now I get it, like in the winter slows down, and in spring comes back. But I've been checking a lot of things. I do find the only barrier, except like the transportation, also the experience. As you grow, as you have more experience in your apprenticeship, it's easier for you (WA8, Second Interview, unemployed at time of interview).

Knowledge about the realities of trades-based work, including the role skills and apprenticeship can play in getting jobs or call backs, is an important outcome of the work CSEs do (Observations; Interview, Employer, 16, October 2024; Interview, WISE Staff, 7 March 2024).

Importantly, it wasn't only those who were unemployed who faced barriers to getting in or remaining in construction. Employed participants faced the challenges related to pay that didn't cover the costs of living, transportation challenges and job insecurity. As put by one unemployed individual: "It's hard to just find a job. And if you do find a job, it's hard to meet your expenses" (WA10, Second Interview). This is an unfortunate reality where wages have outstripped cost of living, and can be a reflection of lower wages in nonunionized environments (the latter being one of the reasons the Toronto CSE tended to encourage exiting participants to connect to union-hiring).

"Making it in construction" may not be viable for many in such an economy. For entrants who may have fewer resources – savings, family support, Canadian-based networks – indeed, many of the participants in this study, making it over the many bumps and bruises in this increasingly harsh environment may not be a viable option. As noted previously, Construction Social Enterprises provide "grit" to participants to enter and navigate trades-based employment. What we can highlight is that the grit is not just ephemeral ideas, but material actions. CSEs, as a starting point for those marginalized in the mainstream economy, may be providing the best chance to participants to succeed in today's context.

Persisting in the Trades

Wisdom from WISE Participants

Making it in the trades requires grit and persistence. Participants in the WISE Project told us what they have found helpful to keep at it. Here are just a few nuggets of their wisdom:

Patience with the grind

“You desperately want to learn something [new], [but] it doesn’t work like that. You need to take your time and do what they tell you to do. Because they need someone to take care of [what you’ve been assigned]. So: patience”–WA23

Being humble and being open to learning more

“[The first day on the jobsite] was actually a very good experience for me because I got to see how it is to construct something, work on it and renovate it straight from the beginning stage. And then start going through the rough stage and getting to work until there's a finished stage.... [but even so I realized] I don't have the skills for [this] job. But [this employer is] willing to take me in and give me the skill and learn it for the job.... [That’s why] you’re really there to prove yourself....A lot of it is on you and you have to learn as you go” –WA10

Creating value for an employer

“You're really there to prove yourself. There's no one, as life is, but there's no one to depend on. You're looked upon as What do you bring to them? What worth do you have for the job site? A lot of it is on you and you have to learn as you go. One thing I realized is you can work so hard for them, but at the end of the day, it’s a business and they're going to put their business first before you. [What have I learned about construction that I didn't understand before?] Definitely: time is money”–WA13

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