

Good companies keep good apprentices

Investing in people will pay off if you treat them well

BY STEVE ARNOLD

Treat them with respect and they will stay.

That's how some of Hamilton's top employers of apprentices solve the thorny problem of keeping kids in the tough training programs in order to become skilled trades workers like electricians and millwrights.

"What works for us is to give them the challenge they're looking for," said Jamie Kielbowich, of the Active Green and Ross franchise at Centre Mall. "We let them know that they're valuable to us, that they're not just a name."

His was among other area companies honoured yesterday with the Skilled Trades Alliance Employer of the Year Award for their contributions to apprenticeship programs.

Keeping apprentices in programs long enough to get their certificates of qualification is a major hurdle. One Statistics Canada study found almost half who register for an apprenticeship drop out before completing the program. The study found between 46 per cent and 51 per cent interrupt their studies. Only 10 per cent of those return.

The fear of pouring money and time into an apprentice who'll drop out is just one of the problems groups such as the Industry Education Council try to overcome as it races to outrun a simple



Steve Dosen, left, and David Au have been training at Active Green and Ross, a company that encourages apprentices.

fact — more than half of skilled trades workers today are nearing retirement.

"Employers are really competing for the best and the brightest now," said Richard Allen, executive director of the IEC. "It's a myth that apprentices will leave an employer for more money — it's how they're treated and the oppor-

tunities they have that keep them.

"Young people today have very high expectations when they go into the world of work," he added, but more than anything they want to be treated well."

Brian McKnight, a retired Dofasco mechanic who now entices employers to consider apprentices, said it's easy to

tell which companies will keep apprentices — they're the same firms that have low turnover among their regular employees. "Employers who know how to challenge young people will retain them."

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RON ALBERTSON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Best practices

Who: Al Merlo of Merlo Electric Ltd.

What they do: Electrical contracting.

How long: 50 years in business.

How they keep apprentices:

"They don't leave you if you're honest with them."

Who: Shirley McCoy of Lucky Day Nursery.

What they do: Child day care service.

How long: 45 years.

How they keep apprentices:

"A lot of mentoring and coaching."

Who: Ann McLaughlin of Elettra Technology Inc.

What they do: Manufacturer motors and motor components.

How long: 12 years.

How they keep apprentices:

"We have a lot of big brother-big sister mentoring."

Who: Jamie Kielbowich of Active Green and Ross.

What they do: Car maintenance.

How long: 35 years.

How they keep apprentices:

"What works for us is to give them the challenge they're looking for."