

# Damage Prevention: Understanding industry labour challenges



## Answering the call for labour shortages in the damage prevention industry

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As the economy begins exiting the impacts of a global pandemic, a new world is becoming apparent. Customer demands are growing, and staff shortages are making headlines across the globe.

Canada is no exception, with reports of retail, construction and logistics companies being unable to meet cus-

tomers' expectations. Job vacancies in Canada hit record levels in the second quarter of 2021 at 871,000, or 5.2%, as job growth outpaced job participation. At the same time unemployment in October dropped to 6.7%, indicating the 3 million job losses caused by the pandemic have completely recovered. Statistics Canada also reported 1,366,000 people unemployed and looking for work in October, well above the active vacancies. The labour picture in Canada is telling a complex story. With employment demand and participation strong, why are so many industries still struggling to find staff?

Much has been written about what is termed The Great Resignation. Polls have shown that as many as 66% of em-

  
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ployees would consider a career change if the opportunity presented itself. The pandemic created an unprecedented opportunity for reflection and a re-evaluation of what employment represents for many employees. Extended lockdowns and working from home, or in relative isolation, changed the work-life equation permanently for some workers. According to an RBC study, employee resignations due to job dissatisfaction tripled in June 2021 compared to prior year. Additionally, 125,000 workers are expected to retire in the second half of 2021 alone.

Canada Job Vacancies  
Q2 of 2021



**871,000**

or

**5.2%**



Furthermore, employment patterns have shifted considerably. Countless workers impacted by COVID layoffs took the opportunity to reskill, shift career goals, change industries and rethink work values. Work-from-home opportunities and government wage support provided many employees with the time and environment to consider these changes.

**What this means for employment in the damage prevention industry**

The demands on the damage prevention industry grow more and more each year, and there are no signs of things slowing down.



Statistics Canada reports August building construction investment in Canada at \$17.7 billion. Housing shortages are well documented across the Greater Toronto Area, and urban migration is steady. Cities such as Oshawa and Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo saw populations increase as much as 2.1%, the largest in the country during mid-2020. Toronto's population **actually decreased by 50,375 people during the same period.**

Population migration creates increased infrastructure demand, from highways and transit to utilities and related services. This all translates into the need for labour growth and stability in the damage prevention industry.



**Industry related obstacles**

Unfortunately, the industry has some inherent employment difficulties. One of the more significant is the seasonal nature of the work. Companies must compete in a labour market against full-time, year-round businesses. Not only does the work demand a unique mix of skills, including understanding electromagnetics, interpreting utility record data, and working outdoors for long periods in all weather conditions, but for some employees, the prospect of a winter layoff looms.

Along with this, summer demand for employees is competitive, high and inconsistent. Industry challenges related to regional demand forecasting, wildly unpredictable customer volumes and weather patterns have all contributed to an increasingly litigious environment.

Customer demand is not pre-ordered like in many industries. Volumes are erratic and unpredictable. As well, orders are placed with five days' notice to complete, making on-time performance challenging across the province. Stakeholders have been shifting risk and ac-

countability, and there is largely a lack of consensus around material solutions. Little of this risk management has resulted in a positive impact for the stakeholders awaiting locate completions. To make matters worse, the pressures associated with these challenges are often felt by the individual damage prevention technicians, resulting in employee dissatisfaction and turnover.

**How to attract and retain workers in a highly competitive labour market**

All stakeholders succeed when accurate damage prevention demands are met with proper resourcing. With that in mind, educating and marketing the benefits of working in damage prevention should happen at an industry level, involving associations, utility owners, government employment partners and others.

Recruitment activities should involve seeking out new sources of employees such as migrant labourers or those working in heavy off-season businesses such as winter highway maintenance, snow and skiing hospitality, and heating related industries.

Consideration should be given to the creation of an annual industry job fair, where potential job seekers could meet and discuss positions with employers at centralized locations across the province.

To combat seasonal turnover, industry stakeholders should consider investing in the development of off-season work; projects that improve the accuracy of records from field data, for example, would provide a future return on investment through more accurate request clearing and field marking.

<p style="text-align: center;">⊗</p> <p><b>Hygiene or Job Dissatisfaction - factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Salary</li> <li>• Company policy</li> <li>• Supervisors</li> <li>• Work conditions</li> <li>• Status</li> <li>• Security</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">☑</p> <p><b>Motivation or Job Satisfaction - factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition</li> <li>• Growth</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Advancement</li> <li>• Achievement</li> <li>• The work itself</li> </ul>
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## Employee happiness – a new look at old research

Human resources (HR) management at companies employing damage prevention technicians needs to evolve to meet the requirements of the new employment environment. Happiness at work is too often minimized down to salary and the quality of a supervisor.

If we pull on research completed nearly 60 years ago by Frederick Herzberg, employee happiness is based on much more, something he termed the **motivation-hygiene theory**. His research showed that employee happiness is distinctly separated by factors that create satisfaction and cause dissatisfaction.

Herzberg identified specific factors which caused employee dissatisfaction, such as salary, working environment, quality of supervision and company policies, to list a few. He found that improvements in these areas reduced dissatisfaction with a job but did not create feelings of satisfaction.

The factors which specifically created job satisfaction included, an intrinsic interest in the work, a sense of achievement and purpose, receiving recognition, having opportunities for advancement, and having responsibility and autonomy. Similarly, increasing and improving these elements did not remove the impacts caused by factors of dissatisfaction.

So, employing an HR strategy that works to decrease dissatisfaction while

simultaneously increasing satisfaction, provides for the most unified employment improvement environment for workers.

## Demographic considerations

Employees now span four generations for the first time in modern history, with ages ranging from 15 to more than 75. Baby boomers, Generation X, Millennials (Gen Y) and Generation Z all hold positions in workplaces across Canada. This provides managers and human resource professionals with a variety of challenges. The previous approach to company structure, written policy and relationship management was largely influenced by older generations. A paradigm shift may be necessary to work effectively with a multigenerational employee group. Younger generations want improved work-life balance, mobility between employers, and work that provides a purpose and supports sustainability and environmental stewardship. Older employees have different views on company loyalty and focus on other motivational components in the workplace.

Designing an organization that can effectively target and cater to this diverse candidate pool may require companies to develop new strategies and policies, provide for staffing flexibility, and invest in training and corporate sustainability.

## Final thoughts

There are many things to consider when evaluating and managing current employment challenges. Generational employees are complex and more discriminant, and many are considering a career change based on personal values reinforced by the global pandemic. Matching these employees with open positions has never been more complex, and industries looking to compete for these limited resources must work on reducing obstacles. They must also complete a thorough review of recruitment efforts, invest in employee training for managers and human resource professionals, and take stock of changing demographics and employee expectations.

At this point in history, without a significant investment in our understanding of labour management and resourcing, the impacts on the Ontario economy reliant upon the damage prevention industry could be extreme. Stakeholders should answer the call for collaboration and refrain from short-sighted blame and risk shifting.

The damage prevention industry has historically struggled to source talent; a challenge that is now spread across multiple industries and amplified by the impacts of a pandemic. The time to work together at an industry level, as well as invest individually to attract and retain a more critical job seeker pool, has never been more important.



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