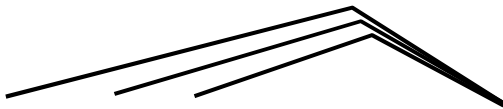


**Heavy Equipment Technicians/
Agricultural Mechanics
Niche Profile**

Prepared for the
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse



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Heavy Equipment Technicians/Agricultural Mechanics Niche Profile

Introduction

Contractors and others contacted for previous Clearinghouse reports have often mentioned a need for Heavy Duty Mechanics (now referred to by Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development as Heavy Equipment Technicians). This report looks at the actual demand in this field as well as in the related field of Agricultural Mechanics.

Methods

This report is based on the results of one small written survey, a series of interviews and secondary research. The first survey was a faxed-out questionnaire asking a variety of large and small companies mainly about employment qualifications but with a separate section looking at employment needs for Heavy Equipment Technicians. Eight employers out of 17 contacted responded to the Heavy Equipment Technician portion of this survey. The interviews were conducted with eleven industrial and/or farm equipment dealers throughout northern Alberta. They were asked about their current and projected employment levels and about their ability to find the qualified personnel that they need.

Training Requirements

Heavy Equipment Technicians apprentice for four years, taking their classroom study at any one of: Fairview College, Keyano College, Lakeland College, Lethbridge Community College, NAIT, Olds College, Red Deer College or SAIT. There are currently 587 northern Albertans enrolled as apprentice Heavy Equipment Technicians, most of whom most likely take their courses at northern institutions. This program is under review with a possible breakdown into three streams: Heavy Equipment Mechanic-Off Road; Truck and Bus Mechanic; and Truck-Trailer Mechanic.

Both heavy equipment technicians and agricultural mechanics are trained through apprenticeship programs. Agricultural Mechanics go through a two-year program, with classroom training being offered by Olds College. There are 17 apprentices from northern Alberta currently enrolled as apprentices in this program. Journeyman Agricultural Mechanics can apply their two years of training toward a Heavy Equipment Technician program.

Lakeland College and Lethbridge Community College also offer Agricultural/Heavy Duty Mechanics certificate programs. Olds College offers a two-year Agricultural Mechanic diploma program that includes the theoretical component of the apprenticeship program.

Demand Levels

There appears to be a real demand in northern Alberta for both Heavy Equipment Technicians and Agricultural Mechanics. Of 18 employers surveyed, 10 said that they have difficulty finding the journeymen they need; four had no problem finding people; one reported being able to find people

“if you look hard enough”, and the others either could not comment (not having had to hire any for several years) or were unclear in their responses. One Peace Country employer estimated that training programs currently produce about one-half of the technicians needed in the region.

This demand is not likely to grow much over the next few years. Most respondents expect to have roughly the same number of employees in three years as they have today. Predictions are hard to make in this field as needs are very much driven by volatile commodity markets.

Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development’s Occupational Profiles say that demand for both Heavy Equipment Technicians and Agricultural Mechanics is expected to be “average” over the next few years. Human Resource Development Canada says that the demand outlook for “Heavy Duty Equipment Mechanics” is slightly below average for the next few years, with some increase expected in construction, metal mining, agriculture, logging and retail.

There is no apparent geographical pattern to the demand for heavy equipment technicians.

Employers’ Comments on Demand Levels

- The dealers surveyed said that many potential employees are lured away by the high wages paid by large forestry and oil & gas companies. Not surprisingly, those who reported having little difficulty finding the technicians that they need were large, forestry-related companies.
- Most respondents have slightly less difficulty finding apprentice Heavy Equipment Technicians than finding journeymen. Apprentice Agricultural Mechanics are hard to find.
- One employer stated that recruiting was very difficult in the summer of 1997 but has now eased.
- One dealer mentioned that trained technicians often leave the North for major centres elsewhere.
- The level of demand for Heavy Equipment Technicians and Agricultural Mechanics is related to the level of sales for industrial and farm machinery but it does not follow sales exactly. A drop in sales will not be followed by an immediate drop in demand, as the units sold during the peak sales years will still require maintenance in the years following.

Comments on Training

- Computer training is now an essential part of training for all mechanics. Several employers emphasized this point. One pointed out that Case, an agricultural equipment manufacturer, insists that mechanics be computer-literate before being sent for their specific training courses. Mechanics must be able to use a laptop computer in the shop or in the field. In some cases mechanics need to be familiar with the Windows95 operating system in order to run diagnostic programs.

- One employer stated that he does not see many apprenticeship applicants with “the right attitude”. People drop off resumes and never call back or drop by, which demonstrates a lack of interest in the job. Even when hired, some new employees show a poor work ethic.
- Heavy Equipment Technician training may not be well-suited to the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) for high school students. One survey respondent said that heavy equipment technicians and agricultural mechanics need greater physical strength than most young apprentices have.
- Farm implement dealers and mixed farm and heavy equipment dealers often employ both heavy equipment technicians and agricultural mechanics. They generally see value in having both types of mechanics on staff, but most agree that a heavy equipment technician with experience on farm machinery has more opportunities than a purely agricultural mechanic. One employer has several workers who apprenticed for two years to become agricultural mechanics then took two more years to add heavy equipment technician tickets to their resumes. The employer found this to be an ideal combination. Conversely, another dealer found that employees who tried to take both apprenticeship programs simultaneously wasted much of their time because the programs were not well coordinated.
- One major forestry company suggests that employers can generally train for specific job-related skills. Colleges should focus pre-employment training on “soft skills” such as people skills and initiative.

Summary

There is a definite demand for heavy equipment technicians in northern Alberta that is not currently being met. Training programs could expand to meet this demand but it is not likely to grow significantly over the next few years.

The demand for agricultural mechanics is not as large as that for heavy equipment technicians but it is larger than the current supply. Relatively few people in the region are entering the Agricultural mechanic field, perhaps favouring the wider range of employment opportunities offered by heavy equipment qualifications.

Pre-employment training in either field should emphasize computer skills and “Soft skills” such as teamwork, leadership and a strong work ethic.

Sources

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