

# Woodworking Machine Operators in Northern Alberta

## Opportunity Report

Prepared for the Northern  
Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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**Labour Market Information Clearinghouse**

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# **Woodworking Machine Operators Opportunity Report**

## **Introduction**

The Clearinghouse Advisory Committee requested a report on the demand for training for Woodworking Machine Operators (WMOs), based on the growth of the forest industry in the north and the potential for an increase in secondary wood products manufacturing in the region.

Information was gathered from industry, government and training institutions through telephone interviews and a review of publications. A contact and reference list is attached.

## **Definitions**

According to the National Occupational Classification, WMOs "set up, program and operate one or more woodworking machines to fabricate or repair wooden parts for furniture, fixtures or other wood products."

Woodworking machines include saws, routers, planers, drills and sanders, which may be manual or computerized.

## **Employment Opportunities**

WMOs are employed primarily in the construction industry, in secondary wood products manufacturing, and in sawmills. They may or may not be enrolled in an apprenticeship program. The number of WMOs in northern Alberta is unknown. It is likely in the order of 100-200 people, not including apprenticed carpenters and cabinetmakers.

## **Training Options**

Three types of woodworking training are currently available. Short courses are aimed at the general interest market, and are of interest to equipment salespeople and demonstrators. Pre-employment or pre-apprenticeship training is available as well. These courses are between 12 weeks and one year long, and prepare people to enter the labour market and/or apprenticeship programs. The third type of training is at the apprenticeship level. The term of apprenticeship for carpenters and cabinetmakers is four years, and includes eight weeks of training each year.

Pre-apprenticeship training is available in northern Alberta through Lakeland College (Vermilion), AVC Lesser Slave Lake (location based on demand), and Keyano College and AVC Lac La Biche

on campus. Apprenticeship training is available through Lakeland College in Vermilion and Fairview College in Fairview. As well, NAIT offers short courses, a 32 week pre-apprenticeship program and apprenticeship training.

### **Hiring Criteria**

When hiring, employers look for aptitude for the job, rather than for specific skills. They may prefer to hire employees with Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) or first aid training, but are not generally concerned with specific woodworking skills. This holds true for companies using computerized equipment. Mills in particular, because most of their workers are unionized, tend to hire unskilled staff and then train and promote them based on seniority. At Manning Diversified Forest Products, for example, a trained person would likely only be hired new to replace a certified tradesman, and then only if the tradesman could not be replaced internally.

### **Demand for WMOs and Training in the North**

At the present time, demand for WMOs and for their training appears to be low in northern Alberta. Indicators include:

- northern Alberta's Canada Employment Centres had no job orders for woodworking machine operators in 1995.
- two years ago, 70% of the graduates of NAIT's pre-apprenticeship training program found employment. Last year the number was down to 45%. NAIT attributes this to the downturn in the construction industry. Many of the students in NAIT's program are from the north.
- northern businesses report that they are not doing much hiring, and that applicants come to them rather than the other way around.

There appear to be several reasons for this:

- growth in the forest industry is leveling off
- the construction industry is still not doing well
- employers prefer to provide on-the-job training
- larger companies seem to train and keep their employees for the long term (there is low turnover)
- small companies may only hire employees seasonally, but they prefer to lay off and rehire the same employees.

These last three factors may explain why, while the construction industry in the Grande Prairie area is strong, and Grande Prairie Regional College does not offer any kind of woodworking training, there is not a strong local demand for training. The College may however want to keep an eye on trends in this segment.

## **Contacts**

Debbie, Fleetwood Construction, Grand Centre, 594-0500

Malcolm Cook, Apprenticeship and Industry Training, Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, Edmonton, 427-0830

George Drewniak, Millridge Builders, Slave Lake, 849-3677

Tom Fisher, Intercoast Truss & Prefab, Grande Prairie, 538-3491

Bernie Smith, NAIT, Edmonton, 471-8665

Hugh Seaton, Boreal Wood Centre, Manning, 836-3264

Andy Zwolak, Manning Diversified Forest Products, Manning, 836-3111

## **References**

1991 Canada Census (Statistics Canada)

Calendars - Fairview College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, AVC Lesser Slave Lake, Lakeland College, AVC Lac La Biche, NAIT

Canada Employment Centres database (Human Resources Development Canada)

Directory of Secondary Wood Products Manufacturing in Alberta 1995-96 (Alberta Economic Development and Tourism)

National Occupational Classification 1992 (Employment and Immigration Canada, now Human Resources Development Canada)

Two Stories in One - Annual Forecast 1996 (Alberta Construction Association)