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## Solving the Skills Gap

Mandy "Bear" Rennehan  
provides expertise on how  
to solve the trades skill gap.

**The Collar Blue**

Mandy Rennehan is ready to solve the trades skills gap.



# CARE BEAR

Blue-Collar CEO™ Mandy “Bear” Rennehan is on a mission to close the skills gap by bringing diversity and dignity to the trades.

**BY MATT ALDERTON**

**I**f countries were cottages, their economies would be their foundations. And in the United States and Canada, those foundations are the product of skilled tradespeople — manual workers like bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, pipefitters, welders, miners, machinists and mechanics — who literally and figuratively poured the concrete on which the 21st century rests.

Like woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers, however, so-called “blue-collar” workers might soon become extinct, a 2018 report by The Conference Board noted “growing blue-collar labor shortages” resulting from “converging demographic, educational and economic trends.” Those trends include:

- An increase in educational attainment, which has resulted in a glut of college-educated professionals who see white-collar work as their only option;
- the escalating retirement of baby boomers, who occupy the majority of blue-collar positions today;
- and workforce non-participation of non-college graduates due to disability, which has diminished the pool of available workers.

“Companies are now having a more difficult time finding blue-collar workers than white-collar workers,” The Conference Board reported. “And while the pool of blue-collar workers has shrunk, the demand for their services has continuously grown since the 2008 financial crisis.”

The economy hungers for skilled labor like bears hunger for wild berries and spawning salmon. When food is scarce, the latter hibernate. But Mandy “Bear” Rennehan is not your average grizzly. A lifelong member of the trades, she refuses to let employers sleep while the blue-collar workforce fades. Instead of hibernating, she insists on hunting for a solution.



"In the U.S. and Canada, we're missing probably 12% to 16% of the people we need to do the work we have right now," said Rennehan, Founder and CEO of Freshco, an Oakville, Ontario-based firm that provides reconstruction and maintenance services to retailers in Canada and the United States.

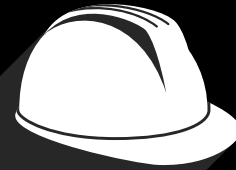
Then there are existing workers, some 10% of who lack the necessary experience, skills or character, but can't be replaced because there's nobody available to replace them. That further raises the talent deficit to 22% to 26%, according to Rennehan, who estimated that the shortfall will exceed 30% within the next decade. As a result, building projects will stall, businesses and consumers will have to pay more and wait longer for services, and employers will buckle under the stress of untenable labor costs.

"This isn't just a trades issue. This is an economic issue that is hurting everyone and will continue to hurt everyone," Rennehan continued. "We need to solve it together, and we need to do it right now."

Rennehan, who is called the Blue-Collar CEO™ by those in the industry, is leading the charge by "redefining the collar blue." If her movement is successful, workers who once perceived the trades as dirty, dangerous and dull will instead see them as diverse, dynamic and distinguished. When that happens, Rennehan predicted, the blue-collar workforce will grow as rapidly as it has shrunk.

## Born 'BLUE'

Rennehan grew up in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, whose harsh weather and remote geography demand ruggedness and resilience from both the land and the people.



**"There's a class system in America and Canada, and that's the reason we have a skilled-trades shortage. The people who built America and Canada were extremely skilled, but they were treated like second-class citizens."**

— Mandy Rennehan,  
Founder and CEO, Freshco

The youngest of four children, she learned to respect manual labor from her father, who spent 38 years as a lobster fisherman.

"I watched my dad work day in and day out until he just about died in his chair at night," Rennehan said. "So, from day one I have respected people who work in industries that have never been respected."

Because she inherited her father's tireless work ethic, Rennehan left home at age 18 determined to make her own way in the world. With just a dirty hockey bag full of belongings, she moved to Toronto and began cold calling local contractors, for whom she volunteered to work for free at nights in exchange for the opportunity to learn their trade.

"These guys took me under their wing and made me their special project because they could tell my intent was to learn the industry," Rennehan said. "And also, because I respected who they were."

Her respect for trades and tradespeople opened the doors that allowed Rennehan to establish Freshco in 1995, when she was just 19 years old. Now, 25 years later, it's the beating heart of her crusade to close the skills gap.

"There's a class system in America and Canada, and that's the reason we have a skilled-trades shortage," she said. "The people who built America and Canada were extremely skilled, but they were treated like second-class citizens. That feeling is still very much alive today. It's assumed that if you want to be somebody, you have to go to university or college. You can't be the dirty person in the blue-collar industry. That has to change."

## Transforming the Trades

Rennehan appreciates white-collar work, too. She just wants to create a viable alternative.

"I can say from experience — because they end up on my doorstep — that 20% to 25% of the kids who go to college end up

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depressed, in debt and full of anxiety,” she said. “They were told they needed a degree if they were going to be looked upon as a professional and as a citizen to be respected, but all they want to do is to use their hands and their minds and to be part of something meaningful.”

To make careers in the trades both attainable and attractive to young people, Rennehan is working with industry to promote:



#### DIVERSITY

It's not possible for an industry to close its talent gap by being hospitable to only one half of the prospective talent pool. Rennehan is working hard to champion the trades among women, and to champion women among the trades.

“Right now, maybe 4% of the whole industry are women. My goal is to push that number from 4% to 40%,” said Rennehan, who has engaged in numerous activities to get girls and women interested in blue-collar jobs. In 2017, for example, she teamed up with toymaker Mattel as part of its “You Can Be Anything” mentorship program, a Canadian initiative sponsored by Mattel’s Barbie brand where girls entered for the chance to win one-day mentorship experiences with professional women. Rennehan hosted an event for girls in her hometown of Yarmouth, where she helped give away 300 free Barbie Builder dolls, and also spent a day teaching construction to an 8-year-old contest winner.

Rennehan isn’t an advocate for women in the trades just because she is one, or even because they’re underrepresented. She’s an advocate for women in the trades because they’re good for business.

“Women are good for the bottom line because they come with a whole



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Mandy Rennehan worked with toymaker Mattel to help increase gender diversity in the trades.

different set of instructions and skill sets the industry has never, ever seen before,” Rennehan explained, who said women’s innate qualities — for example, communication, empathy and emotional intelligence — are assets on job sites just like they are in offices. “What the industry does not have right now, but desperately needs, is balance. Too much estrogen in one room is a [disaster] and so is too much testosterone. We need both men and women.”



#### DYNAMISM

One reason trades have trouble attracting workers is that young people perceive them as inert and old-fashioned. In fact, the opposite

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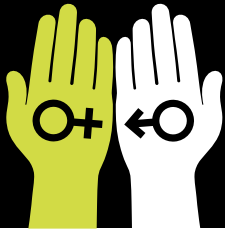
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— Mandy Rennehan, Founder and CEO, Freshco

is true, according to Rennehan, who said the construction trades often are on the forefront of technology.

“People don’t realize how dynamic the industry really is,” she remarked. “Some of the coolest new technology right now is in our industry.”

In many cases, technology will create new and exciting career opportunities for tradespeople. Consider, for example, automation. “One of the big myths in the industry is that automation is going to take jobs. But if you look at things like autonomous brick-laying machines, you’re actually going to need more people, not less,”

Rennehan explained. A job site with a bricklaying robot will need someone on hand who understands bricklaying best practices and building codes, another person to oversee the robot’s work and conduct quality control and a third person to conduct maintenance and troubleshooting if the robot malfunctions. “A job that normally would need two manual bricklayers needs three people for one robot.”

Communicating cutting-edge opportunities — and investing in training programs that prepare blue-collar workers to exploit them — will help attract a new

cohort of tech-hungry talent that might otherwise overlook the trades, Rennehan predicted.



#### **DIGNITY**

What trades need even more than diversity or technology is dignity, Rennehan said, who offered an illustration from her own company: Three or four years ago, she approached her trade coordinators

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who manage on-demand maintenance for retail clients in the United States and Canada. She asked them to name their biggest challenges. Among the most significant, they answered, were rude and unprofessional technicians.

"I said, 'Well, how do you treat them? Do you treat them the same as your co-worker? Your dentist?' They just stared at me," Rennehan recalled. "So, I set up a challenge: I told them for one month to treat their technicians the way they would treat anyone else in their life — to thank them for the skills they had and to help them with skills they didn't have — and then to come back and tell me what happened. Thirty days later, technicians' performance was up 30%. They were returning calls. They were polite. It was incredible, and it proved the whole point behind my movement — people will act

like professionals if you treat them like professionals."

## A Team Effort

Rennehan's message is clear: Blue-collar work is good work. Her task now is to spread her gospel across North America.

In August 2019 she took a critical first step by helping Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau establish a new advisory committee that will consult with the Canadian government on federal solutions to the skills gap. The committee, on which Rennehan sits, currently is laying the groundwork for a national campaign to encourage apprenticeships and promote the skilled trades as a career of choice for young Canadians. It will lead consultations, explore partnerships and provide advice on the subject to Canada's

Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour.

"We need an overarching campaign that looks at the industry as a whole and markets it for what it really is and the opportunities that are really in it," Rennehan said. She wants to amalgamate small, disparate local programs into a cohesive national effort that will encompass a comprehensive list of stakeholders, including schools, teachers, guidance counselors, unions and employers, all of who will be trained to deliver the same messages and to promote the same career resources to prospective tradespeople. Once it's proven in Canada, she plans to export the campaign to the United States.

In the meantime, Rennehan said retailers and other employers can take steps of their own to promote change from within. For example, they can reframe how they view and interact with tradespeople. "You need to look at how you've treated people in the trade industry and start viewing them the same way you view an accountant, a doctor or a lawyer: as a professional," Rennehan said.

Second, evangelize the trades within their personal and professional networks. "You need to start talking about the industry with enthusiasm," Rennehan continued. "Because passion sells."

Finally, remove barriers that keep underrepresented groups, including women, from entering the trades. "You need to stop segregating and get ready for the influx of new people coming into the industry," Rennehan advised, pointing out that women are entitled to separate restrooms, and may require more flexible work schedules to accommodate those who also have roles as caregivers. "A cultural shift is coming, and you need to prepare for it now."

If individual companies do their part, the entire industry will benefit.

"This is a movement, and I can't do it all on my own," Rennehan concluded. "Everybody has to work together so we never end up in this mess again." ✕

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