



# Skilled Trades Shortage in Alberta a Tremendous Opportunity for New and Growing Businesses

For Elite Integrity Services, an oil-storage tank repair and field construction company based in Calgary, growth has been all about innovation and an honest approach to customer service.

The company was established by three seasoned journeymen – Shawn Kirwan, James Vollmer and Shane York – in 2010. Each brought his own brand of industry experience to the table.

The demand for skilled trades represents a significant business opportunity for anyone in the region, Kirwan says.

"There's always a demand for good quality contractors. The industry is changing so much, we saw an opportunity to leverage the relationships we had to bring something different to customers, because we were very knowledgeable when it comes to both construction and repair. And all three of us were huge proponents of going above and beyond when it comes to customer service."

They began doing repair and restoration of large oil storage tanks for regional customers as they worked towards setting themselves up to do fabricating. The plan made perfect sense, Kirwan says. "We always intended to get into fabrication but decided to focus on repair and restoration projects to build up the business, equipment and policies we needed to get there." It wasn't long before the company outgrew its original locations and started leasing space in Ponoka, Alta. (for fabrication), Calgary (administration) and Edmonton (drafting and engineering).

The first manufacturing project for two 20,000-barrel tanks was kicked off on Nov. 13, 2011. "Now we've successfully completed in excess of 10 new construction builds ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 barrels with many more projects that will take us into 2015."

Since expanding into manufacturing, Kirwan says Elite has been experiencing double-digit growth. Today it employs more than 60 staff and contractors to serve customers throughout Western Canada and internationally.

The latest step in their growth was building a new state-of-the-art 12,000-sq.-ft manufacturing facility in Ponoka to keep pace with constantly growing customer demand. The facility is scheduled to open in July.

"This year we're going to focus on getting our house in order and making sure our systems and processes stay ahead of the curve," Kirwan notes. "With our new fabrication facility, we're more than ready to take on our next stage of growth."



From Left: Shawn Kirwan, Shane York and James Vollmer stand outside their brand new manufacturing facility in Ponoka, AB. (Tophar Seguin / Postmedia News)

The shortage of skilled contractors in Alberta has been an ongoing challenge for major industries within the region, says Judy Tidlund, branch manager for Nexus Staffing, a Calgary-based recruitment firm for the manufacturing and logistics industries. "Industry in Alberta is very contract-savvy, which translates into a lot of opportunities for skilled trades looking to start or grow a business," she says.

It's not unusual to see an individual contractor branch out and combine skills with like-minded partners to create end-to-end solutions for major industry players, she adds. "In many large-scale projects, you don't need the same trades all the time. Setting yourself up with a combination of services provides a wonderful foundation for growth." Having multiple partners with complementary skills also improves one's ability to compete on larger-scale requests for proposals (RFPs), as well as access financial capital.

Since all the Elite partners are in their 30s, Kirwan anticipates a long and prosperous future for themselves and company staff. "We've got years of doing what we love and we have great team that's making all the difference in our success."

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## CIBC Tips: Putting the Customer First

1. **Big Demand, Big Opportunity** When demand is high in your market, whether it's for your skill set, product, or any other service your company offers, be strategic in how your company responds to the spike. Take the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of your customers' needs and strive to exceed their expectations consistently. By impressing them now, you increase your chances of a lasting relationship. Your goal should be to outlast the boom.
2. **Strategic Alliances** Partnering with other individuals or businesses is a great way to create added value for your customers. Pool your skills, resources and relationships, in order to achieve economies of scale that benefit not just your company but also your clients. This does not necessarily mean lowering prices. Consider redirecting your cost-savings towards process improvements or reinvesting them in your business.
3. **Back to Basics** After a significant growth or change in your business, revisit your company's core strengths and differentiators in the market. It's important to align growth to your business plan and to ensure that you're making thoughtful, customer-centric decisions.

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