

by Al Schwartz
PLUMBING CONTRACTOR



Perishable skills

While the industry is focused on attracting and retaining new blood, and rightly so, aptitude for the trade cannot be given a back seat. The facts are that, no matter how many bodies we are able to hire, those bodies do not come with any guarantees the apprentice candidates will actually be willing and able to learn the trade and to apply that knowledge in the field.

One of the most repeated comments I hear from owners, foremen and journeymen alike who are trying to hire entry level people (forget about hiring seasoned journeymen, they are a rare these days as hen's teeth) is the seeming total lack of anything even approaching work ethic. When they finally manage to hire a new apprentice, and that apprentice actually shows up for work for, say, a month or more, the real test begins.

As far as craft goes, the plumbing/mechanical trades require an in depth understanding of the systems that we work with, including, but not limited to: sanitary drainage, waste and vent systems, rainwater/storm drainage, both potable and non potable water, fuel piping (gas and liquid), exotic gases such as oxygen, nitrogen and other inert and active gas systems, site utilities and so on. These systems all use a variety of differing materials and some use different materials within a single system. In addition to understanding the why's and how's of the aforementioned systems, the candidate must be able to actually install, modify (according to codes and statutes) and service said systems. Further, the successful journeyman has evidenced these abilities not in some abstract way but in the real world where the results of his expertise are tangible and open for all

to see. This is a unique skill set.

In times past, when young people actually sought out a trade career, the failure rate of apprentices hovered somewhere in the 60% to 70% range.

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That is to say, six or seven out of every ten apprentices hired left the trade before achieving journeyman status. The other three or four actually had the aptitude to learn and master trade skills AND the textbook curriculum and kept a steady employment for the four or five years it takes to become a qualified journeyman. In today's world, such an investment in time and effort might be viewed as an anachronism. That is one reason it seems to be so hard to get and keep new apprentices. During the four or five years it takes to actually become a journeyman plumber or pipefitter, the successful apprentice must learn certain skills in order to perform the work required. These skills are perishable, in that they will deteriorate if not constantly used and sharpened in the field.

Think about it for a moment. If you work in the field in our trade, at some point you must know how to solder, braze, weld, put together plastics of various types, cut and thread pipe of various materials and so on. Learning those skills requires aptitude and application. Being good at those skills -- that is, producing a finished product that meets the standards set by the manufacturers, the local building officials and/or your company

-- requires practice. You can't just solder one joint every few weeks or produce a weld that will pass x-ray once in a while, at least not initially anyway. You might be able to get away with being that idle

after you've become a journeyman or master, but those skills deteriorate rapidly. Even a master who has not worked in the field for a long time will not be able to consistently produce quality work until he gets some practice.

I saw a post on a social media platform of a welder who answered an ad that stated, "welders wanted, \$18 to \$25 per hour." The guy sent the company two pictures of welds he did. One picture showed a sloppy, snotty weld of two pieces of plate at 90° with spatters and voids, but it was a weld. The other picture showed a beautiful, flowing weld with even heat and a symmetrical bead. The owners asked him why he had sent the two photos. His reply, "the first one is an \$18 an hour weld, the second is a \$25 and hour weld." Point made.

New hires need to learn the skills of the trade. Not all will. The aptitude necessary to become skilled at the craft requires dedication and more importantly, repetition. We do best what we do most. The fact that our trade skills are perishable, that is deteriorate in time when not constantly used, is something that new hires need to be made aware of.

You can pretty well tell if a new hire has "it" when it comes to mechanical

aptitude. Working with one's hands is something that you either can do or cannot do. There is very little in between. One way to improve the odds of success in your new hires is to have friendly competitions. The UA and PHCC do this regularly in their apprenticeship training classes. It doesn't have to be cutthroat either. Setting up a competition can be as easy as having a company outing with the goal of improving trade skills included. Providing prizes for the winners is also not a bad idea.

Unlike today's 'everyone gets a participation trophy' atmosphere, pushing your apprentices to improve their skills and strive toward excellence does several things. First, it gives everyone a chance to compete on equal footing (assuming that your keeping the playing field level). Second, if the reward is desirable, it fosters a competitive spirit that can only improve everyone's skills in the long term. The most important aspect of providing a competition, assuming it is handled correctly, is keeping everyone at the top of their game and bolstering perishable skills.

When your people are experts at their trade, your company benefits. When they know that their skills are well honed, there is a certain level of confidence as well as pride in being good at what you do...and having everyone know it.

In any case, cultivating the mechanical aptitude of your new hires and keeping their skills sharp will pay dividends in the quality of the work they perform and your firm's reputation. The added benefit of pride in your people and their own sense of pride in their trade cannot be underestimated. **G**

The Brooklyn, N.Y.-born author is a third-generation master plumber. He founded Sunflower Plumbing & Heating in Shirley, N.Y., in 1975 and A Professional Commercial Plumbing Inc. in Phoenix in 1980. He holds residential, commercial, industrial and solar plumbing licenses and is certified in welding, clean rooms, polypropylene gas fusion and medical gas piping. He can be reached at allen@proquilldriver.com.

Specialty trades added 37,600 positions in February

WASHINGTON, DC -- The Bureau of Labor Statistics employment data for February showed strong job growth and an unchanged unemployment rate. The construction industry saw sustained increases, adding another 61,000 jobs weighted heavily in the specialty construction sector.

"Construction Employers of America is pleased to see continued, steady employ-

ment growth in the specialty trades," said Jack Jacobson, spokesperson for CEA.

While there were significant gains across the construction job market, the major growth was in the specialty trades, which created 37,600 new positions. Residential specialty construction added 18,600 jobs, while nonresidential specialty contractors added 19,000 positions.

"It's clear that the Federal govern-

ment's actions have a direct impact on the construction industry," continued Jacobson. "Passage of comprehensive infrastructure legislation funded with significant Federal funds will ensure the construction industry can continue to create good, middle-class jobs that will fuel our economy for years. Failure to act on infrastructure would threaten job growth across the country." **G**