

The Case for Craft Careers

One main reason for construction's skilled-labor shortage is the lack of awareness and of a plan to build a pipeline of workers. Regrettably, nontraditional career paths often are not presented as viable and lucrative alternatives to college for young people graduating from high school.

They are not often well informed about nontraditional career alternatives.

That's too bad. I wanted to be an ironworker because I looked up to generations of ironworkers in my family. My father and uncles were ironworkers, and a few of my cousins are. I remember starting my career as an apprentice ironworker at Local 29 in Portland in 1986. I paid my way through college, working rebar in the summer. I worked as a journeyman in many areas of the trade. By the second year of my apprenticeship, I knew that I wanted to be an apprentice coordinator. A few years later, I was selected as the



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apprentice coordinator for Local 29. Later, as the Northwest administrative coordinator, I worked with apprenticeship coordinators to manage apprenticeship issues and encourage them to be active in their state council meetings.

Now, I hope to continue to make a difference doing what I do every day in the ironworkers' union Apprenticeship and Training Dept. and, most recently, as part of a national effort to bring career-based solutions to the skilled-labor shortage, serving on the Dept. of Labor's Advisory Committee on Apprenticeship.

But with three out of four construction firms showing concern about finding hourly craftworkers over the next year, I feel an urgent need to raise awareness about the

great careers in the skilled trades. I want to educate our young people about nontraditional, lucrative alternatives to college by showing them the benefits of ironworking and all craft apprenticeships.

According to the Dept. of Labor, apprenticeships are a proven path to secure careers: Almost nine out of 10 apprentices are employed after completing their programs, with an average starting wage above \$50,000. If you make \$50,000 per year versus spending that or more on college, it's about a \$400,000 swing.

The return on investment for employers is impressive. Studies from around the globe suggest that for every dollar spent on apprenticeship, employers get an average of \$1.47 back in increased productivity, reduced waste and greater front-line innovation.

A Shallow Labor Pool

Time is working against the industry. With a young generation that is not considering construction as a viable career option, a wave of baby-boomer retirements and workers who switched careers during the recession, the growing project demand is dipping into a shallow pool of skilled labor. It has resulted in higher prices and longer construction schedules. Trouble finding skilled labor hurts the bottom line when companies can't meet the growing project demand. The on-

going labor shortage can have a ripple effect on the U.S. economy, especially with Congress preparing to fund more public works.

Labor unions have played a critical advocacy role in the 2016 election and are preparing to lobby the next administration on key policies. We hope the new administration shows the same deference to trade and union labor as has the Obama administration. Union apprenticeship training programs are among the most important.

At the ironworkers' union, we recognize that apprentices play an essential role in the growth and development of a safe and highly trained workforce. Earn-while-you-learn training allows ironworkers to make a fair wage with benefits while training to become a journeyman.

The ironworkers' union training centers collectively spend between \$80 million and \$90 million a year in training. Our doors are always open, and we handle 50,000 applications annually, with more coming each year. We average 3,000 to 6,000 graduates a year.

It is time to stop telling our young people that their only path to success is a four-year college degree. The earn-while-you-learn apprenticeship model is already well established. We simply need to do better at promoting technical training at the middle- and high school levels and providing them with choices and information so that these young people can find these well-paying and satisfying careers. ■

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