

Revisiting the Trades as Career Options

There was a time in our country's history—in fact, not very long ago—when high schools and colleges promoted several very different career paths for their students. One option was the standard four-year bachelors degree, perhaps followed by a masters and even a doctorate. Another option was to train in the trades and become a plumber, electrician, welder, or other skilled worker. While this option was the route chosen by many of today's essential service providers, it has largely disappeared from learning institutions today. The result is a significant drop-off in the number of young people being recruited and trained into the trades, which in turn promises to create significant difficulties in the near future.

In this paper we make a case for the trades for today's young people, who face unprecedented difficulties entering the workforce—particularly after graduating with a four-year degree that qualifies them for only a small number of high-demand positions. At the same time, high-paying, rewarding jobs with opportunities for advancement remain unfilled within the trades. Here are a few of the reasons young people would do well to take a close look at the trades and what's possible there.

A Closer Look at College

Nearly universally in the current educational climate, students are pushed toward applying to a number of different colleges before finishing high school. Beginning with their freshman year or even in middle school, the focus is on SAT scores, AP classes, college visits, selecting a major, and doing everything possible to make it into the student's "dream school." The promise, either spoken or unspoken, is that spending four years at that school and earning a degree will unlock the "dream job" and establish the student for life.

The reality of the four-year college degree very rarely matches that expectation. Even a degree from a highly regarded university qualifies the graduate for a relatively limited number of available positions, which are most likely spread out throughout the country or the world. Getting a job within their field, if even possible shortly after graduation, often means relocating away from friends and family and "starting over" in a new location.

Perhaps the most negative consequence, however, of the four-year degree is one that has been headlining news stories around the country for years: college student debt. The plan to earn enough money to quickly pay off loans after graduation hardly, if ever, happens as expected. Rather, it takes years of careful budgeting and perhaps working a second job in order to pay for a degree that has yet to unlock that dream position.

A Closer Look at Trades

With that background, a closer look at the typical career path in the trades reveals a very different story. First of all, what exactly does the term “trades” refer to?

What Are the Trades?

Typically the trades are activities related to the infrastructure of the buildings that each one of us lives and works in every day. Roofing, plumbing, electrical services, welding, carpentry, and flooring are a few of the most common examples. The men and women who install, maintain, and repair these infrastructural elements are highly trained and are in high demand, and their work is essential in order to keep homes, commercial properties, and industrial facilities safe, clean, and functional for those that use them.

Becoming a Tradesman or Tradeswoman

There is a certain amount of “classroom” education required to enter the trades, but a critical component of entering this field is the apprenticeship system. This method of learning is so successful that it has thrived for thousands of years and continues to be the most reliable and efficient way for beginners to become experienced tradesmen and tradeswomen. As an apprentice, a future plumber, for instance, follows an experienced technician on the job and provides assistance, closely following each procedure and learning the best practices, practical tips, responses to unexpected situations, and the myriad of other lessons that can only be taught and learned “in the field.”

After a few years of practical apprenticeship training and education in the classroom, the student is ready to launch their career as a plumber or other trade worker—usually with little to no debt due to student loans and the ability to find a lucrative position immediately with a company close to home.

Traditional College Education vs. Training in the Trades

Four years of education before entering workforce // Two years of education and apprenticeship

Very expensive // Inexpensive, on-the-job paid experience

Employment positions are limited // Trades workers are in high demand

Years needed to "climb the ladder" in employment // Good pay and opportunities for advancement right away

Entering the Plumbing Industry

If many high school students do not consider plumbing as a promising career path, it is largely because today's educational culture has hidden it from their view and relegated it to a category of "less desirable" industries. The impression is that plumbing and the other trades require less skill, are less rewarding, and are less prestigious than the careers made possible with a four year college degree. In reality, however, plumbing is a complex, exciting field with opportunities for career advancement and entrepreneurship that are rarely found in competing career paths.

A Case Study

At Rooter-Man of South Carolina, we have had the privilege to introduce a number of young people to the potential careers in the plumbing field. Initial jobs often take the form of summer and after-school work, following experienced plumbers into the field to work as assistants. Over time, these young people become more familiar with the equipment, parts, and processes and become valuable members of our team. A recent example within our team clearly illustrates how this type of introduction to the plumbing industry is a valuable investment for our company as well as a life-changing opportunity for the employee.

Tyler Walker worked for our company as a plumber's assistant during his first two years of college, learning how our industry and our specific business work. He left the Charleston area to complete his business degree at Clemson University, then returned to Rooter-Man of South Carolina to launch his

career. Having already learned our business, Tyler was an ideal candidate for the position of Shop Foreman, managing the ordering, inventory, and distribution of the equipment and parts that our plumbers use every day in the field. Today, we are proud to have Tyler as a valuable member of our team and plan to include him in marketing, customer relations, and business development decisions into the future.

In a way, Tyler combined both the traditional four-year college route and the trades route. By building his knowledge of the plumbing trade while gaining an education in business, Tyler gave himself a fantastic foundation for a career within this essential field.

Ongoing Training

In every industry there are constant evolutions in technology, equipment, safety, supply chain dynamics, and or best practices. Plumbing is no different, and once the trades worker has leted the main educational and apprenticeship phases of their training, their learning has just begun. At Rooter-Man, we extend ongoing training opportunities to our plumbers, often in the form of five to 10-day courses to update their knowledge and train them in a variety of diagnostic and other skill sets. We believe and have seen it proven many times over that investing in [our plumbers](#) in this way makes our entire company stronger, guarantees better service to our clients, and makes for happier employees able to pursue greater opportunities within their field.

Careers at Rooter-Man of South Carolina

The president of [Rooter-Man](#) of South Carolina, Nelson Huggins, has a unique perspective on the different career paths available to young people considering a four-year college degree or training in the trades. Having taught school himself for 17 years before launching the RooterMan business, Nelson has seen graduates enter the often-disappointing search for employment (saddled with large student loans) and has also seen young people go into the field with plumbers, learn the ropes, and then jump into the trades with both feet, quickly establishing themselves in a lucrative job and pursuing ongoing educational opportunities to make themselves the best they can be.

[Rooter-Man](#) makes it a goal to inform young people in the greater [Charleston, SC](#) area of the possibilities that await them within the trades. Specifically within plumbing, there is a future before

them with amazing job security, high demand for skills in nearly any part of the country they desire to live, and even the option to start their own business as entrepreneurs in the future.

More About Rooter-Man of South Carolina

[Rooter-Man](#) of South Carolina provides highly skilled plumbing services throughout the Lowcountry region, including Charleston, North Charleston, Mount Pleasant, and Summerville. From simple [drain clog removal](#) to identifying and locating leaks in [sewer lines](#), residential and commercial property owners can depend on Rooter-Man and their courteous, professional plumbers to give great service every time. Hundreds of positive reviews over the course of over 15 years illustrate the dependability and capability of Rooter-Man's team.