

There are at least six good reasons to join the skilled trades

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Have you ever considered a career in the skilled trades? If you like to work with your hands and aspire to make a good living with low student loan debt, the trades may be right for you.

The skilled trades industry sometimes carries with it certain stigma and perceptions that are inaccurate and outdated. Let's get real about the skilled trades.

Myth: The skilled trades are for those who wouldn't do well in college

Occupations within the skilled trades — like electricians, plumbers, HVAC technicians — require a high level of problem-solving skills. Trades workers must be knowledgeable about their field, think on their feet, and make decisions every day. Besides, there is far more to being intelligent than just having “book smarts” — trades workers must have “physical smarts” (or kinesthetic intelligence) to succeed in the field.

Myth: The skilled trades are outdated and unsafe

The digital technology revolution has not left the skilled trades untouched. Automation has advanced manufacturing and construction and improved workplace safety. According to [CONTRACTOR magazine](#), the trades have adopted 3D modeling, virtual reality, and other cutting-edge digital technologies into their training programs. The automotive industry are heavy automation users as well, as reported by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Additionally, the manufacturing and construction industries have made leaps in improving workplace conditions in the past few decades. Companies are held accountable more than ever before for ensuring the safety of their workers; some facilities hire for positions entirely devoted to safety. In Pennsylvania, safety education is a required topic during apprenticeships, so employers must prepare trades workers to respond to workplace hazards as part of their training.

Myth: The skilled trades are only for men

Luckily, women across the country are proving this point wrong every day. Interest in the trades among women is increasing, according to Family Handyman. If you're a woman interested in pursuing a career in the trades, don't let a stereotype stand in your way.

The skilled trades have changed a lot in the past few decades; the industry in the 21st century might seem unrecognizable. Now, let's talk about what the trades have to offer.

Six reasons to join the skilled trades

1. High pay, especially with benefits

Despite popular belief, the skilled trades offer competitive wages and benefits packages to workers. Thomas J. Sandell, president of the [Great Lakes Building and Construction Council](#), noted in an Erie Together 2020 career pathways information session that while pay scales differ across trades, all trades pay a living wage, and provide opportunities to advance and earn more. For example, an apprentice plumber in northwestern Pennsylvania can make \$18 per hour plus benefits during their first year. As they progress through the apprenticeship program, their pay increases each year. Upon graduating from the apprenticeship program and becoming a journey-worker, their pay is boosted to \$41 per hour, according to Sandell. Also, a 2021 report by Angi surveyed employers and found that many are offering new hires above-average wages, flexible work schedules, health insurance, fun workplace environments, performance bonuses and other perks.

2. Opportunities to advance — with lower cost and time commitment than a four-year degree

Coupled with the potential to make high earnings, the skilled trades also come with a cheaper — and often quicker — route to education through apprenticeships. Apprenticeships typically take three to five years to complete, and students can “earn while they learn,” working in an entry-level position and getting paid while going to school to enhance their skills, said Sandell. According to ASVAB, “working in a trade career means learning a valuable skill that can offer less debt, lucrative pay, job stability and overall good quality of life.” Skilled trade workers start gaining experience and earning dollars sooner than college graduates.

3. Steady, high demand

There will always be a need for someone to construct buildings, fix appliances and improve infrastructure. For this reason, certain skilled trades can insulate themselves against economic recessions better than other industries, as noted by Maclean's. [Angi](#) states that increased home improvement activity during the pandemic has heightened demand for construction and related workers. This effect combined with the ongoing shortage of labor workers — which began before the pandemic — has led to a record backlog in home projects, according to Insider magazine. This means that if you're looking to get into the trades, now is a good time — you won't be out of a job.

4. Satisfying work

Working in the skilled trades means hands-on work and the chance to solve problems. While the work may be tough, some prefer it to the sedentary work of a typical office job. According to Angi, 83% of trades workers were satisfied with their jobs.

Technicians fix our vehicles to keep us safe. Construction workers build our homes, hospitals and schools. Machinists and welders make medical equipment that saves people's lives. Trades work is a meaningful occupation that is invaluable to our way of living.

5. Travel

While travel may not be commonly associated with the skilled trades, it is an exciting perk to working in the industry. Once a student graduates from an apprenticeship program and becomes a journey-worker, they are qualified to work anywhere in North America, according to Sandell. Could you imagine fixing roofs in Alaska, or painting houses in Mexico?

6. Diverse work

A variety of occupations exist within the skilled trades. In the building and construction trades, Sandell notes that there are 14 major trades and a handful of specialty crafts, including: boilermakers, bricklayers, carpenters, cement masons, electricians, insulators, ironworkers, laborers, operating engineers, painters, plumbers, roofers, steamfitters, sprinkler fitters, sheet metal workers, and teamsters. There seems to be something for almost anyone within the skilled trades.

If you're interested in learning more about the skilled trades, talk to your guidance counselor about pursuing career exploration experiences through Erie's [Career Street](#) program. That will help you learn more about the skilled trades and other careers at no cost to you.