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Marine carpentry students Frank Worsham, left, and Steve Guling put the finishing trim on a boat during a class at Seattle Central Community College. (Karen Ducey / P-I)

Good pay, steady work, few takers as young people spurn the trades

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The average construction worker is well into his 40s, and unless something changes to make the fresh-from-prom set take a sudden interest in framing and drywall, that work force is just going to keep getting older.

In an industry where retirement tends to come early and knowledge is passed down on the job, that trend presents a potentially paralyzing problem -- especially as demand for workers continues to rise.

Crews will be at a loss for skilled workers. Buildings might not go up so quickly. So-called "green initiatives" could falter.

And the young people who passed up those opportunities? Unless they managed to land that desk job at Microsoft, they might have missed out on a chance to make a comfortably upper-middle-class living, some industry experts say.

The shortage isn't confined to carpenters -- it extends to plumbers, stonemasons, electricians, cabinetmakers, welders and a list of other trades that were once sought after.

What has some educators and employers puzzled is that many of those professions offer the chance to make upward of \$50,000 right away. But they say a negative perception of the trades coupled with a mounting push for college education has dealt the professions a hard blow in the United States.

Nettie Dokes, manager of Seattle City Light's apprenticeship program, calls apprenticeships "the other

four-year degree." (An apprenticeship, often regulated by unions, is a period of on-the-job training that typically lasts one to five years. After that, workers graduate to higher journeyman-level wages.)

Dokes worries how her quickly expanding crews of linemen will be able to retool technologically without new blood coming in.

Years ago, she would hire 20 apprentices every year. Now she has spots for almost 60, and can't guarantee those will be filled.

"Historically here, from even a biblical time, a parent sent their child to apprentice with a skilled trade individual," Dokes, said. "Here for us, after World War II, we made a shift where all of the focus and energy was based around a four-year credentialed program."



The state's community and technical colleges have thousands of students in trade programs.

Enrollment in work force training at the technical and community colleges, which includes some apprenticeships, reached nearly 60,000 five years ago, but has slowly fallen since then. However, the Department of Labor and Industries reports that more than 17,000 workers were in apprenticeships at the end of last year, and that they have been steadily growing through the years.

Still, industry officials say the community colleges and apprenticeships aren't keeping up with demand. And those programs often attract older students, who will end up having shorter working lives.

In Washington, apprentices for state projects can start out earning more than \$30 an hour, according to Labor and Industries figures.

"It's not like the college system where you go to college and sit in class -- these folks are out there working in the field," said Halene Sigmund, who oversees apprenticeships for the Bellevue-based Construction Industry Training Council. "They're all making family living wages."

The 'misfits'

At Seattle Central Community College's wood construction program, boatbuilding instructor Gordon Sanstad tallied the construction industry's woes as he led a tour through the Central District facility. Cabinetmaking, boatbuilding and carpentry -- the program's three emphases -- are fields dominated by "what we call the gray-hair set," he said.

And they're industries where local demand is high.

Even his students are older than you might expect, he said. The average age of those enrolled in the wood construction program is 34.

Sanstad led the way through sawdust-covered workrooms where students labored over projects such as half-scale models of stairs and the naked ribs of what will one day evolve into boats.

Tours, he said, are starting to be a bigger part of his job. At least once a week he leads a group of high school students through the facility, hoping they'll find appealing the prospect of steady work that can't be easily outsourced.

The young students who enroll are often "misfits who can't fit in anywhere else," Sanstad said.

"If they aren't going to the university, what are they going to do?"

Nicole Lundheim paused from working on a half-finished small racing boat to talk about how these days people "don't want to get dirty." The 32-year-old grew up watching her grandfather and father work on houses -- construction is in her blood.

That's not the case with everyone, she said.

"We're in a technological era," Lundheim said. "People aren't exposed to it. I was exposed to it, but I was unique."

Sanstad and other instructors back that theory up. Forty years ago, the program didn't need to have introductory classes for students to learn the basics of construction -- how to operate tools and keep all their fingers at the same time. Now, the course is mandatory.

Frank Worsham, a 52-year-old student, came late to boatbuilding after a career at Boeing -- so he's all too familiar with the aging tendency of the trades.

"I've thought that if I ever did it over, I would do this when I was younger," he said as he bent over a half-finished dinghy. "I don't understand why young people aren't doing these things."

The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates there will be an 18 percent increase in the need for

plumbers and pipe fitters from 2004 to 2014. During that same time, demand for carpenters and painters will increase 13 percent, and the need for electricians will go up 14 percent.

Demand for heating, ventilation and air conditioning mechanics and installers will swell 27 percent during that time, according to the bureau's data.

Some economists speculate that "green initiatives" championed by government and corporations will create millions of jobs over the next 10 years, some of which would be technician positions or renovation work.

Image problem

Problems related to aging work forces haven't gone undetected. Late last year, Gov. Chris Gregoire announced "Running Start for the Trades" grants for 14 school districts, hoping to promote pre-apprenticeship training for students.

That was part of the latest push to mobilize young people toward the trades -- a drive that might be working. In the last two years, the state has seen a 62 percent increase in registered apprentices, said Elizabeth Smith, apprenticeship program manager for the state's Department of Labor and Industries.

But the average ages in apprenticeships still tend to border 30 -- evidence of what Smith and others call "the 10-year drift." After graduating high school, young people apparently work elsewhere before finding their way to the trades.

"I don't know why it is -- I just know that we see it, and we're working on changing it as well as we can," Smith said.

Some educators think schools are at least partly to blame for the diminishing interest young people have in the trades. They complain that WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning) scores have taken top priority over elective classes -- music and art along with the trades -- and students don't get to see their career options in the same way they used to.

"We live in tech-central," said Cal Pygott, who leads Bothell High School's construction program. "Every parent thinks their student needs to go to a four-year school. But not every student needs to, wants to, or has the grades or ability to go to a four-year school."

Pygott heads the school's "Construction Academy," which allows high school seniors to complete the first year of construction apprenticeship before graduation. After watching the drop-off in trades-related training years ago, Pygott says he's slowly seeing programs like his re-emerge.

But beyond lack of support from high schools, Pygott said the trades face another problem that can't be remedied by lobbying the Legislature: The industry has an image problem.

Until parents and students stop thinking of construction workers as "some big guy with a beard" who "swears a lot and drinks beer," he said that industry is likely to have a hard time recruiting.

But Pygott thinks parents, students and school districts are missing the big picture: job security.

"We import all or most of our clothing, all or most of our consumer electronics, more and more of our food -- our automobiles are either made overseas or owned by overseas companies," he said.

"But we cannot import our highways. We cannot import our bridges. We cannot import our skyscrapers or our infrastructure."

WHERE TO LEARN ABOUT BUILDING TRADES

These area schools offer training in building trades:

Seattle Vocational Institute: building trades pre-apprentice programs.

South Seattle Community College: building trades apprentice for such crafts as ironworkers, electrical workers, painters and bricklayers.

Seattle Central Community College: cabinetmaking and fine woodworking; carpentry; marine carpentry and boatbuilding; and wood construction.

North Seattle Community College: HVAC

ON THE WEB

To learn about apprenticeship programs in Washington, check this site provided by Labor and Industries: goto.seattlepi.com/r1314

For apprenticeship programs at these colleges:

- South Seattle Community College: dept.seattlecolleges.com/duwamish/art.htm
- Renton Technical College: www.rtc.edu/Programs/Apprenticeships
- Lake Washington Technical College: lwtc.edu/future/programs/apprenticeships

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