Guide to Becoming a Plumber

Overview

There are two ways on the path to becoming a plumber. One way is to receive training at a community college, technical school or career school. Another way to is to join an apprenticeship program administered by either a local union-management committee or a nonunion position administered by local chapters of the Associated Builders and Contractors.

College Credit

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), most residential and industrial plumbers attend either a technical school or community college to earn a two-year associates degree. According to the Trade School Info Zone, a clearinghouse for information on trade schools, qualified schools have met the standards established by the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training. These schools feature courses in mechanics, electricity, math, welding, pipefitting and the basics in heating, ventilation and air conditioning. On-the-job training is an important part of a plumbing education, giving participants real world experience in the plumbing profession and students will be paired with professional plumbers.

Applicants to either trade school or community college need to have a high school diploma or general equivalence diploma.

Apprenticeships

According to the BLS, apprenticeship programs generally provide "the most comprehensive training available for these jobs." They are administered either by union locals and their affiliated companies or by nonunion contractor organizations. Union organizations sponsoring apprenticeship programs include the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry of the United States and Canada, and local employers of either the Mechanical Contractors Association of America or the National Association of Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors. Nonunion apprenticeships are sponsored by the Associated Builders and Contractors or the Home Builders Institute of the National Association of Home Builders.

Apprenticeships usually consist of four to five years of on-the-job training as well as 144 hours annually of related classroom instruction. While on the job, apprentices learn basic skills such as identifying grades and types of pipe, the use of tools and the safe unloading of materials.

Although there are no uniform national licensing requirements, most states and localities require plumbers to be licensed. These requirements vary but mainly require workers to pass an exam on local building codes.

Outlook

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), job opportunities in the plumbing trade should be very good in the future, especially for workers with welding experience. Additionally, the profession of pipelayers, plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters is one of the largest and highest paid construction occupations comprising approximately 569,000 jobs in 2006. Furthermore, 55 percent worked for contractors on new construction, repair,

modernization or maintenance projects, according to the BLS, while 33 percent worked in industrial, commercial and government sectors and 12 percent were self-employed. Additionally, the BLS projects the demand for pipefitters and steamfitters will be driven by maintenance and construction of structures with extensive pipe systems such as powerplants, office buildings and water and wastewater treatment plants.
According to the BLS, with additional training, some pipelayers, plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters will go on to become supervisors for mechanical and plumbing contractors or owners of businesses themselves. Furthermore, "others, especially plumbers, go into business for themselves, often starting as a self-employed plumber working from home," while others may move into other areas such as construction management or building inspection.
The BLS recommends those interested in advancement learn Spanish because "Spanish-speaking workers make up a large part of the construction workforce in many areas. Supervisors and contractors need good communication skills to deal with clients and subcontractors."

Trade School Zone Info
http://www.tradeschoolinfozone.com/Plumbing_Trade_Schools.html

Bureau of Labor Statistics
http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos211.htm

Career Overview: Plumbers
http://www.careeroverview.com/plumbing-careers.html

Plumbers
According to CareerOverview.com, plumbers "are involved in the installation of three things: plumbing fixtures, like sinks; appliances, like water heaters; and complex systems in individual structures," such as homes and commercial and industrial buildings. Mainly, plumbers install and repair water, drainage, waste disposal and gas systems.
Plumbers are required to stand for long hours, lift heavy pipes and often work in cramped or uncomfortable positions. A typical job might include cutting holes in walls, ceilings or floors, hanging steel supports from ceiling joists, installing the fixtures and appliances, then connecting the system to the outside water or sewer lines.

Pipefitters
Pipefitters install and repair both high- and low-pressure pipe systems used in manufacturing, in the generation of electricity and in heating and cooling buildings, according to "Real People Working in Building and Construction." They also install automatic controls used to regulate these systems.
A typical job may be the installation of a municipal sewage system comprised of large cast-iron pipes which requires an entire crew of pipefitters. This position requires the ability to work from blueprints or building plans.

Pipelayers, Steamfitters and Sprinklerfitters

According to CareerOverview.com, pipelayers “dig and level trenches and then lay pipes for drainage, sewer, water or gas systems.” Typical jobs include laying pipe for oil and gas pipelines and sanitation sewers, drains and water mains.

Steamfitters install large scale pipe systems that move gas or liquids under high pressure, according to “Real People Working in Building and Construction.” These systems can be found in factories, industrial complexes, oil refining and chemical processing systems.

Sprinklerfitters are piping mechanics who install automatic fire sprinklers in buildings. According to the BLS, demand will increase because of changes to State and local rules for fire protection in homes and businesses.