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## **Recruiting youth Fewer young people entering skilled trade careers**

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LONGMONT — Many observers say the key to the American work force in the 21st century will be knowledge workers — those with innate skills and talents that cannot be transferred overseas or outsourced.

While the creative class, as author Richard Florida calls them, may be the U.S. economy's future, there's another often-overlooked fact: These people still have to have someone build and wire their houses and fix their plumbing.

But finding skilled tradesman to do these jobs is getting more difficult all the time, with fewer young people choosing to take such a career path.

"It's all computers; everything's done on computers now," said Trevor Harley, a high school senior taking his second year of the building trades class at the Career Development Center. "I just think there's more opportunity in the electronic world than in carpentry right now."

Harley's not sure if he'll pursue a career in construction after graduation — "I've got a lot of ideas floating around," he said — but if he chooses to he'll find no shortage of job opportunities.

Brian Laartz, vice president at Golden Triangle Construction, said the average age of the carpenters and other skilled tradespeople in his company is somewhere in the mid-40s, and he doesn't see a large crop of younger people coming up to take their place when they retire.

"We've seen (a shortage) coming for the last 10 years," Laartz said. To fill the gap, his company and other members of the Association of General Contractors of Colorado have been hosting a career day for the past three years, trying to get young people inspired about the opportunity to use their hands and their heads for a living.

"I think it's enlightening (for them)," said Laartz. "One is, I don't think they know that these opportunities are out there, and I don't think they know that these opportunities are as high-paying as they are."

According to the Association of General Contractors' Lee Blum, this year's fair was held at the Adams County Fairgrounds and attracted more than 1,500 people.

Construction companies, pipefitters, electrical contractors, mechanics, engineers, colleges and post-secondary schools offering training in some of these professions were represented.

The fairs have been increasingly well-received, Blum said, because the companies that participate realize how important young people are to their future.

“Don’t come to our career fair if it’s not something the students can do hands-on,” said Blum, who added that at least 550 volunteers help put on the fairs. “There’s no question the industry wants to invest and wants to put in the energy and let students know it’s a career choice.”

One who understands that type of approach is Gary Martin, the building trades instructor at the CDC. In his third year of teaching at the school, Martin is a 35-year veteran of the industry.

“I think this is a viable trade,” he said. “Having been in the trade myself, I can say there are a lot of what I call ‘trashers’ out there — a lot of wannabe’s who can’t really do the job.”

He said he tries to give his students a lot of free rein in his classes. After spending the first six weeks in the classroom, the students are given blueprints for large storage sheds and then turned loose to build them on their own, with his advice only given if asked for. The students get the freedom to make decisions and mistakes on their own. That’s how they learn, Martin said.

“We let them know they are the contractor,” he said. “I give them a set of prints, and if they have a problem they come to me.”

Martin said he was one of those high school students who wasn’t particularly interested in going the traditional college route and then a career in, say, the business world.

But he’s quick to say that, along with working with their hands, tradespeople also have to have plenty going on upstairs to be successful.

“The first thing I ask everybody when they come in here is, ‘how many of you hate math?’ Just about every hand goes up,” Martin said. “But the problem is they didn’t know how to apply the math.

“I’m the same way. I hate math, but yet I use it every day.”

At Golden Triangle, Laartz said his company helps some of its younger workers with career advancement by sending them to the Colorado Industrial Training Center for a four-year program.

If a worker demonstrates a commitment to the company, Laartz said, the company is willing to invest in career development.

The construction industry, like many other businesses, has some negative stereotypes associated with it, but Laartz said those are often simply misunderstandings.

“I think a lot of people think of construction as being a temporary job,” he said. “I think the biggest negative connotation is that it’s manual labor. But really, it’s skilled labor.”

As such, the pay scale rises with the skill level. A wage of \$20 an hour is not uncommon in the construction industry.

And despite what some may think, it’s possible to work in construction and have a stable home life, Laartz said. Chasing the hot construction markets around the county is an option, but it’s not something one has to do.

Golden Triangle does jobs up and down the Front Range and is able to provide work for its employees throughout most of the year.

“We don’t see any of that (moving around) here,” said Laartz. “You can make those choices. You can go to Katrina if you want and follow the dollar, but you don’t have to.”

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook, demand for carpenters is projected to be “excellent” over the next decade. The same goes for plumbers. Not enough young people are entering what can be a high-paying profession, so the job opportunities are there for the taking, according to the BLS.

“It’s a dying breed, and it’s kind of sad,” said Nick Burger, the owner of Burger & Sons Plumbing. “Nobody wants to get their hands dirty.”

Burger’s two sons, 32 and 34 years old, have followed him into the business, as he followed his father into the trade after getting out of the military after the Vietnam War.

Burger said that even for young people wanting to get into the profession, it’s not easy. They have to be willing to work hard and convince an employer that they’re worth the time and money the business owner will invest in them. But if they can get past that first hurdle, he said, opportunities abound.

“The first thing is to find a shop that’s going to take you,” Burger said. “Try to get on as a helper, move on to an apprenticeship program, and hopefully you can find an employer that’s going to move you around to get vast amounts of training, and that’s the key.”

It’s the training aspect that has become much more challenging, he said.

“I’d love to bring them in and tuck them under my arm because I remember my five years as an apprentice in the union,” Burger said. “One journeyman would teach me squat, but another guy, when he was training me, I would learn so much in such a short period of time.”

Getting a solid foot in the door has become more challenging in several of the skilled trades. In some cases it’s important for young people to bring more to the table than just a desire to learn.

“I tell people, if we were hiring right now the minimum we would need would be a licensed journeyman, not an apprentice,” said Diana Gwin of Branch Electric. The Gwin family has owned Branch since the late 1940s.

Mike Gwin, Branch’s president, said when his father ran the business, he would be able to charge clients a two-man rate, with the second man being the younger person learning the ropes. But that time has passed.

“It used to be accepted; it’s not anymore,” he said. “It’s become such a demanding market — your deadlines and so on.”

How do people break into the industry? It starts with training, the Gwins said. They suggest seeking out training classes at technical or community colleges — places like the Colorado Industrial Training Center. That way, when they come to a place like Branch Electric, they’ll have a leg up on most of the applicants who walk in the door.

“I think it’s very important you have the mechanical ability, and I would say the majority of people who come in here do not have that mechanical ability,” said Mike Gwin.

But to the young people of today, is such a thing as mechanical ability considered a viable path to a rewarding and successful career, or is a traditional four-year college degree seen as the only way to prosperity?

“I see it from my own kids,” said Scott Gwin, Branch Electric’s vice president. “They don’t want a high-labor job. They want to go sit behind a desk and tell people what to do all day for big dollars.”

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