

Tools for Success - Chapter 2: Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

The trades are interesting and pay well because the work is not simple, nor easy. It requires training, hard work and determination. Most union workers are trained through union registered apprenticeship programs, which last between two and five years, depending on the skills required. During this time, apprentices get classroom training provided at the school, which is typically sponsored and paid for by the union and its employers, through the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee, or JATC. Classroom training is complemented by on-the-job training (also referred to as OJT) which is provided by employers which have an agreement with the unions (also called signatory contractors).

As training advances and classroom and work hour benchmarks are met, the apprentice receives progressively higher wages commensurate with their increasing value and experience. At the end of the apprenticeship, a worker becomes a journey-level tradesperson, earning the same pay rate as every other journey worker in their trade in that region. Wages are negotiated by the unions and the industry associations.

Though classroom training can be challenging for tradeswomen, particularly if they are the only woman in their class, they are in the same classroom with the other apprentices and have the same access to educational resources.

On-the-job training, however is often unequal and remains one of the most frequently cited barriers women face to successful careers in the trades. Apprentices are supposed to work with a journey-level worker on a series of increasingly difficult tasks as part of the required on-the-job training (OJT) hours. Many women, however, find instead that they are assigned to routine, unskilled tasks like cleaning up or sorting tools while male apprentices are learning real skills, knowledge and abilities on the jobsite. As a result, some women finish their apprenticeships without gaining the necessary skills or experience that achievement represents, which can lead to problems in obtaining and retaining employment.

Be Aware of the Work You're Assigned To

All apprentices, whether male or female, do repetitive, entry-level work like going for coffee, sorting tools and cleaning. However, you will want to be aware if you're not receiving all of the experience and opportunities afforded to your male counterparts. Is your training different from the other apprentices' training? Are all the apprentices going for coffee, or are you the only one? Are you getting the same variety of assignments everyone else is? Keep good records of your assignments in a notebook you keep in your lunchbox or pocket.

If you feel that you are not getting sufficient training, you can speak to the supervisor on the site, to the foreperson's superior, or to the person who hired you. You can also speak to your

apprenticeship coordinator or business agent as well. Be assertive. Explain your position: "Joe started when I started, but he's welding and I'm not." Ask for a different assignment or the training partner you want. Follow up these conversations with letters asking for the same thing and keep copies of the letters.

Assume Some Responsibility for Your Training

The Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee should make sure that you are being trained properly but in reality, they rarely have the staff time or the authority to effectively monitor and manage the job assignments of their apprentices. To ensure that you are receiving adequate training, you may have to take some steps on your own. Here are some suggestions.

- 1) Find out what is included in the training curriculum and make sure you are being trained in every area.
- 2) Set goals for yourself. Goals for carpenters might be: By May, I will be able to frame a doorway without assistance. By June, I will be able to draw a plan for a simple staircase.
- 3) Team up with other tradeswomen to study and practice skills. Some apprentices form study groups and work together throughout their apprenticeship.
- 4) If you find a journey level person who is willing to teach you, ask to be his or her partner.
- 5) Find a more experience mentor outside of work who can help you build skills and negotiate the job site.
- 6) Be aware of other people's work. You can watch what other tradespeople are doing even if you're sweeping up or sorting tools.
- 7) Practice your skills, or learn new ones, on your own:
 - Take a recreational shop class at an adult education center or park district
 - Take a course at your union's school after hours, and
 - Read books about your trade
- 8) Volunteer where you can practice your trade, for example, with Habitat for Humanity, where volunteers build houses for low-income people.
- 9) Learn to accept constructive criticism, focus on the usefulness of the advice rather than the delivery.

10) Many tradeswomen say the most important thing is to make it hard not to train you, finish assignments quickly and thoroughly and repeatedly ask for more work, demonstrating efficiency, eagerness to learn and confidence in your ability. Filter this advice through your knowledge of your worksite and find the strategies that work best in that context.

Finally, remember that you're looking for progress, not perfection. Many experienced tradeswomen say that learning a trade always seems to take longer than it should. They also say that you'll never know everything about your trade. One woman, who has been a carpenter for twelve years says, *"I run into new stuff every day still. If I take the attitude that I'll know it all tomorrow, I'll be disappointed tomorrow."*

"I always tell apprentices that you'll come out of the program with a journeyworker card and a damn psychology degree! You have to read people and figure out how to get them to teach you. Sometimes jumping on in and making mistakes gets you yelled at but educated on how to do it right..sometimes just asking if you could jump in and help with something you want to learn gets the tools in your hands. Whatever your strategy, be prepared to get shot down and try a different angle but always with a great attitude!" Sarah Stigler, Plumber Local #130