

Tools for Success

Chapter 2: Keep Your Eyes and the Prize

The trades are interesting and pay well because the work is not simple. It requires training. Most union workers are trained through union apprenticeship programs, which last between two and five years. During this time, apprentices get classroom training provided at the school and sponsored by the union and its employers, through the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee. Classroom training is complemented by on-the-job training provided by the employer. As training advances and classroom and work hour benchmarks are met, the apprentice receives progressively higher wages commensurate with their increasing value. At the end of the apprenticeship, a worker becomes a journey-level tradesperson, earning the same pay rate as every other journeyworker in the trade.

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. Many women, however, find that instead they are assigned to routine, unskilled tasks like cleaning up or sorting tools while male apprentices are learning real skills. As a result, some women finish their apprenticeships without gaining the 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, women and men, do repetitive, entry-level work like going for coffee, sorting tools and sweeping. You should, though, watch carefully to see if you're being discriminated against. 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're not getting good training, you can speak to the supervisor on the site, to the foreperson's superior, or to the person who hired you. You can 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. However, 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) Be aware of other people's work. you can watch what other tradespeople are doing even if you're sweeping up or sorting tools.
- 6) 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
- 7) Volunteer where you can practice your trade, for example, with Habitat for Humanity, where volunteers build houses for low-income people.
- 8) 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.

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."