

Contractor Licensing=Respect

We received the following letter in response to our inaugural *Training the Trades* column in the March issue:

“I appreciated your column. We do need further discussion about developing a skilled and, ultimately, resilient labor pool in the construction industry.

“I apprenticed under a master carpenter (Jack) for four years and went to CITC (Construction Industry Training Council) in Bellevue, Wash.—a non-union training facility. That was a four-year, nights and weekends, apprenticeship program. It served me fairly well as an introduction to the trades, though any mastery of my craft that I may have achieved is certainly attributed to Jack’s teaching and guidance.

“I might have also attended Seattle Central’s wood construction program in carpentry, cabinet making, or boat building, which is widely popular—but the program was full time and the company I was working for paid half of my tuition at CITC.

the wherewithal to purchase insurance and a bond. What if contractors were held to the same standards as plumbers and electricians to keep their licenses? Would the ramifications of this not be more beneficial than detrimental? Have we limited the pride and professionalism we both feel and project to our community by keeping these requirements to bare minimums or nothing at all? Surely this is a dynamic to add to your list of causes for the diminishment of our trade!

“I spend an inordinate amount of time apologizing for the tradespeople who were met by my clients before I arrive on a project and it deeply saddens me.

“We must require education if we are going to expect to see its benefits in our field.” —*Josh Coberly*

This letter resonated with me. I’ve long held the position that the building industry must work collectively to reverse the stigma and unfavorable impression it seems to have in the public eye.

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“Shortly after I graduated from the program in 2010, I went into business for myself because of the drop off in available work from my employer. I have since been building my own remodeling business here in Seattle. I keep in close contact with my mentor and teacher, Jack, who quit working with our previous employer and now works with me again. After 10 years of practicing carpentry, I depend on him an enormous amount for his deep knowledge of construction and contracting.

“It is my impression that those who have lobbied to limit required education for carpenters and contractors have succeeded to an alarming rate in Washington state—all that is required to have a construction license is

I believe that the building industry is nearing the tipping point: Either we can strive to present a more professional image, or we can stand by as our skills and integrity are called into question, our industry is ridiculed, and prospective customers become further convinced that they’re better served following the “Do It Yourself” mantras from big-box stores than by hiring a pro.

The bad press and mistaken beliefs that professional skills are easily replicated by DIYers have taken years to evolve, thanks in part to a lack of self-policing in the trades. The lack of respect for professionals often feels like the 600-pound gorilla in the room at many of our

client meetings, and I suspect the same is true for many of my colleagues. And that gorilla isn't likely to go away quietly—at least not until many more in the trades take the responsibility to conduct themselves as professionals.

I generally have pretty strong opinions regarding the state of our industry, yet contractor licensing is one issue I'm on the fence about. While I'd like to believe that comprehensive licensing requirements would truly help increase the knowledge, quality, and competence of contractors, such licensing often depends directly upon the governing body overseeing the program. And, given that I live in Illinois, a state where dysfunctional government seems to be the norm, I question whether a rational licensing program could be effectively implemented and managed, and I suspect contractors from other states have similar opinions about their state or local governing bodies.

I also think that licensing without requiring regular CEUs or some other form of recurring education would probably not be very effective at increasing the number of "good guys" in the trades. To put this in perspective, think for a moment about the tradespeople you hold in high regard and ask yourself what most—if not all—have in common. In most cases, the answer will be that they take their job seri-

ously and strive to learn more about their craft, trade, or business. These types of individuals generally excel because they're motivated not by outside forces or requirements, but by a desire for improvement. I simply don't believe that we can legislate away apathy.

I think Josh raises many valid points regarding licensing requirements, but we'd like to hear your perspective on the state of our industry and what steps should be taken to ensure a competent, qualified labor force is adequately representing us. With that in mind, we are asking readers to chime in online. Do you think that general contractors should be required to carry a state license? Select the answer that best describes your opinion, at jlconline.com/training-the-trades:

- A. All GCs should carry a state license that requires a test and annual CEU credits
- B. All GCs should carry a state license that requires an initial test
- C. The current municipal licensing is sufficient
- D. GC licensing should not be regulated at all
- E. Other

Greg Burnet and his wife, Sue, own Toolbelt Productions (toolbeltproductions.com).

MORE LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

Training vs. Education

First off, we shouldn't call [these courses] "training" programs. "Educational" or "learning" is far less offensive to the ego of a seasoned tradesman doing things as he's always done for years and years. I myself have experienced that uncomfortable feeling of realizing one day that I didn't know what I didn't know, learning that the way I had done it forever was wrong.

Knowledge is not always an easy thing to communicate. Some people (20% to 30%) learn by reading or hearing; others (upwards of 40%) learn by watching; and the majority, especially adult males in the trades, learn by touching, doing, and being engaged in the process of learning. Think about how most of us learned the majority of what we know today. I like to call it "The BISS system" (Because I Said So). We were shown how to do something with little to no explanation as to why—it just worked.

At our company (Ring's End, a full-service building material supplier with numerous locations throughout Connecticut and Westchester County, N.Y.), we became involved with an RRP training provider and started putting classes together for the interested trades. We were so busy with RRP that there were times when we would conduct three to five eight-hour classes per week. We were able to share valuable time networking with our customers, as well as having the added bonus of meeting many new prospects in need of the training, but who didn't necessarily do business with us.

This was when one of the attendees said to me that he didn't

like the word "training." He said, "We 'train' dogs. We 'educate' people."

Being the good listener that I am, I took his comment to heart and have called our facility a "learning center" ever since. But I digress. Suggestions from attendees for additional learning subjects began to come in strong. We got together with our vendors and began a cooperative series of learning events. These events attracted not only builders and remodelers, but architects and building officials as well.

Relationships flourished and it wasn't long before we were offering accredited continuing-education programs (CEUs) at our facility. The best part was that architects, building officials, and tradespeople were all in one room, learning the same things, engaging with each other, and building lasting relationships that are so much needed in these related occupations.

—Tony Calistro

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Preservation Training Opportunities

Your *Training the Trades* article struck a chord with me. We work solely in the historic restoration business, but [training] has definitely become a hot topic for the preservation trades and is a tremendous hurdle to restoring traditional building trades properly. I wanted to commiserate with the pain of finding people in the trades when many high-school trade courses are disappearing.

Fortunately, in the area of historic preservation, there are a number of networks active in building professionalism: The Preservation Trades Network, the Association for Preservation Technology, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Clem Labine's *Traditional Building* magazine is an important resource, as well.

And there is a wide array of university and historic trade school programs, including the North Bennet Street School (Boston), National Preservation Institute (NYC), Campbell Center for Historic Preservation (Illinois), the Preservation Education Institute (Vermont), Traditional Building Skills Institute at Snow College (Utah), Belmont College Building Preservation/ Restoration Program (Ohio), College of Charleston Historic Preservation program (Ohio), and the Iron and Steel Preservation Conference at Lansing Community College (Michigan), among others.

—Neal A. Vogel

Unions Offer One Solution

I began my carpentry career at age 19, carrying wet pressure-treated lumber into a backyard as a helper for a deck-building contractor for \$10 per hour cash and no benefits. Still, I fell in love with the trade. Now at age 34, I earned more than \$100,000 last year as a project supervisor and lead carpenter for a commercial construction company that specializes in building health-care and education facilities.

How did it happen? After five years of working in residential construction—from framing houses to installing crown molding on coffered ceilings, to digging deck footings with a shovel and mixing concrete in wheelbarrows—I realized I would never be able to support a family at the \$25 per hour that I was told I could hope to earn someday, never mind the fact that there were no health benefits offered anywhere that I had worked.

Then someone introduced me to a union carpenter and life changed. I did a four-year apprenticeship (which has been changed to five years). I learned from lots of old-timers on jobsites and now run jobs myself. There are residential divisions in our union. Training is robust and immersive.

Want qualified, experienced labor on demand? Hire union labor. We're not dead and we're not going anywhere. We cost more because we are the best you can hire. There is no labor shortage. Not when you pay a union wage.

—Chuck Esposito

Economic Uncertainties for the Trades

I enjoyed your article in the March 2016 issue of *JLC*. I can't help with training issues, but I feel obligated to bring up what everyone seems to repeatedly ignore when the subject of the lack of skilled help comes up: the lack of social status for tradespeople.

You can educate, train, write, and connect, but until you get parents who want their daughter to marry a carpenter, it's all in vain. The worst offenders? The folks in the trades now. When recessions hit, we're the first to be laid off and the last to be hired [back]. Benefits are virtually unheard of with the exception of union jobs. Pay is so-so and often uncertain. And you think we want our kids to follow? Young people aren't lazy or stupid either. They've seen the economic roller coaster and they don't want [to get] on the ride.

—Joseph Corlett

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On-Site Training School

My name is Paul Lewandowski, and along with my co-worker, Bill Tuchscherer, we teach Residential Building Construction at Fox Valley Technical College, in Oshkosh, Wisc. Our program was started a little more than 20 years ago by Bill when the local home builder association, as well as the local NARI chapter, saw a need for a program to train residential carpenters. Our program focuses mainly on the traditional carpentry trades and takes one year to complete.

During the school year, we typically build a spec house of around 2,000 square feet for our college's foundation to sell, with the proceeds going back to the foundation. However, on occasion, we have built a couple of custom houses, as well as done some extensive remodel projects.

The program consists of five nine-week blocks: Frame Construction, Exterior Finish, Interior Closure, Interior Finish: Basic, and Interior Finish: Intermediate. When students have completed our program, they will have worked on at least two different structures, because they complete their framing block on an entirely different house than the one that they finished.

—Paul Lewandowski