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Getting Young People in the Trades

June 4, 2021

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Steve Spaulding

In putting together this month’s feature, our Under 30 All-Stars, I reached out to Brian Nelson of Nelson Mechanical Design. He recommended a couple of his bright sparks for our feature, but he also told me a few things about his philosophy of hiring. Nelson Mechanical hires for attitude, personality and work ethic. If those are there, they can train for all the technical know-how a tech might need. If they aren’t there, then no amount of training, it seems, will do any good.

I was surprised when he told me that most of the hires he gets out of the trade schools are a bust. It leads me to think that a lot of the vocational programs in this country are not structured to be real alternatives for young people who want something besides a four-year degree, but instead are seen as a last resort; that the reason those students ended up trade school was because they were lacking that attitude, personality and work ethic in the first place.

I think that view of trade schools—a last resort, or (less charitably) a dumping ground—means a lot of young people in the tradecraft pipeline just don't want to be there, which in turn explains why some of the "graybeards" in the trades are so often frustrated by the younger generation. I know the complaints by heart. They don't want to show up on time. They don't want to present themselves well. They don't want to put in the hours. They don't want to learn. They don't value the craft.

And the people I hear this from are usually speaking from a place, not of scorn, but of concern. Those older guys who are at the end of their careers see the trades as the backbone of this country and to see them devalued breaks their heart a little (and it does mine too, to be honest).

But I don't think it's the fault of the younger generation that the trades aren't attracting the best and the brightest. I think there was another generation, one that survived the Great Depression and the Second World War, and when they came home they said, "My kid is going to have it easier than me. My kid is going off to college. My kid is going to be a doctor or a lawyer, and they are never going to have to bale hay, shovel coal or sweat a pipe for as long as they live." And I think that attitude is with us still.

But I know a few young people just entering the workforce and I can tell you a few things about them.

They don't want to spend their lives in debt. They've heard horror stories from their peers and the last thing they want is to spend the next 10-20 years crippled by student loans, unable to buy a house, invest, or start a family.

They don't want to work behind a desk. Or nine-to-five. They want the kind of flexibility and work-life balance that their parents never had.

They want to work with the latest technology—to feel like they're on the cutting edge. And if that technology is making a difference in people's day-to-day lives, if that technology is helping to save water and energy, so much the better.

They want to help people. They want the satisfaction that comes from solving people's problems.

And all of those things can be found in the skilled trades. I think we might be on the verge of a sea-change in how the trades are perceived and valued, and I think (I hope) that change will benefit, not only employers, but of a lot of young people who are just starting out.