

APPRENTICESHIP
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Valerie Henrich



Becoming an Apprentice

I've always enjoyed building and doing things with my hands, so after years of working in sales and customer service, I decided to contact a trades firm...after working for a few days, I realized that I really liked the job and became determined to make it a career. I worked hard to prove myself. I joined the union and a couple of years later I was offered a registered apprenticeship. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it.

I didn't take any mechanical classes in high school but I knew I had lots of other skills. Working in customer service helped me to acquire the skills I needed to do a service call since you have to deal with the customer. To be a good apprentice, you have to be organized and be able to coordinate and multi-task, including keeping track of all the jobs we have going. There are so many skills that you can use that are versatile and can be used in other aspects. I did some accounting in other jobs and that helps with billing, managing time, equipment and materials.

Now I work for the Toronto District School Board as an Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Apprentice. It is a job in high demand. I service and maintain everything from refrigerators/freezers big and small, the air quality of air handlers, as well as the heating and air conditioning mechanical systems and this is only a portion of the things we do. The job varies from day to day and it keeps you on your toes, which is one of the things I like best about my job!

Some of the Challenges

Being a woman in the trades can be challenging. It is typically a male profession and the people I work with are young and old. They aren't used to working in the field with a female tradesperson. The most important thing is to maintain your professionalism. It helps to keep you in check and help to earn the respect of your peers and co-workers. At the end of the day, the quality of your work and the way in which you carry yourself speaks for itself.

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Finding an Employer

It was very difficult to find an employer. I sent my resume to over 200 companies and went to over 30 interviews. It was discouraging, but I never gave up. 'No' was not an acceptable answer for me. I contacted the union by phone or in person at 9am every day to check if they had any job openings. I made cold calls, faxed my resume, and canvassed in person so I could get my name and face out there. It's hard as an aspiring apprentice as many companies are looking for experienced people, but I never gave up and eventually received this opportunity from the union. Determination and perseverance is the key to success.

What Worked and What Didn't

A willingness to work hard, eagerness to learn and assist, dedication and a refusal to give up are the winning qualities in the trades. Be confident in your abilities. But don't over sell yourself. Arrogance is not a quality that is appreciated in the trades. People are always willing to help and to teach if you aren't sure what to do. The most important thing is to have a positive attitude.

If you want a rewarding career where you make good money then the trades are for you. You...put in a [few] years of training and afterwards, the world is your oyster. If you're willing to do the work, the work is there. I worked hard to get here and it's the best feeling in the entire world. I love it and I wouldn't change it for anything. I wish you could stand in my shoes for a day so that you may feel the confidence and pride that I feel every day.

Trade: Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning and Refrigeration. Location: Toronto, Ontario.

Employer: Toronto District School Board. Year of Apprenticeship: 5th year

