

A solution to finding workers: Set up your own apprenticeship program

Talk with any plumbing and HVACR contractor, and the need to find and develop future workers almost always comes up in the conversation.

The Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors - National Association will tackle this issue in a number of ways during the Sept. 27-30 Network '06 and ISH North America trade show in Chicago. Seminars, networking and panel discussions will offer



Plumbing apprentices attend a class in a program that is sponsored by PHCC members.

many opportunities for contractors to talk about how they are finding and training workers. For example, during a PHCC seminar Wednesday, Sept. 27, two PHCC contractors will provide tips on how to set up an apprentice program in areas where one is not available. Dickie McCurdy, MMM Plumbing, Heating and Cooling, Amarillo, Texas, and Jo Wagner, CTO Inc., Harlingen, Texas, will talk about how they established PHCC apprentice programs and give advice on how others can do the same. They also will cover some recruiting tips they have learned over the years. An "Apprenticeship Start-up Kit" video will be shown.

"In locations where apprentice programs are a long distance away, some employ-

ers have chosen to partner with other contractors in their area to offer an in-house program," said Merry Beth Hall, director of apprentice and journeyman training for the PHCC Educational Foundation. "These programs offer greater control of the content taught, can include instruction on regional-specific topics and reduce the need for travel."

The commitment of the employers to getting students to class is greater because they have a stake in the instructional process, Hall said.

McCurdy and Wagner said that establishing an apprenticeship program in a community where one is not currently available takes a great deal of commitment and organization. It is, however,

well worth your time to begin these classes. "Mechanical needs are continuing to rise," McCurdy said. "Establishing an apprenticeship program can help you continually evolve into a company of highly trained technicians. The industry also benefits by having a more skilled workforce."

For a full list of Network '06 and ISH North America events, visit www.network06.org.



Apprentices graduate from the program in a cap-and-gown ceremony, which thrills their parents.

A contractor's lessons learned

BY JO WAGNER

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Here are some of my observations and "lessons learned" that I would like to share with other contractors interested in beginning an apprentice program:

Don't be desperate. When we first started the school, we felt desperate to get students to enroll in the program. This proved to be a terrible mistake because our dropout rate was excessive. We learned through the years to screen our applicants for values we were looking for in future plumbers. We made sure they had a high school diploma, good reasons for wanting to be in the trade and showed enthusiasm for what was to follow for the next four years.

Make the students feel proud. We realized what we were

giving these young people was a chance to have a productive and profitable life and one that didn't come cheap. Before the four years were complete, we would have invested more than \$80,000 in training and schooling for each student, and we wanted them to know this up front. Second, we wanted them to get certification and walk across a stage in cap and gown, which thrilled their parents. Our company does mainly hospital work, and I wanted students and parents to understand that their son or daughter had people's lives in their hands, and how, as an industry, we were responsible for the "health, safety and welfare of the country." If they doubt this, they should go to an undeveloped country and look at the amount of sickness and disease there was because of poor plumbing conditions.

Think of the future. We will need more than 100,000 plumbers in the next five years just to keep up with the ones

retiring or leaving the trade, so we better be committed to getting these schools right. If we in the industry don't train them, who will?

Stress the value of the trades. Society used to understand that not every child was cut out for college, but somehow over years we have made it socially unacceptable for anyone not to go. Now we have a dropout rate of more than 60% of those who enter higher learning, and many of these really bright kids fall between the cracks and never make it at anything because they think of themselves as failures. The trades are a great way for smart youths to lead a great life. They can go from being plumbers to superintendents to project managers and then on to being owners if they want. All these positions pay as well or better than a college graduate would earn.

Start-up tips for an apprentice program

Here is a preview of some of the tips from the "Apprenticeship Start-up Kit" video that will be shown at the "Starting an Apprenticeship Program" seminar Sept. 27 at Network '06.

Eight key steps must be taken to set up a successful apprentice program:

1. Identify and reach out to possible partnering companies.
2. Form an apprenticeship committee.
3. Develop and submit agreements to an appropriate body, such as the Bureau of Apprenticeship Training of the U.S. Department of Labor.
4. Supply curriculum for your program.
5. Establish apprenticeship wage standards.
6. Select apprentice candidates for the program.

7. Locate facilities for your apprenticeship classes.

8. Hire experienced instructors.

When recruiting, look for a high school graduate with good reading and math skills. He, or she, must have a good attitude and an earnest desire to work in construction. The ideal candidate can tell you with sincerity that he will make the most of the next four years.

"The trade industry is in desperate need of highly trained workers," Dickie McCurdy said. "It is our job as employers to search out these individuals who we feel are competent enough to thrive in the p-h-c industry. It is necessary for us to train our workforces to provide professional service and to communicate in the field with our customers. Recruiting exceptional individuals is a must."