Addressing MEP Labor Shortages and Methods to Attract Young Adults into The Trades

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The mechanical, electrical, and plumbing (MEP) fields require a large skilled workforce. In recent years, companies have experienced shortages of skilled employees. These shortages arise from many causes, a root cause identified is the decrease of young adults pursuing MEP careers. This project focuses on the reasons young adults are reluctant to enter these careers, such as misconceptions or lack of knowledge on MEP careers. A pool of twelve MEP companies was surveyed regarding their experiences with the causes of labor shortages and the short-term mitigation methods used. They were also asked about their perspective on the lack of young adults in their industry and the importance of attracting young talent. The responses indicated how crucial it is to attract young adults to the MEP fields, and that an efficient way to do so is by informing them on what they are and their associated benefits. In response to the survey outcome, a brochure and PowerPoint were developed. They will be presented in high schools for the purpose of informing students about the MEP industries. Through the PowerPoint and brochure, students in high school can learn about the MEP fields, potentially sparking interest to pursue a career in these trades.

Key Words: Construction, MEP, Labor Shortages, Specialties, High School

Introduction

Labor shortages in the skilled MEP sectors are not a new issue, but one that has been ongoing for quite some time now. Many companies from California and throughout the nation have recognized this and have been aware of the shortages for a long time now (Yoders, J., 2018). With the rise of more complex MEP systems for projects, such as data centers and renewable energy plants, the demand for skilled MEP employees has risen (Yoders, J., 2018). The causes of these shortages that have been identified by MEP companies, is the lack of high school students entering the construction industry (Huard, R., 2019). Construction careers can be viewed negatively, and high schools lack to inform students about the different careers in construction and their benefits. There is a nationwide issue with MEP labor shortages and many MEP subcontractors are desperate to hire talent, “Nationwide, our industry needs nearly 500,000 workers, and most of our members could hire 20 to
30 people today” (Shaw, M., 2018). In this project, we will further analyze the shortage and present a potential solution for this ongoing issue.

**Background**

The primary objective of this project is to inform high school students and young adults about what MEP careers are, associated benefits, and the process involved to pursue an MEP career. Being an electrician’s apprentice assistant led to a firsthand perspective on the shortage, sparking curiosity on possible solutions. The solution presented in this project is a brochure and PowerPoint which includes a guide on MEP careers, their benefits, and how to pursue that career. The brochure can be set up in high school career centers for students to grab. The PowerPoint can be sent to counselors and teachers to not only inform the students on MEP careers, but them as well. These two forms of communication methods presented to students and counselors can provide valuable information, sparking student interest in these careers and allowing counselors to further understand what the construction industry has to offer. By potentially implementing similar informative material in other schools as a shortage solution, more students can learn about MEP careers, increasing the number of young adults interested in pursuing these careers.

**Methodology**

To further validate and enforce the creation of an informative brochure and PowerPoint, data was collected to ensure that MEP companies agreed that informing students was a viable solution to the labor shortage. California-based MEP companies and unions were selected based on their availability to respond, creating a mixed pool of twelve companies and unions. The data was collected through phone and email by asking the MEP companies and unions a series of eleven questions, regarding their experience with shortages, cause of shortages, views on lack of young adults in their field, and whether informing them would increase interest. The data collected was qualitative since a majority of their responses were based on their past experiences influencing their responses. The questionnaire was composed of the following questions:

1.) *What MEP trade do you perform?*
2.) *Have you experienced a shortage of labor during your career?*
3.) *If so, what were the causes of the labor shortage or shortages that you experienced?*
4.) *What were some methods you used to mitigate the shortage?*
5.) *What are you doing to attract, hire, and maintain your workforce?*
6.) *Do you see a lack of young adults choosing trades as careers?*
7.) *What do you attribute the lack of young adults entering the trade fields to?*
8.) *Do you think it is beneficial for MEP trades to attract young individuals?*
9.) *What can be done to attract high school students and young adults in general, to a career in the trades?*
10.) *If high school students were better informed on what MEP trades are and the process taken to make a career out of them, do you see an increase in interest on their behalf?*
11.) *Would you like to see high school students receive some trade-related training in high school or do you provide all of the required training?*
The questions were used to explore the perspective of actual mechanical, plumbing, and electrical companies and unions who have firsthand experience with shortages, and an immediate view on the number of young adults entering their respective trades.

Results

The survey fulfilled its objective, providing validation for the creation of an informative brochure and PowerPoint geared towards high school students and young adults. After analyzing the data, all the MEP companies and unions surveyed had experienced shortages recently. When asked about shortage causes, electrical, plumbing, and mechanical unions attributed the shortages to an increase in construction work in combination with a workforce that is not growing. In addition to those reasons, companies also stated there is an increasing demand for electrical, plumbing, and mechanical systems. After discussing the shortage causes, the unions and companies spoke on some solutions that were implemented. The two solutions brought up the most were, increasing work hours to stay on schedule, and outsourcing manpower from other localities. They further expanded that these solutions presented were temporary and would not be justifiable in the long-term.

In an attempt to create a long-term solution, almost all the companies and unions surveyed are extensively trying to attract and hire workers. They attend career fairs to demonstrate towards potential future employees their values and commitment to their wellbeing. They also try to create the best company culture and let it speak for itself. When asked about the lack of young adults entering the MEP trades, companies and unions responded with a firm “yes”. They expressed that over the years there has been a constant decline of young adults entering the MEP fields which is the leading factor to a non-growing workforce. This is an issue because, if the demand for MEP services is increasing but the workforce is not, then this leads to a labor shortage. In addition to a non-growing workforce in a high-demand environment, the decrease of young talent in the industry also leads to a major issue in replacing older MEP tradesmen who are retiring, with young, skillful, and experienced individuals. Overall, the companies and unions agreed that the attraction of young adults to their industry is crucial and have confidence that informing them would increase interest. Many students are indecisive on what career path they want to take after high school and providing them with information on MEP careers can potentially spark an interest in them, giving them a career option.

In addition to answering the survey the recruiter of the local plumbing union also commented that if young adults who have chosen an MEP career spoke about their experience in the trades, it would motivate other young adults to acknowledge these careers more. The reasoning for this is young adults tend to pay more attention to those closer to their age group rather than someone much older than them. The CEO of a local electrical company also stated counselors hardly mention the option of MEP careers to students because, many of them do not truly understand the MEP fields or are completely uninformed. When the idea of the brochure and PowerPoint was presented to the MEP companies and unions surveyed, they were all in support of the idea. With the brochure and PowerPoint created in this project, both teachers and counselors can be better informed about the reality of MEP trade careers.

Deliverables

The brochure created includes detailed information on each MEP trade, respectively. It also provides a guide on the process involved to start an MEP career as well as the average salary and pay wage for an entry apprentice and journeyman. For the development of the brochure, local electrical and plumbing union recruiters were consulted. They provided pay and salary information, as well as
allowing the use of personal contact information on the brochure for any intrigued young adults to use. The brochures can be placed in local high schools and community colleges for students to grab. The objective of this is for students to read it and potentially become interested in MEP careers. This can lead to the increased interest and pursuit of MEP careers on behalf of young adults. If implemented by others on a statewide or nationwide scale, it can potentially become a permanent solution for labor shortages.

**Brochure**

Information presented in the brochure is the following:

- **Mechanical**
  - The mechanical construction industry is one that incorporates many fields including sheet metal, refrigeration, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems.
  - Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) and refrigeration systems are to control the interior temperature according to the occupant’s needs. Sheet metal is a component used to fabricate duct to enable the flow of air in buildings which is bent and cut to desired dimensions, being part of the work done in the mechanical field.
  - These systems are used in residential, commercial, and industrial construction. Residential construction being homes and any housing building like apartment or condominiums which will serve for people to live in. Commercial construction is buildings that will be for businesses such as restaurants, hotels, stores, and office skyscraper buildings, to name a few. Industrial construction can be factories or nuclear plants.
  - Being in the mechanical field you will work with your hands building these different systems and learning how they function.
  - Also, not only are you being trained on the job and in class, but you will be paid while doing so.

- **Electrical**
  - The electrical construction industry is also one that is very broad which will allow you to learn many different systems.
  - Electrical construction is installing conductors like copper wire to provide a power source for lights, heat, power, and other systems. In the electrical industry, you can choose the sector you want to pursue a career in.
  - These sectors are outside lineman, inside wireman, residential wireman, and installer technician. Outside linemen installs and maintains transmission lines that distribute power coming from power plants to buildings.
  - Residential Wireman has the task of installing systems that distribute power for homes which involve lights, receptacles, fire alarm systems, and other systems.
  - Inside wireman is very similar to a residential wireman but differs in the fact that they focus on distributing power for commercial and industrial buildings.
  - Installer technicians install low voltage cabling and components which are used for data, video, voice, and signaling systems. All these fields are within the electrical industry, which you choose based on your interests and availability in your area. This trade will also pay you while learning.

- **Plumbing**
  - The plumbing construction industry is tasked with installing and maintaining the piping and plumbing systems in charge of distributing drinking water, waste, wastewater treatment, and ventilating systems.
These systems are incorporated in all sectors of construction, residential, commercial, and industrial. Steamfitter-pipefitters are tasked with fabricating, installing, and maintaining process piping systems. These process piping systems differ from plumbing as they can transport other fluids besides water, ranging from oil, gas, and many other liquids. Steamfitting-pipefitting can require welding and there is demand for steamfitters-pipefitters in projects such as paper mills, oil refineries, and other chemical factories. There is demand for both plumbing and pipefitting in residential, commercial, and industrial construction. Both are great career options, as the other trades pursuing either of these careers is up to personal interest. This is also a paid apprenticeship allowing you to earn an income while you learn.

- **Electrician Hourly Wage**
  - A 1st-year apprentice starts making about $16.56.
  - 6 months after beginning is about $18.63.
  - 1st year is about $20.71.
  - 2nd year is about $24.84.
  - 3rd year is about $31.06.
  - 4th year is about $37.27.
  - 5th year certified journeyman is about $41.41.
  - Annual Salary for Journeyman $60,000-$80,000

- **HVAC Technician Hourly Wage**
  - 1st year is about $17.91.
  - 2nd year is about $19.90.
  - 3rd year is about $23.88.
  - 4th year is about $27.86.
  - 5th year certified Journeyman is about $39.80.
  - Annual Salary for Journeyman $53,000 - $76,000

- **Plumbing & Pipefitting Hourly Wage**
  - 1st year is about $20.
  - 2nd year is about $25.
  - 3rd year is about $30.
  - 4th year is about $35.
  - 5th year is about $40.
  - Journeyman $50 to $52
  - Annual Salary for Journeyman $57,000 - $90,000

- **Starting**
  - Must be 18 years of age and a high school graduate.
  - Passed Algebra with a "C" or better
  - Valid driver's license
  - Reach out to local unions for the trade of interest.
  - Complete application
  - Will be waitlisted according to the number of applicants.
  - Notified of when aptitude is available.
  - If aptitude is passed next step is to interview
  - Based on the interview eligibility for apprenticeship will be decided

- **Local Santa Barbara County Unions**
  - IBEW 413 - Electrical Union
  - Website: http://ibew413.org/index.cfm?zone=/unionactive/view_page.cfm&page=SBJATC
- Phone: 805-686-0903
- UA Local 114: Plumbers & Pipefitters Union
- Website: http://www.ualocal114.org/
- Phone: 805-688-1470 or 805-440-0743
- Local Union NO. 104: HVAC & Sheet Metal
- Website: http://www.tcjatc.org/
- Phone: 805-922-3396

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What is Mechanical?

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What is Electrical?

- The electrical construction industry is also one that is very broad which will allow you to learn many different systems.
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- Inside wireman is very similar to a residential wireman but differs in the fact that they focus on distributing power for commercial and industrial buildings.
- Installer technicians install low voltage cabling and components which are used for data, video, voice, and signaling systems. All these fields are within the electrical industry, you choose based on your interests and availability in your area. This trade will also pay you while learning.

Figure 2: Back Side of Brochure
The PowerPoint created for the project was developed with not only students in mind, but counselors as well. In an environment without COVID-19, the PowerPoint could be presented to complement the brochure in a classroom setting. The PowerPoint idea was based on the comments of the CEO of an electrical subcontracting company which was mentioned in the brochure, regarding the lack of knowledge counselors have about MEP careers. In the PowerPoint presentation (Appendix A) information was outlined similar to the brochure, with descriptions of what mechanical, electrical, and plumbing sectors are, the benefits and pay of being in an MEP career, as well as the process of getting into these trades. A current, young HVAC technician and electrician were also interviewed, giving their first-person perspective and experience on pursuing an MEP career.

All the information in the PowerPoint is aimed towards students, teachers, and counselors, so that they can all be informed and aware of MEP trades as good career options. By counselors and teachers being well informed they can pass their knowledge down to future students and it can also change some of the stereotypes that are thought of MEP tradesmen. It will prove that they are careers with competitive pay and benefits, worthy of pursuing for those who do not necessarily plan to attend college.
Lessons Learned

Developing the project was enlightening and brought many lessons. Throughout the surveying phase, a lesson learned was how close and confident tradesmen are when it comes to their work. They are all very proud of being an electrician, plumber, or HVAC technician. Many stereotypes are associated with these individuals, one being they are not smart since they did not attend college, but in reality, after speaking with multiple tradesmen it is obvious, they are smart well-rounded individuals. Tradesmen can solve problems on the field immediately and their skills are very practical in life and other sectors. In the conversations with the different leaders of the companies, they mention how persistently the engineers value inputs of tradesmen because they know they have extensive on-field experience, and throughout the years this experience is vast. Many companies also mentioned that young adults would allow for quicker technology progression on the field for MEP trades since they are much more intuitive with software and hardware than older individuals are.

Additionally, some of the local unions have already begun attending career fairs in high schools and community colleges in an attempt to recruit young talent. They stated that they felt students weren’t as interested because their representatives are a lot older than them. They noted that, if someone closer in age to the students were to speak with them, the students might be easier engaged due to the smaller age difference. Lastly, some people who have gone to college but didn’t enjoy their careers have transitioned to MEP careers and greatly enjoyed it, for it allowed them to work with their hands and think critically.

Moving Forward

Due to the current global pandemic, the delivery of the brochure and PowerPoint presentation in a school was not achievable. There was contact made with different high schools, but they were not able to allow an in-person delivery given the current pandemic. This led to a compromise, and the brochure and PowerPoint were sent to counselors and teachers through email. They can begin reviewing it and informing themselves, as well as forwarding it to students if they decide to. As we move forward, and restrictions begin to be lifted potentially by fall, high schools will be contacted again to try and arrange for the setup of these brochures in person.

The solution presented in this project is only one of many that can be implemented. For future projects regarding permanent solutions to MEP labor shortages, a social media page can be created. In modern-day, mostly all young adults are on social media, making it a great platform to inform young adults about MEP careers. The perspective of companies on using social media to attract talent can be explored to analyze whether it is a viable option. If so, a social media account can be created, including posts on what MEP careers are and their benefits. It can go as far as posting short videos describing what they are or simply recording a construction site with MEP work being performed. The brochure and PowerPoint presented in this project is only one viable solution option supported by companies and unions to recruit young talent to MEP careers. Nonetheless, other unexplored solutions could also be implemented.

Conclusion

The MEP skilled labor shortage is an issue that will keep increasing if there are no long-term solutions. At this moment in time, there is an incredible increase in MEP services with the rise of data centers, renewable energy projects, and more technological facilities. The moment to create a long-
term solution is now, new sectors will only keep growing requiring larger workforces. An initial step to solve this shortage can potentially be implementing a brochure and PowerPoint comparable to the ones presented in this project. It can be used at a local and national level as this issue is not only in California but throughout the nation.

It is great to see that companies and unions have already initiated attempts to inform and attract young adults into the MEP fields. An important factor that these unions offer which can interest many potential students and parents is the fact that while they are learning through an apprenticeship, they will be paid a reasonable wage. This is a unique aspect of trades because not only are they teaching these students but paying them as well. This factor can incentivize many students to choose MEP careers as they will not be in debt like many individuals who choose to go to college. This project is an additional component to the current attempts to increase the recruitment of young adults into the construction industry ensuring a sufficient workforce now and moving on into the future.

Steps to further eliminate the MEP shortage issue can be accomplished by involving local government support. This needs to happen in order to eliminate stereotypes about construction workers. It is as if there is no dignity in working in construction. Society needs to stop looking down on these jobs because they are well-paid jobs that are essential to the wellbeing and growth of communities. Not only do the MEP trades need to create a positive image for the public, but the whole construction industry in general. The industry needs to be viewed as one, with great career options such as MEP specialties, that do not involve college but are composed of smart and highly skilled individuals.
References


Appendix

Appendix A: MEP PowerPoint Presentation

MECHANICAL

- The M in MEP stands for the Mechanical discipline in construction.
- Mechanical construction is the installation, fabrication, and maintenance of:
  - Heating
  - Ventilation
  - Air Conditioning
  - Sheet Metal
  - Refrigeration Systems
- These are systems in charge of:
  - Indoor air quality
  - Indoor temperature
  - Provide clean fresh air
  - Odor control
ELECTRICAL

- The E in MEP stands for the Electrical discipline in construction
- Electrical construction is the installation and maintenance of:
  - Power distribution
  - Lighting
  - Power outlets
  - Transmission lines
  - Solar systems
- These are systems in charge of:
  - Lights
  - Reciprocals
  - Power buildings
  - Distribute power to cities

PLUMBING & PIPEFITTING

**Plumbing**

- The P in MEP stands for the Plumbing discipline in construction
- Plumbing construction is the installation and maintenance of:
  - Sewer drainage systems
  - Water distribution for potable water
  - Storm water systems
  - Water temperature controls
  - Water pumps

**Pipefitting & Steamfitting**

- Pipefitting and Steamfitting are specialized fields within Plumbing and Mechanical
- Both fields are focused on the installation and repair of piping systems
- Pipefitting involves systems of liquid distribution at low or medium pressure that is not water such as gas, oil, and other chemicals
- Steamfitting involves systems of gasses or liquids at high pressure and temperatures
MEDIUM ENGLISH

**MEP WORK**

- Mechanical
- Electrical
- Plumbing

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**BENEFITS OF MEP CAREERS**

- Competitive Pay Wages
- Health and Welfare Funds
- Pension Funds
- Retirement Plans
- Vacation
- Growth Opportunity
- Contribution to 401k

- Paid apprenticeship - getting paid while learning on the job and in classes
- Projects are different will never be in a routine
- Can build your own business in the future if that's in your plans
PAY & PROCESS TO BEGIN

- Starting
  - Must be 18 years of age and a high school graduate.
  - Passed Algebra with a "C" or better
  - Valid driver's license
  - Reach out to local union for trade of interest.
  - Complete application
  - Will be waitlisted according to number of applicants.
  - Notified of when aptitude is available.
  - If aptitude is passed next step is interview
  - Based on interview eligibility for apprenticeship will be decided

Electrician Hourly Wage
Any apprentice is earning between $14.50/hr to $22.20/hr in the first four years of his/her career.
In the fifth year after becoming a journeyman they will earn $41.41/hr.
The Annual Salary for a journeyman is $60,000.

HVAC Technician Hourly Wage
Any apprentice is earning between $16.75/hr to $22.98/hr in the first four years of his/her career.
In the fifth year after becoming a journeyman they will earn $41.83/hr.
The Annual Salary for a journeyman is $75,000 to $96,000.

Plumbing & Pipefitting Hourly Wage
Any apprentice is earning between $25.50/hr to $42.90/hr in the first four years of his/her career.
In the fifth year after becoming a journeyman they will earn $63/hr.
The Annual Salary for a journeyman is $127,000 to $163,500.

WORDS OF A TRADESMAN

MEP Career: HVAC Technician
Company: Airway Heating and Air

When and how did you begin your career?
I began my career right after graduating high school. I was unsure of what I wanted to do with my life, a close relative explained to me there was an opportunity in HVAC company to work. I reached out to the company they brought me in for a qualification process and after began training on the field and through classes. I have been working here since, this being my fourth year.

What is your favorite part of your career?
My favorite part is that all projects are different, therefore I never feel like I’m in a routine. One week I can be working on a beautiful custom home and the next week I can be working on a small commercial project. There is also never-ending learning; I am constantly learning new things whether it is on new building methods or better HVAC components.

Would you recommend a MEP career to other young adults?
I would highly recommend MEP career to other young adults out there. If they feel like being in a classroom sitting most of the day is not what they want like myself, they should definitely pursue a MEP career. From the first day you will be working not only with your brain but with your hands. This pay in these careers is also highly competitive, I am planning on becoming a homeowner in the upcoming year. All young adults should definitely at least look into MEP careers and have them on the radar before deciding their careers.
WORDS OF A TRADESMAN

MEP Career: Electrician
Company: Classic Electric & Consulting

When and how did you begin your career?
I started my career as an electrician a year after I graduated high school. At the time I was working in the fast-food sector since I didn’t want to attend college. I was completely unaware that trades existed until a family friend invited me to work for a small electrical subcontractor. After working there for a small time, I came to the current company I am at because I saw greater growth opportunities.

What is your favorite part of your career?
My favorite part of being an electrician is that when I drive around a project, I work on it to tell my family about what went into completing that project. Also, with the current company I work for I get to travel across California and all the expenses are paid for. There are times I am working near my hometown and other times I am working in places like Sacramento or Takhoma.

Would you recommend a MEP career to other young adults?
MEP careers are definitely great careers that I would recommend to other young adults. I don’t say this just because I choose to take this route but because it is a great way to make a living. Besides making a great salary, the most rewarding part is working on cool projects. The trade communities are also very welcoming and tight, I have made lifetime friends here.

CONTACT INFORMATION TO BEGIN A CAREER PROCESS OR FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- Local Santa Barbara County Unions
  - Electrical
    - IBEW 413 - Electrical Union
    - Website: http://ibew413.org/index.cfm?zone=local413&view_page.cfm&page=SBJATC
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