Career Outlook

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Apprenticeships: Outlook and wages in selected occupations

Elka Torpey (updated by Ryan Farrell) | November 2019

Note: This is an update of an article originally published in 2017.

You might know that apprenticeships offer a way to earn money while learning a skill. But you might not know that in many occupations with apprenticeships, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects employment to grow at least as fast as the average for all occupations—if not faster—from 2018 to 2028.

And there's more: wages in a number of the top occupations for apprenticeships were well above the $38,640 median annual wage in all occupations in 2018. Keep reading for details about some of these occupations with opportunity.

What's an apprenticeship?

An apprenticeship is an arrangement in which you get hands-on training, technical instruction, and a paycheck—all at the same time. Apprentices work for a sponsor, such as an individual employer or a business-union partnership, who pays their wages and provides the training.

Formal apprenticeship programs usually last about 4 years, depending on the employer or occupation, although they may take as little as 12 months or as many as 6 years. Many of these programs are registered with the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). At the end of a registered apprenticeship program, apprentices get a nationally recognized certificate of completion as proof of their skills.

Occupations with apprenticeships

In fiscal year 2018, DOL counted about 585,000 active apprentices in more than 23,000 registered apprenticeship programs across the country.

According to BLS, some occupations typically require an apprenticeship to enter. These include:

- Boilermakers
- Carpenters
- Electricians
- Elevator installers and repairers
- Glaziers
- Insulation workers, mechanical
- Ironworkers
- Masonry workers
- Millwrights
- Musical instrument repairers and tuners
- Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters
- Sheet metal workers

But there are lots of other occupations with apprenticeships, even if an apprenticeship is not the typical path to entry.

Table 1. Selected occupations with many apprentices, 2018

Selected occupations with many apprentices: employment growth, projected 2018–28, and employment and median annual wages, 2018

Occupation	Employment growth, projected 2018–28	Employment, 2018	Median annual wage, 2018
Carpenters	8% (Faster than average)	1,006,500	$46,590
Construction laborers	11% (Much faster than average)	1,405,000	35,800
Electrical power-line installers and repairers	8% (Faster than average)	119,400	70,910
Electricians	10% (Faster than average)	715,400	55,190
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	5% (As fast as average)	1,958,800	43,680
Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters	14% (Much faster than average)	500,300	53,910
Sheet metal workers	8% (Faster than average)	143,000	48,460

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (employment growth, employment, and wages), U.S. Department of Labor (selected occupations, based on federal data on active apprentices in fiscal year 2018).

Table 1 shows the occupations with the greatest number of active apprentices in 2018, according to a DOL summary of data sources. For each of these occupations, the table shows BLS data for 2018–28 projected job outlook, 2018 employment, and 2018 median annual wages.

Outlook and employment

In total, the occupations in the table accounted for almost 6 million jobs in 2018. And over the 2018–28 decade, these seven occupations are projected to add more than 500,000 jobs.

Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers had the most jobs in 2018 of these occupations. Workers typically enter this occupation by taking professional truck-driving courses to qualify for a commercial driver's license and complete short-term on-the-job training after being hired. And some truck drivers meet these requirements through an apprenticeship.

Of the occupations in the table, plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters is projected to have the fastest employment growth from 2018 to 2028. These workers install plumbing and related systems in newly constructed buildings, as well as upgrade or repair systems in existing homes and businesses. Apprenticeship is a common pathway into this occupation.

Wages

Apprentices usually train under the direction of experienced workers, earning about half of what a fully qualified worker makes. And apprentices earn pay increases as they advance in their training.

BLS data show that many occupations with apprenticeships have relatively high wages. Except construction laborers, all the occupations in the table have a median annual wage that was higher than the median for all workers. Formal education typically is not required to enter this occupation, but some construction laborers take classes as part of an apprenticeship.

Electrical power line installers and repairers had the highest median wage of the occupations in the table—$70,910 per year. To become fully qualified, these workers typically need technical instruction and long-term on-the-job training, which they might get through an apprenticeship or other employer-training program.

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