Career Outlook

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Apprenticeships: Occupations and outlook

Elka Torpey | November 2017

This article has been updated.

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 2016–26.

And there's more: Wages in a number of the top occupations for apprenticeships were well above the $37,040 median annual wage in all occupations in 2016. 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 2016, DOL counted about 500,000 active apprentices in more than 21,000 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
- Ironworkers
- Masonry workers
- Millwrights
- Musical instrument repairers and tuners
- Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters

- Insulation workers, mechanical
- Sheet metal workers

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

The table shows the occupations with the greatest number of active apprentices in 2016, according to a DOL summary of data sources. For each of these occupations, the table shows BLS data for 2016–26 projected job outlook, 2016 employment, and 2016 median annual wages.

Table 1. Selected occupations with many apprentices, 2016

Selected occupations with many apprentices: employment growth, projected 2016–26, and employment and median annual wages, 2016

Occupation	Employment growth, projected 2016–26	Employment, 2016	Median annual wage, 2016
Carpenters	8% (As fast as average)	1,025,600	$43,600
Construction laborers	12% (Faster than average)	1,216,700	33,430
Electrical power-line installers and repairers	14% (Faster than average)	120,900	68,010
Electricians	9% (As fast as average)	666,900	52,720
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	6% (As fast as average)	1,871,700	41,340
Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters	16% (Much faster than average)	480,600	51,450
Sheet metal workers	9% (As fast as average)	138,900	46,940

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 2016).

Outlook and employment

In total, the occupations in the table accounted for more than 5.5 million jobs in 2016. And over the 2016–26 decade, these seven occupations are projected to add more than 500,000 jobs.

Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers had the most jobs in 2016 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 2016 to 2026. 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. Of the occupations in the table, all but construction laborers had 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—$68,010 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.

For more information

Learn more about the occupations identified in this article in the Occupational Outlook Handbook.

DOL's Office of Apprenticeship has data and other information, including how to become an apprentice or start an apprenticeship program. It also provides a list of occupations and their program lengths.

My Next Move also has a list of careers with registered apprenticeships. And CareerOneStop's apprenticeship finder tool can help identify potential sponsors near you.

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