

A REPORT FROM  
ATLANTA ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION  
**Recruiting for the Electrical Industry: Career Options & Choices**  
**Chuck Little, Human Resources Director**

**ISSUE:**

The electrical construction industry will face a severe workforce shortage in the coming years. This is primarily due to two main factors:

- a. As the economy worsened during the 2008 -2012 recession, a large number of workers left the industry. At the same time, our EC industry accepted far fewer apprentices into our programs.
- b. Baby boomers are retiring in greater numbers, further depleting our experienced workforce.

**THE CHALLENGE**

One significant challenge that affects our ability to recruit talent into the EC industry is stereotyping. From the early part of the twentieth century through the 1950s, a skilled trade was a respected career in America. That has not been the case for decades. The lingering perception of someone in our industry is a big belly, big neck, pants hanging down kind of guy. In multiple career surveys, wanting to work in the construction industry is consistently ranked toward the bottom of the list. American culture attempts to “herd everyone to college.” Neither students nor their parents understand the depth of education and training our electrical apprentices receive, with a heavy emphasis on math and science.

During the 2008- 2012 recession, the number of electrical construction apprentices dropped from approximately 42,000 to close to 28,000.

According to forecasts from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the need for electricians is expected to grow by 20%, nearly twice the average growth rate for all other occupations. This means our industry needs 115,000 new electricians through 2022.

Add to the mix the percentage of baby boomer electricians retiring over the next five to ten years. The retirement figure could be as high as 30-40 percent.

## THE OPTIONS

There are thousands of careers a person could choose. Yet, across the board, there are five basic “career pathways” to reach the chosen career option. An individual might:

1. Start to work directly after high school.  
Students entering the workforce directly from high school can expect primarily low-paying, non-skilled jobs. A person is hired at minimum wage and five years later is earning just a few dollars more per hour.
2. Attend college. Some will begin by obtaining a two-year associate-level degree. Some will then move on to a four-year bachelor’s degree.

Universities can be very expensive and time consuming.

- a. As of 2017, the average graduate ends up with close to \$40,000 in debt.
  - b. On average, a student takes six years to complete a four-year degree program and changes majors three times between starting and ending college.
  - c. A typical student makes little or no money while attending college.
  - d. Only about half of all students who start college actually graduate.
  - e. While a degree in Engineering and a few other disciplines will command a good salary (high \$50,000s and up), there are many low-paying (\$30,000 range), low-demand college degrees in majors such as Psychology, Philosophy, Criminal Justice, Social Work, Journalism, Political Science, Phys. Ed, Education, etc.
3. Enroll in a two-year technical college program. This choice does not necessarily lead the student toward a four-year college degree.

Technical Colleges offer education and training at a lower tuition. For example, in Georgia, a student can expect to pay a maximum of \$5,000. These schools graduate their students more quickly and move them into the workforce. They offer programs for mechanics, welders, autocad/drafters, healthcare, residential construction, etc.). It may be a good strategy to woo some of these graduates into our world of commercial and industrial electrical work.

4. Join the military.

The military is not for all, but recruits can receive some good training while putting in their service. With the education and discipline they receive, they can make for a great workforce once their tour of duty is completed.

5. Choose an apprenticeship program or trade school.

## THE BEST PATH

The apprenticeship / trade school choice is the forgotten path to a great paying technical career. The electrical construction industry needs a strong effort to differentiate our “apprenticeship pathway” from the other four choices. The best way to accomplish this will be to compare and distinguish our apprenticeship program from the other options. Our selling points should include the following:

- Apprentices earn while they learn. In our approach to recruiting, we need to make it clear that there are many profit-making and not-for-profit “trade schools/apprenticeship programs” charging high tuition. We are a not-for-profit school that charges no tuition. Yet, our biggest competitor is also not-for-profit but does charge tuition.
- In Georgia, our electrical apprentices attend school part time – TUITION FREE. By comparison, university students will pay about \$30,000 per year for five or six years for a total expenditure of \$150,000 to \$180,000 to cover tuition, room, board, books, and fees. Technical school students pay up to \$5,000 per year for three years (\$15,000) to earn their two-year degree.
- Our apprentices earn about \$150,000 during the five-year program, while full-time college students earn little or nothing in the same five years.
- College graduates start their careers in debt. Our apprentices have no student loan debt.
- Our apprentice graduates earn \$60,000 or more. This is equal to most of the high paying degrees and twice the income of the low-paying degrees

## OUR EXAMPLE

In January 2000, NECA’s Atlanta Chapter hired a full-time Human Resources professional to focus on “workforce development”, to go out and spread the word about all careers in the world of electrical work. This staff member’s main responsibility is to recruit “applicants” for all of the Chapter’s members. While the effort concentrates primarily on attracting apprentice applicants, it can also be productive in recruiting Engineers, Project Managers, Administrative Assistants, Warehouse personnel, and others.

Initially, the main emphasis was on high schools with construction programs. A key factor to working productively with the schools is to get into the classrooms to discuss in detail all the “doors of opportunity” open in our world of work. Schools prefer that representatives come to their “career days,” but having 60 seconds to talk to kids as they briefly stop at your table is not an effective use of time. Our industry needs time in the classroom so we can distinguish our program from all the other career pathways.

However, all contractors need to grow far beyond just getting into construction programs. Across America, most all school systems have Career Technical and Agricultural Education Directors (CTAE or CTE). This is what used to be known as Vocational Education.

Besides recruiting in the construction program, we also need to speak to students in Agriculture (FFA) classes, and Engineering & Architecture (Technology Student Association). Each of these groups can be contacted at the local, county and state levels.

The ideal situation is for contractors/members to “adopt” schools near to their home offices. “Adoption” means working year round with the local school(s) to provide advice, products, and guest speakers. This way, contractors get to know students personally and can build relationships with them to (hopefully) hire the good ones when they graduate. The best thing a contractor or NECA Chapter can do to get their foot in the door is to call the nearest school system and speak with the CTE Director. Through these conversations, contractors can inform the educators about our apprenticeship career pathway and create opportunities for future dialogue and cooperation.

Our Atlanta Chapter has a NECA Student Chapter at the university level to recruit engineering graduates and project managers. We are in the process of signing an “articulation agreement” with the two-year Technical Colleges to enable their Electrical Systems graduates to enter our apprenticeship program as third-year apprentices. The need for this level of apprenticeship appears to be far greater than for first-year apprentices. The Tech Colleges can serve as a “feeder farm system” to our apprenticeship program.

In addition to the recruitment options explored above, there are many other pools to “fish” in including:

- ✓ Department of Labor
- ✓ Department of Veteran Affairs
- ✓ Latin American Association
- ✓ Pan-Asian Association
- ✓ Mega Churches (conduct Career Days for adults)
- ✓ Goodwill Industries (provides Career Services)
- ✓ Helmets to Hardhats

We need to keep in mind that electrical construction also offers the CW-CE program. Applicants who have an interest in the electrical industry but fail the entry test can still be put to work. These employees dramatically help NECA contractors achieve a competitive composite pay scale for their projects.

Collectively, our approach to securing a qualified, well-trained workforce is a win-win for all.

- Our members directly interview these applicants to decide whom they want to hire.
- The apprenticeship school does not have to devote resources to recruiting. We work closely with them to coordinate group field trips to the facility.
- The IBEW gets potential new members as soon as the “applicants” become official apprentices.