SUPPORTING WOMEN IN A NON-TRADITIONAL TRADE

BY FIONA SHEWRING
Acknowledgements

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Fiona Shewring

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Overview

There are many myths around women working in non-traditional trade areas which are treated as fact and provide reasons for people to continue maintaining the status quo which prevents women entering these trades.

These myths include beliefs that:

- All men currently engaged in trades are apprentice trained
- It’s a waste of time and money to train women because they will stop and have babies
- Women can’t do the work
- Women do not have the physical strength to do the work required
- Women don’t want the work
- If women are trained they won’t cope in their trades and leave quickly so it’s a waste

Even when evidence is available to dispel these myths, people maintain their position. Without an engagement by all parties [employers, Registered Training Organisations, schools and society] in true Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO), where any person capable of the job is trained and employed to do the job, nothing will change. Women represent half of the general population yet represent about 0.2% of most non-traditional trade training.

The following stories are from women in trade. Almost all of the women come from trade families although not necessarily with family members in the same trade. Most of the women undertook apprenticeships as it is very difficult for them to gain training without one. According to their Head Teachers most of the women are high achievers in their training and an excellent influence on the trade classes.

Almost all of the women commented on their love of their trade and the need to be passionate about it to survive. When women can enter the trades, as they did during the Second World War, on an equal footing and not as a special case or as high achievers but just as people who want to engage in a trade, then hopefully we will have achieved true EEO status. Raising women’s participation to 10% in the trade courses would be an excellent start and not impossible.
Introduction

As a female tradesperson with fourteen years experience in my trade I am well aware of the difficulties and barriers women face when they decide to engage in the male dominated world of non-traditional trade.

The idea for this report has changed over the years from one format to another; from a wish to do something to finally producing that something in a different way. The motivation has always been the same – I wanted to do something which would help and support women on their journey from the beginning and which would help until they were established.

The idea of writing the women’s stories began when I ghost wrote some women’s stories for The National Association of Women in Construction’s (NAWIC) website “Build a Better Future”. I was also inspired by a Victorian publication called “Women in Industry” by M Poustie, D Clark and T Corney, 2005. My original idea had been for a networking system which would enable the women to support each other – if the painters and decorators needed a carpenter they would know the woman to call and visa versa. I still believe that this is possible, but I hope that this resource can be used to encourage women to consider trade as a career choice and for people, and especially prospective employers, to reconsider the way they view women participating in trade.
Fiona Shewring
Trade – Painter and Decorator

Many women are already working in the trades but they are completely unacknowledged as such, they work on the tools for their partners when they need a hand, they have intimate knowledge of the trades because they do the books, order materials and talk to clients and customers on the phone. A few come to TAFE and complete an apprenticeship, many do not. I was one of the women who did not enter trade in the conventional apprentice manner.

When I met my husband, Peter, I was a single mum with five small children, the youngest of whom where twin girls of two and a half. He was a bachelor living in Drummoyne, who generated enough money as a Painter and Decorator to enjoy his life of hang gliding, playing guitar and singing and listening to live music in the pubs of Balmain.

I started to work for him once my girls where able to go to pre-school. I would drop them off and drive to work and be back in time to pick them up, I would then dash home for the school bus arrival of the three boys.

I was instructed by Peter in the protocols of what to wear: I must wear whites, I must tie my hair back and wear nothing revealing, and above all else, I must not touch or kiss him nor call him darling! I progressively worked more and more hours as the children got older and was surprised to discover myself working in a trade which I enjoyed and was good at.

The professional protocols worked, in that once people got over the shock of seeing me on site and had spent a good long time checking my work to make sure I was up to scratch, I was accepted. I didn’t have time initially to add external training at TAFE into this mix and when I did it was in the form of a short course which would enhance our business. Finally when I did gain my certificate III in Painting and Decorating, it was because I wanted to become a teacher rather than to benefit our business.
MYTH

All men currently engaged in trades are apprentice trained

It is not often recognised that many men also enter trades in an informal manner. Many Trade Sections run evening courses for people who have been working in their trade for over five years. They have the knowledge they have already gained, acknowledged through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and they pick up on the skills they are missing to gain their certificates.

It is far more common for a male without an apprenticeship to gain entry into a trade course, if there are spaces available, than for a woman. Pre-vocational courses do not normally target women to apply and participate. In fact these courses are an excellent way for women to gain training and possible employment. It is also not trusted that the women will find their way within the industry and find their own level of employment.

MYTH

It’s a waste of time and money to train women because they will stop and have babies

One of the main arguments is that if women are trained they will just stop and have babies, so it’s a waste of time and money. The first point to make is that men have babies too and women in general, return to work more commonly than not in today’s society. Many of the women I have talked to have children and use the same support methods as any other working family. Some industries are recognising the worth of their female employees and are adjusting their shifts to encourage more women with children to apply for jobs such as in the mining industries in the north.
Adriana Schumacher

Trade – Boilermaker

I have been in the trade of boilermaking for nearly four years now but it took a while to get established. I had a really good relationship with my School Careers Advisor, Miss D. I used to do lots of work with her helping out with kids with special needs whilst I was at school. I didn’t do really well in year 11 and I went to Miss D and said I wanted to leave but I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I had done metal work at school which I loved and with five friends in year eight we made a sign for the canteen which involved different skills like woodwork which I was proud of.

Miss D took me to a TAFE taster. I tried welding and loved it. I did the test for the Pre-Vocational Course and five minutes after walking away from the TAFE they phoned me to say I was in. I would stay back and do extra hours if there was anything I didn’t understand. My teachers were really supportive and helped me heaps, sometimes I would finish as late as ten o’clock at night. They said it was unusual to see a girl this determined to do welding.

I went on to do my TIG (GTAW or Gas Tungsten Arc Welding) and then the MIG (GMAW or Gas Metal Arc Welding) which I couldn’t quite finish at the time because I had some family problems. To support myself during all this time I was also working in a kebab shop. Then I got my first job in the trade from March to September 2006 but unfortunately was laid off. I did casual work and then I got a phone call out of the blue from my current employer who had heard about me by word of mouth because I was unusual.

I have been working with my employer for nearly a year now and I’m loving it, it’s just fun to go to work. I got the apprenticeship three months after I started. In fact I asked them and they thought it was a really good idea. My previous employer had said ‘no’ because I was a girl and might get married and have kids.

Sometimes guys don’t want you there because you’re a woman but it worked to my advantage and got me a job because I’m unusual. Being a woman can help break down barriers, I’ve got new mates, got into canyoning and the bosses know I am a good welder.

Recently my old School Careers Advisor, Miss D, contacted me to see if I would come into my old school and talk to the classes about being a woman working in trade as a Boilermaker and Welder. I am really glad to do this because I am very happy doing this work and I don’t think enough girls know about it.
Tara Grant
Trade - Signwriter

I did alright at most things at school and had a particular flair at art – not major but enjoyed it. My step dad was a signwriter and I probably wouldn’t have thought to explore that avenue if it wasn’t in my face as much.

I did my work experience during year ten at my step dad’s signwriting business and loved it, so I left school and started as a shop assistant in the sign shop. I did this for two and a half years. I did leave and try a few other things such as retail but didn’t enjoy it as much.

I decided to go back and worked for another year in the shop front then I asked for an apprenticeship and got it. I love doing illuminated signs, neon signs and shop fronts. I like the fact that I am doing something different everyday.

It hasn’t all been plain sailing. I’ve been harassed and bitten – I didn’t talk to anyone about being harassed but when I was bitten I told the boss and the guy was sacked immediately. Mostly I ignore any bad stuff but you’ve got to be physically strong. You’ve got to be keen as the men, in fact probably keener. There is no easy way out and having long nails doesn’t work. It has been good having an apprenticeship because I have been able to buy my own unit because my income is secure.

My advice to other women is to stick it out and give it a go, but you are in for the long haul, you’ve got to be committed, if it is not your thing then keep looking till you find the trade that does give you that.
Melissa O’Sullivan
Trade – Fitter & Machinist

When I was at school I loved metal work, PE and health, woodwork and I did alright at maths. I’ve always been a hands on person and I wasn’t much good at the other subjects. The metal work teachers were the best. Whilst I was at school I saw an ad in the paper looking for apprentices. I had to send in a one page letter of interest, at the interview I can’t remember what I said but they asked me questions like, ‘why would you be good for the job?’ and ‘what could you provide for the company?’ My metal work teachers wrote really supportive letters for me and I had to do a test which I did quite well in. They called me back and asked me to go for a medical.

I have been working with my employer for almost a year now and work is different everyday which is good. One day I might be fixing elevators and the next day at different site fixing plant equipment. There is not enough fitting work in the department I am in at the moment and it gets boring if there is not enough to do.

When I started some of the lads expected me to clean up after them, they even said ‘you should be doing that’ I just walked away and left it. Luckily one of the bosses overheard and they had a word to them and they were alright after that. I know most of the guys I’m studying at TAFE with and there haven’t been any dramas with fitting in at TAFE.

When I started in my trade I didn’t think I had any family connections working in a trade but my uncle runs an engineering company. He said that once I finish my apprenticeship there may be a possibility of a job at his company if I am interested.

My family have all been very supportive of me; other people tend to be surprised but impressed by what I do, they say ‘Oh really! That’s heaps good’ or good on you and all that.

I really love my trade, I was lucky, I was in the right place at the right time but you also can’t be shy, you have to speak up and keep going....you also have to keep reading the paper!
MYTH
Women Can’t Do The Work

When women were allowed to begin training as doctors at the end of the nineteenth century there were many alarms and upsets as to why they should not engage in this form of work. ‘It would intrinsically damage their femininity’, ‘it would make them ill’, ‘they did not have the capacity for the work’, where some of the more restrained points of view. Not a lot has changed in arguments used today for women not to participate in the trades.

The women who engage in trade are just like their male counterparts, they are hands on people, they can’t cope with being stuck in an office, they get a kick from seeing something they have made with their own hands and skill, they are proud of what they can do and they want to contribute to society in a very practical way. Even though women are currently discouraged from entering most of the trades either by employers or enrolment processes or society, women apply in large numbers when they are offered the opportunity as has happened in Painting and Decorating department at the TAFE NSW - Illawarra Institute.

MYTH
Women do not have the physical strength to do the work required

Another argument is that the work is too heavy and dirty for women. Women can not cope with the physical demands of the job and do not want to get their hands dirty. The problems of men being expected to break their backs for their trades has been dealt with by OH&S and particularly by Work Cover in their attempts to prevent disabilities and injuries which have been so much a part of trade for too long.

None of the women in this report had physical problems with their trade, the biggest problem was getting an apprenticeship or related work.
Charmiane Faulkner

Trade – Painter and Decorator

I have been in the painting and decorating trade for about one and a half years now. I got the apprenticeship through a job agency when I was looking for work; it was just advertised on one of their touch screen computers.

I’m employed by a group training organisation and they found my employment with a host trainer. My first host was very demanding, very pushy; nothing was ever good enough but he was like that, to both men and women, it wasn’t a gender thing, that’s just how he was.

My current employer is pretty good. I have two kids aged four and three, they don’t live with me full time but my boss is considerate about my kids. When my daughter was in hospital he said ‘you go, go and visit your daughter.’

My mother is a landscaper and I never thought about the fact that I was entering a male domain, I wanted to expand my creative horizons and this was a way to do so. I like to do a good job and pay attention to detail; I also want to expand my skills. I would like to do more work in design and combine my ability in painting and decorating with that.

When I began lunch times were a bit difficult as the talk was a bit awkward but that passed. You’ve just got to be yourself and try and get in with a good crowd that makes you comfortable and work hard.
I have never had any issues although not that long ago I was driving around with the first year apprentice and people just assumed that he was the tradesperson and I was the apprentice. My Dad is a Shipwright and does carpentry but I didn’t grow up with him so I don’t think that influenced my love of carpentry.

I have a young son who is five and I manage the same as anyone else that works. I start work at 7am so we just have to be organised and my partner helps pick him up and drop him off – we share the load as do most parents these days.

I am just moving up to the north coast now so have just left my job and am about to try and get some work up north so we’ll see how it goes but I am pretty persistent. You have to be just to get your foot in the door - as a woman you normally need to work harder to remain even in the trades.

### Emma Royle

**Trade – Carpenter**

I didn’t really enjoy woodwork at school as I found it pretty uninspiring - the subjects I enjoyed were science and art. I did a few years at Art School but couldn’t get my head around how I was going to make a living from my art. I started doing handyperson stuff for my friends and myself which I was good at and enjoyed.

I applied for so many ads for carpentry apprenticeships but they didn’t even respond or if they did they tried to talk me out of it by telling me I would have trouble driving from here to there etc.

Finally I contacted the Master Builders Association (MBA), They won’t take you on unless you have work with someone so I got all the paper work and found someone who would take me on for three months. In fact it was the partner of a friend and I stayed with him for a year until I moved on to another job.
Jeanette Easton
Trade – Electrician

I have been an apprentice electrician for one and a half years now. I didn’t want to go to uni as I wanted a hands on job, I figured that if I got a trade I’d be set for life – I’d always have something to do. I saw an ad in the paper and I sent in an application letter saying that I was well suited for the job and a hard worker. I got a phone call asking me to go to the Ribbonwood Centre in Dapto to do aptitude tests. There was a whole bunch of tables set up with tests on them but it was just before my HSC so that didn’t freak me out; I was used to tests! I did really well scoring 99%, I think someone got 100% but I was really pleased with my results.

We had interviews straight away but I had to wait until the day after my first HSC exam to hear that I got the job. I was tempted not to finish my exams, but my Mum would have killed me. I had a little bit of a break after my HSC then started on the 16th January.

I have really enjoyed the work so far, the first six months I was doing maintenance at the metal coating lines where they make zinc alum and gal strip. The next six months I transferred to the Springhill Crane crew. It is all industrial work – if there are any breakdowns we fault find and then fix it which involves work on cranes, brakes and motors. About six months ago I moved and the work is very different – I’m fixing things in offices and canteens – I prefer the industrial side of things as there is more variety, it’s not just changing fluoro tubes.

I was brought up with two older brothers so it doesn’t bother me to work with mostly guys – I’m well used to that. When I was younger I started in girl guides but I moved to the scouts because they were doing more interesting things and had more fun.

My Dad especially encouraged me to enter trade; Mum was more on the lines of so long as you’ve got a job.

They are both really supportive. My Mum is a midwife, Dad is a fitter and machinist, my brothers are apprentice electricians and boilermakers. Having a strong trade family definitely helped because I didn’t think I couldn’t do it. The whole family is used to getting up early.

Other people think it’s great that I’m doing this. It’s not often that people meet a woman that works in this very industrial male dominated trade but you just need to get along with people, work hard and you will do well.
We have a rough schedule for the week; when you break up carcasses, when you make sausages etc. My husband didn’t have a lot of time to show me how to slice and break up the meat when I began so I relied on TAFE to show me and I am now an expert sausage maker. Nothing is pre-packed, just cut and displayed.

I have worked with family most of my working life. My father’s business was parquetry flooring and I did all the business/office side of that business, which has helped us. There is also a lot of heavy lifting being a butcher so it helps being part of a team.

When my daughter finishes school for the day she comes to the shop and does her homework and plays outside with other kids or chats to adults that she knows. Depending on what needs doing in the afternoon I can leave at three if I need to, such as if my daughter has a special event. My hours are flexible which works well.

I didn’t enjoy school, I was at an all girls school and had a really bad time and I got on better with boys so it suits me to be a woman in a non-traditional trade. I’m a hands on type and I just get in there and get on with it, but you do need to have a good memory for the breakdown of carcasses so that you don’t cut into the wrong section of meat.

Tracy Byron

Trade – Butcher

I have been working in the trade of Butchery for two years, my husband is a butcher and I started working with him for financial reasons. To begin with I was just helping him packing mince and placing stuff out on the counter. As far as I understand, I couldn’t cut anything because of Work Cover and safety issues so I started an apprenticeship.

We run Butchery in a small community selling meat and poultry and people know I’m training as a butcher. At first they were surprised to see a female butcher but now they love a chat. Both my husband and I enjoy customer service and we always have a laugh. When I first started working in the shop and a customer asked for something that I couldn’t do yet, we would swap customers and it would throw them but now they are used to it.

My day at work starts when I drop my daughter at school, I then do whatever my husband needs me to do although he does say “I’m the boss and my wife says I can say that!”.
Margaret Chate

Trade- Carpenter

I have always liked making things and it all snowballed four years ago when I was helping my boyfriend to renovate his house. People said 'if you can do this without training, what can you do with training?' I couldn't wait to get up and go to the house and do some work. I was doing a course on tourism and it just wasn't for me, I was stressed and failing. I really love what I am doing now.

I have had some funny reactions...some are fascinated.

Guys in class are cool although at first one or two had a vibe that you knew they weren't sure. I'm a big joker and I'll be the first one to say 'its OK...I'll pick up the big sheet!' I couldn't ask for a better bunch of guys. Men swearing doesn't worry me. I don't want to threaten the guys I just want to fit in.

I have two children aged fifteen and thirteen and my boyfriend is very supportive helping me with them. Originally I applied for a pre-apprenticeship and I have had trouble getting a job. I thought I had a job a few months ago, they where going to put me on part time but then it didn't happen. During my first year I did some work experience which was excellent and I learnt heaps.

I would like to be employed as a cabinet maker, you have to have a passion for your trade - a passion for wanting to do it. When I'm not coming to TAFE I get down. You have to have perseverance and don't give up.
Monica Senff
Trade – Electrician

I was looking for something a bit different – I had had previous jobs working in Maca’s etc but I found them boring and not challenging. My partner is a boiler maker and he knew that some new apprenticeships were coming up, so I watched for the ad in the paper. There was a number of different apprenticeships available but I decided I wanted to be an electrician as it gave me a chance at a real career. I didn’t want to rely on my partner having a better job, by finding my own career I was more independent which I liked.

When the ad came out I applied – I just had to put in a brief cover letter. Everyone was called in for testing, we had to do a variety of tests: maths, English, cogs and pivots and a special test, they told us the results the same day I did quite well. When I was interviewed they asked if I had a second preference but I said no. They just chatted to me about whether I had stayed on to year twelve which I hadn’t, I left in year ten but I am the only one in my group to have left that early most electricians have done year twelve.

The next step was a medical, then they give you a starting date and you get sized up for uniform. I started at the Skill Centre for the first six months then every twelve months you get rotated around the works until you become a tradesperson.

My employer has a very strong policy on Equal Opportunities and all the guys know that they have to be aware of their language etc. it is really great, I have no problems at all, everyone is just treated the same. Two of my uncles used to be electricians and my Dad used to be a fitter. My brother also works for the same employer with me.

When my partner originally told me about the apprenticeships he said quite a few women go through with them and I thought if they can do it then so can I. I knew nothing about electrical work when I first started and I think if it doesn’t work out then you can try something else, but it has worked out for me. I like the fact that I learn something new everyday – you don’t get bored.

I’d be happy to stay here, I enjoy it here and I don’t mind that there is not that many women. I’d recommend giving it a go – it’s a learning experience.
Shandi Anderson
Trade – Automotive Spray

I have always been a tomboy and I have always loved cars. It was cars and the colours – the colours you can paint cars – the pearls and the sparklers that drew me to my trade. I started on this course with my sister, she did the first two years with me then she got another job. It took a while to get an apprenticeship but I got one four months ago through my TAFE teacher. I love my workshop, my boss is really good, he doesn’t treat me as a girl just as someone doing a job. It is really good because if he did I think there would be a problem. We’ve had our differences but we work them out.

My Dad is a Carpenter and my brother is an apprentice carpenter.

My sister now runs her own food shop. Mum was a welfare worker and now she is a nurse.

I’ve always been different so they expected me to do something like this.

I’d really like to own my own shop and do lots of artistic things – were I work now there is no time for colours. You smash your car, you want it fixed really quickly, it’s hard work but what isn’t? You need enthusiasm and you need to get along with the boys.

You have to take things on the chin – be a bit of a joker – you can’t take things personally – boys will be boys. I went with my teacher to a Careers thing and a girl said to me I don’t know if I can hack it. I said if you don’t try, you’re never going to know.
MYTH

Women don’t want the work

Some people state that women don’t want to enter the trades. The Outreach and Painting and Decorating Departments at Illawarra Institute have had strong and steady enrolments for the courses offered in Painting and Decorating. We have proved beyond doubt that women are excellent tradespeople who are capable of being licensed and who can find their own place, through their own efforts, in the workforce. We began by providing basic courses in painting and decorating which also aimed at raising the women’s self esteem. The original purpose had been a basic Outreach policy of reaching out to a disadvantaged group, bringing them into TAFE, enabling them to realise their potential and helping them to move to which ever educational pathway was best for them. What we discovered was a large number of women who found a passion for painting and decorating and who really wanted to continue and make a living from this.

Through the support of the Outreach Coordinator Jennie Vulatha and the Head of Painting and Decorating, Jeremy Knight, I have been able to continue to train these women and many have now progressed into the trade courses we run. We still do not have vast quantities of women in our trade courses but we have about 10% in trade courses and about 40% participation with all of our courses. This compares with a participation rate of about 0.2% for most other trade courses. The first of our women are through after four years of training and one is also now licensed and in partnership with one of the second year trade women who is following this pathway. Others are still in training but working for themselves gaining experience. They are gaining work and standing on their own feet. We have also provided training in Interior Decoration (Colour Consultancy) and the women are combining this with the painting and decorating to provide a unique package for clients which is being well received.
Hanna Webb
Trade – Boilermaker

One of my favorite books is ‘Lord of the Rings’ and when I was younger my Dad bought me a book which was all about the mythic weaponry from that story, I also saw a movie which showed the making of a samurai sword and it really fascinated me. I did a little bit of metal work at school and made a sculpture in art which was a figure with a welded rio frame. I also really enjoyed woodwork at school because I am really hands on but I didn’t want to be a carpenter.

When I finished school I talked to my Dad (by trade he is a bricklayer, rigger, scaffolder and in the demolition/construction business) he is a foreman for a company and he put me on as an apprentice with a guy called Wayne who has been really instrumental in helping and influencing me. He trains me really well, shows me how to do things but is also very interested in my input.

I started my trade three years ago. I did my first year but then stopped and went overseas for a month when I came back I was behind everyone else and there was no metal work available at the time so I left. I studied journalism and looked after my younger sisters, one of whom is disabled. I got my copy editing certificate and then went on to do journalism (I also started writing a book whilst I was at school which I am still writing). I found journalism different to how I imagined, it is about presenting facts quickly and not particularly creatively where as novel writing is totally different. I am dyslexic so it was stressful as well.

I started working for my Dad again and this time was put with a boilermaker who is actually my cousin’s husband as the company I work for is a family owned company. I realised that I really, really loved what I was doing and I wanted to finish my trade. I just like welding; I even weld in my spare time.

The guys still test me out a bit, when they realise you can do the job they stop reacting to me as a girl and just treat me the same as the other apprentices so they still have a bit of a go at me in a general way. I have a thick skin so nothing bothers me. If anything they are now a bit protective.
Annalisa Pozzacchio

Trade – Signwriter

A friend and I saw an ad for a course in TAFE, an Outreach Mural course, and we weren’t doing anything at the time. I then went on to do another course in the Painting, Decorating and Signcraft department and when I finished that I was tossing up between doing painting and decorating and signwriting and decided on signwriting. So I didn’t have a job when I started my trade course but about half way through my first year I saw a job advertised in the newspaper for a signwriter. I emailed my resume and got a phone call shortly afterwards. I went up to St Leonards in Sydney and got the job.

No one is in the trade in my family and they are really supportive but they don’t really think I will stick it out especially because of all the travelling but I am determined to succeed. I couldn’t have done any of this without the teachers at TAFE, they have given me confidence in myself and made me realise I could do it.

I like being in a male dominated field, it’s more hands on. This is the first job I’ve ever had and sometimes I’m surprised at how far I’ve come. I think that if you want to do something, do it, there is nothing to stop you, and nothing you can’t do.
Teneal Farthing

Trade – Butcher

I am now in my fourth year of my apprenticeship and I will finish in March next year which will be good. I was already working for a big supermarket as a supervisor on the tills when they asked me to move to Butchery for a few days. After I had been there for a little while I asked them why they needed me in the meat section and they said they had lost their apprentice. I said I could do that, I would like the apprenticeship. My fiancée is a butcher so it wasn’t something I thought I couldn’t do.

Heaps of people are really surprised about what I do, lots of people think I work in the deli but I say ‘No, I work in the meat department, I’m a butcher.’ Whilst I am at work if people are looking for a butcher they will often skim past me thinking I’m just a packer and ask a guy about a cut of meat – so people are constantly surprised. My family are really interested in what I do and my Mum and Dad are really proud.

I don’t have any dependants so the 7am or 8am shift starts are no problem, I’d be happy to stay on with my employer a while longer. When I started my apprenticeship we were thinking of opening our own shop but we have just bought our house in December so we will wait and see how we go. It would be good to own my own shop but just so long as I am still in my trade in five years time I’ll be happy.

If I have a question about what I am doing I sometimes ask my fiancée but most of the time I just ask the guys, they are really helpful and they like to teach things. It is best to speak up. No one is going to hold it against you.

You get really cold hands as a butcher, you’re in a cold room all day but you get used to that, but to warm up your hands you have to put your hands in cold water, not hot because that’s not good for you – I just know that it stings! The lifting can be heavy but I don’t have any problem only very occasionally I may need a small amount of help. I like to cut pork, that is my favourite thing to cut.
I was attracted to TAFE by an Outreach Work Opportunities for Women in Painting and Decoration. On my first day I knew I wanted to do the trade course. As part of this course I did some work experience and was offered a job on the spot.

Whilst working at TAFE I met another student Diane on the Interior Decoration Course which we both completed. She had followed the same path as me and had finished the trade course and gained her licence. We have a great rapport and so I now work with her. We also incorporate interior decoration and colour consultancy into our business.

Painting and Decorating is hard work but it is also very rewarding and I always aim to do my very best in my trade by being professional and working to a high standard. Diane is the same so we work well together. We have had a great response from clients and we have also done some volunteer work in the community such as some painting at my daughter’s school. Our business is growing and my kids are all at school so I manage the same as any working mum with the support of my husband.

My goal is to go on and encourage women to embrace this very self satisfying trade. I know my parents are proud of me and I know for a fact that if the opportunities we have today were available when my Mum was young she would have joined the trade too.
Tammy King

Trade – Bricklaying

I wanted to be outdoors and I didn’t want to do office work. At least with bricklaying you’re on different sites and meeting other people interested in building. I haven’t been able to get an apprenticeship but when I finish my course I’m going to do the Builders licence and a short business course. I want to get a cheap ute and start up by myself. I’ve already got a cement mixer and I’m buying my tools – if no one will give me a job then I will make my own.

It is so hard to get into the industry, I came to TAFE and saw bricklaying and I really thought this would be fun. I’m twenty-eight and still enjoying my life so no kids yet. My boyfriend is in plumbing, my uncle is training him and he is going to do the certificate.

The maths can be a bit technical at times – luckily you can use calculators in here, I’d be lost without calculators.

I usually get 60 to 70 out of 100. I have failed a couple of theory tests but I’ll just come back and re-do them and pass.

I’m aiming to start with letter boxes and barbeques and work my way up to bigger things.

It’s an excellent trade, just get into it and get out there and build houses.
MYTH
If women are trained they won’t cope in their trades and leave quickly so it’s a waste.

The women who are currently succeeding in the trade courses and who qualify as Tradespeople have a tenacity which is beyond most of their male peers. They are also normally very good at what they do and as with male tradespeople with these attributes they often gain employment in management or use their trade to further their career in other areas. Whist research needs to be done to track male and female apprentices after completion of their trade; it is well recognised by most Head Teachers that a large number of qualified male tradespeople do not continue in their trade after completion. Many male tradespeople use their trade for entry into other fields such as the army, the police force and teaching.
Renee Lenz  
Trade- Plumber

I had been working in Childcare, I’d needed a job and had opened the paper and Childcare was the only job available to me at the time. I’d been interested in plumbing and had seen a few plumbers come and go and I thought it would be very interesting. I got talking to my boss at the local pub and I asked him for a job. He gave me a three month trial and then gave me a job and an apprenticeship straight away.

People think plumbing is just toilets and what not, but it’s a big area. It is as I imagined it would be; one day you could be inside, the next day outside.

You are working in all weathers and you don’t know what you’re going to be doing till you get to work.

I’ve done bathroom rough-ins, hot water systems, maintenance work, roofs and gutters. There is so much to learn and you have to use your brain. We go in and fix your hot water system or a leaking ceiling but we may have to track down leaks or whatever. You don’t have to be a genius at maths but you need a far idea. I love it.

I still live at home and my younger sisters are still at school. My Mum, who works caretaking a showground is really proud of me, both parents are proud but especially my Mum. She’s glad that I’m doing what I want to do and that I’m not taking notice of anyone that knocks me for doing what they see as a mans job. I haven’t yet come across any one that doesn’t cope with me on site but they are out there. I don’t take anything that anyone like that says to heart – it’s just their insecurity and their problem – not mine.

I’ve always been an outdoors person; not one for sitting in front of the TV. Maybe one day I would like to have my own business but I am really happy were I am. I couldn’t go back to Childcare.
Apprenticeship survey 2006

I have included some of the information gained in The Apprentice Survey 2006 (Appendix 1) which was conducted by Illawarra Institute Counselling and Careers staff. Interesting points brought up by the report was how apprenticeships are gained, which they point out, is not normally through job advertisements.

The top three methods for gaining an apprenticeship were:

- approached employer
- via a friend
- through family

These three methods represent 64% of the apprenticeships gained with advertisement representing only 13% in comparison. Another interesting point is that around one in three apprenticeships (31%) take over a year to find.

The survey did not ask the gender of the students but, based on enrolments, commented that outside of hairdressing, commercial cookery and baking, only one or two female apprentices were found in other trades. There are in fact nineteen women enrolled in Signcraft and Painting and Decorating trade courses at this current time which can be largely attributed to the amount of proactive work to encourage women into this trade done by Outreach and Painting and Decorating.

In my own experience interviewing the women across the different non-traditional trades, I found that most came from strong trade families, even if no one else was actually in their particular trade within their family. Trade families also often support their women unofficially and train them onsite. To increase women’s participation in trade it may be worth talking to the trade families and formalising, with RPL, gap training and trade testing this section of the workforce. They may also be more inclined to take on unconnected female apprentices because they don’t have a prejudiced against women being able to do the job.

Final summary

In conclusion without training, in whatever form that might take; informal within trade families which is later recognised; supported through initial courses by departments such as Outreach to gain experience and recognition of their capabilities; encouraged into trade pre-vocational courses then allowed into the trade courses or accepted into apprenticeships, the women simply cannot progress.

Many people will raise their hands in horror and say we cannot train without employment; we have to have substantiated outcomes before we begin. We have to begin somewhere and it is well recognised that training such as pre-vocational training which gives participants skills and experience has good outcomes for employment. The women who have trained through Outreach courses and then the trade courses in Painting and Decorating are succeeding.

Both major and small employers and the women’s partners and families mentioned in these stories are already truly showing their belief in women and their abilities. They have also proved the capabilities of women to train and work in the trades. They are excellent demonstrations of true equal employment opportunity employers.

It is not a matter of protecting women in these fields; it is a matter of giving them a go in the first place. Once they have entered the field they normally do very well. As one Head Teacher commented to me ‘They are constantly challenged, they are permanently under pressure to prove that they can do the job.’ If the women can’t maintain the quality of their work continuously then people are quick to dismiss them, they would not necessarily expect the same in a man.

Making the women ‘special’ doesn’t help them either, as it sets them apart from their peers. They need to be accepted just for what they are - people with a job to do and judged on their abilities as a tradesperson and not because of their gender.

Fi Shewring
Appendix 1 - Apprenticeship survey 2006
TAFE NSW - Illawarra Institute, Counselling and Careers Service

Stage 1 Apprentices 2006
School Background, Ages, Job Seeking Strategies

The TAFE Counselling and Career Service is frequently approached by prospective apprentices with questions about apprenticeships.

Some questions are about the way apprenticeships work. These questions are best answered with reference to information sources such as brochures occasionally supplied to the Counselling and Careers service by local apprenticeship organisations and by reference to internet sites specifically designed to provide apprenticeship information. Some relevant sites are provided in the appendix to the report.

Other questions can’t be answered by these sites:

  - How old should you be to get an apprenticeship?
  - When should you leave school if you want an apprenticeship?
  - How long does it usually take to find an apprenticeship?
  - When should I start looking for an apprenticeship?
  - How many apprenticeships should I go for?
  - What is the best way to find an apprenticeship?
  - What courses could I do if I can’t find an apprenticeship?

TAFE is in a unique position to gather information from apprentices. The TAFE Counsellors from the Northern District of the Illawarra Institute surveyed 338 first year apprentices seeking information that would help prospective apprentices make decisions and move forward with their plans.

A blank survey is provided to show exactly what was asked. The apprentices’ answers are grouped according to their trade and totals for all apprentices are also provided.

Other key things to note:

Looking at individual trades

The varying pattern of apprenticeship attendance at TAFE meant it was difficult to catch every student during the time that was available to conduct the survey.

A total of 338 first year apprentices were surveyed. This represents approximately 40% of first year apprentice enrolments and so provides good information about the background of northern Illawarra
apprentices in general. When looking at individual trades however please be cautious about the information. As some of the individual trade sample sizes are small it is possible that some of the information collected is not giving an accurate picture.

The role of family and friends

The importance of family and friends must be stressed. Together they are clearly the most successful method of job seeking. Note that this does not usually mean that family and friends employed the apprentices. It means that family and friends helped find potential employers through their networks.

Getting the first apprenticeship applied for

Many apprentices report that they got the first apprenticeship applied for. Our experience is that they often don’t realise the number of contacts and enquiries made on their behalf by family and friends. The young potential apprentice may think it was the first employer approached but this is often not the case.

Pre-apprenticeship courses

Many hopeful apprentices complete pre-apprenticeship or pre-employment courses before successfully finding an apprenticeship. This group does not show up in this survey because those apprentices are usually employed as Stage Two apprentices. We surveyed Stage One. Our experience is that pre-apprenticeship courses remain one of the most successful methods of gaining an apprenticeship.

Women in the trades

Our survey did not seek information about apprentices’ gender. Enrolment information confirms that the majority of female apprentices are found in the Hairdressing (90%), Commercial Cooking (35%) and Baking (37%) trades. Outside of these areas there are one or two female apprentices found in nearly every trade area.

Thanks

This survey depended on the cooperation of Head Teachers and Teachers coordinating apprenticeships. Counsellors from many campuses administered and collated the surveys with a particular effort from Antonella Scavarelli. When the purpose of the survey was explained 338 Stage One apprentices were only too happy to assist. Our thanks to all.

Special thanks to Sally Kettley who provides all the administration support for the Wollongong TAFE Counselling and Careers Service. Sally put in a huge effort with data entry and then checking the data. Without Sally’s efforts there would be no report.

You are welcome to use the information provided here to assist anyone in their search for an apprenticeship. If you have any enquiries regarding this information please contact the Counselling and Career Service at Wollongong Campus on 4229 0535
Time Taken to Find Apprenticeship

Chart 1 – Represented by number of students

Time Taken to Find Apprenticeship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Interval</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before leaving School</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few weeks after School</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 weeks to 1 month</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 2 months</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - 4 months</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - 6 months</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 12 months</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1 year</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 2 – Represented by percentages

Time Taken to Find Apprenticeship

- Before left School: 31%
- Weeks after leaving School: 29%
- 2 weeks to 1 month: 8%
- 1 to 2 months: 5%
- 2 to 4 months: 5%
- 4 to 6 months: 6%
- 6 to 12 months: 6%
- More than 1 year: 10%
Students' Successful Methods

Chart 1 – Represented by number of students

Chart 2 – Represented by percentages