

Construction Laborer and Helper Career Path Exploration

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Introduction

The purpose of this manuscript is to provide career and technical education students who are considering a career in the construction industry, with factual details regarding a career as a construction laborer and helper. Before considering a career as a construction laborer and helper, it would be prudent for career and technical education students to review specific details described in this manuscript to help develop a better understanding regarding what this specific career might be like. The following details regarding construction laborers and helpers will be presented: responsibilities, how to gain employment in this career, pay and benefits, and job outlook.

Responsibilities of Construction Laborers and Helpers

Construction laborers and helpers work on construction sites and assist with debris removal and site preparation. They are involved with moving building supplies from transport vehicles to the site. Assembly of scaffolding or braces to be used in the construction project is another responsibility. The job can be very physical, such as excavating a trench (See Figure 1.), filling holes, or compacting ground material in preparation for the building project. Construction laborers and helpers often maintain and operate machines and equipment used on the job site. They often work alongside trade specialists and assist them with their jobs. Following directions from individuals in a supervisory capacity and being able to read plans for a construction project is also important (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

Figure 1. A trench that excavated by a construction laborer and helper.



Construction laborers and helpers stay busy during the entire construction project. One reason for this is because a main task for someone functioning in this job is to make sure the site is prepared and clean. Many individuals functioning in this job will perform general tasks such as placing cones, installing traffic markings, and setting up barricades. It is possible to specialize in one particular area such as operating equipment and machinery to install solid concrete or asphalt surfaces (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

Construction laborers will utilize basic tools, such as shovels and brooms. Using more advanced equipment such as a jackhammer, tamper, or pavement breaker is also common. After completing training, construction laborers may assist with operating boring machines, transporting explosive materials, placing pipes with laser guided equipment, or operating robotically controlled equipment to cut material. Earning certifications to something that is possible, and these certifications are needed to remove lead, asbestos, or chemicals during a construction project (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

Construction helpers support tradespeople with their tasks (See Figure 2.). These trades specialties may include brickmason, blockmason, stonemason, carpenter, electrician, painter, construction and maintenance, plumber, pipefitter, steamfitter, roofer, tile and marble setter. A construction helper may engage in a variety of jobs as part of this support role, such as transporting materials and tools or preparing equipment. Helping to disassemble equipment, cleaning up a work site, and trash disposal are typical responsibilities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

Figure 2. A construction laborer and helper assisting with an installation.



Becoming a Construction Laborer or Helper

Taking high school courses in mathematics, English, welding, blueprint reading, or shop is recommended; however, there are no education requirements. Many who enter this career field will work towards obtaining further training via vocational programs, trade schools, or community colleges. Once hired by an employer, most construction laborers and helpers are trained on the job. By working with more experienced employees, learning will occur (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

The Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) has a training arm called the LIUNA Training and Education Fund. This training arm is involved with developing coursework, providing education for trainers, and supporting 70 centers that provide training throughout the United States and Canada. Construction craft laborers can learn the skills needed. They offer courses in aboveground drilling, asphalt, bridge construction, renovation, and demolition, concrete, construction math, employability skills, general construction, green construction, hoisting & rigging, ICRA, line and grade, mason tending, pipelaying, pipeline, and scaffold building (LIUNA Training & Education Fund, 2015).

For construction laborers who intend to be involved with the abatement of hazardous materials, they must obtain a hazmat license, which is federally regulated. There are many construction related areas that require certifications, which include asbestos removal, energy auditing, lead abatement, OSHA 10 and/or 30 hour construction safety certification, pipeline operation, radiological work, rough terrain forklift operation, scaffold use and building, signaling, weatherization, welding, and work zone safety (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

Pay and Benefits for a Construction Laborer or Helper

The U.S. Department of Labor (2015) provides wage information as of May 2012 for construction laborers and helpers. The median annual pay in 2012 was specified as \$29,160. For those in the lowest ten percent, the salary was specified as \$18,840; however, those in the top ten percent had a specified salary of \$55,750. It is important to note that when construction laborers and helpers are separated, construction laborers alone have a reported median annual salary in 2012 of \$29,990 as compared to construction helpers with a reported median annual salary in 2012 of \$26,570. Salary.com (2015) reports the median annual salary for general laborer as \$27,063 or an hourly wage of \$13.00 per hour. This source identifies that there are other benefits which include disability insurance, healthcare insurance, bonuses, 401k/403B, pension, and time off. This can elevate the total compensation from \$27,063 to \$42,228 annually.

Job Outlook for Construction Laborers and Helpers

The U.S. Department of Labor (2015) specifies job outlook information current as of 2012 for construction laborers and helpers. The total number of jobs in 2012 was reported as 1,284,600. During the period spanning 2012-2022, a 25% growth is expected. Therefore, an additional 325,200 jobs are expected to be added. This is faster

than the average when compared to all occupations. It is important to note that employment growth can often be influenced by economic events, such as those that occurred during the 2007-2009 timeframe. U.S. News & World Report Money (2015) reports that “Employment for general construction workers is expected to swell this decade” (Para. 3). It is also interesting to note that this source indicates “Working as a general construction worker is an excellent introduction and gateway to other specialties within construction” (Para. 6).

Conclusion

For those who are interested in working in the construction industry right out of high school, entering into a career as a construction laborer and helper may be worth considering. Given there is a good expected job growth, it appears as though this career will be stable for the foreseeable future. As with all careers, carefully consider the pay and benefits as well as the working conditions prior to making a career decision. It may be prudent to also seek out opportunities to speak with individuals in this industry to gain a real world perspective.

References

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