
ALL THE TOOLS

Builders scramble to find, higher young skilled workers

By Colleen Brush, News Business Writer

As a little boy, Sam Soderholm home often snuck off with his father's carpenter tools in headed out to the backyard to build a tree fort, a birdhouse or some other wooden project.

By the time he was 14, he was working alongside his father Ken, carrying wood and sweeping floors while his dad remodeled homes around MetroWest with his company, Soderholm Carpentry Inc. of Natick.

Now, at 20 years old, the young Soderholm hopes to someday take over the family remodeling business and make it as well recognized and profitable as some of the startup Internet businesses in the area.

Well his peers and siblings master the Internet and learn World Wide Web design, hoping to be the next .com millionaires, Soderholm plans to build his fortune – literally.

“I would love to jump in and make the quick buck. At the same time, I don't care how many Internet millionaires are out there, someone still has to put the shingles on the roof”, Soderholm said. “If there's nobody to build houses, fix the cars, there is not going to be much to spend the money on.”



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Soderholm watches as people his age abandon old-fashioned hard work of building houses, wiring electricity or fixing the plumbing in favor of sitting in front of a computer terminal. But he has shunned the wired world too, instead, making something that lasts.

“It’s almost like you are being immortalized in your work” he said “An artist has his pallet and his canvas. We have houses that won’t be torn down or remodeled for another 60 or 70 years.”

New blood needed

Soderholm’s philosophy in career choice bucks the trends of his peers. Fewer young people enter the homebuilding trade today, creating a shortage of new workers to carry on the craft, local contractor said.

“There is a select number of students who want to learn the trades and who want to excel at it,” said Shawn McCadden, Executive Director of Eastern Massachusetts chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, a trade organization. “That select few get gobbled up extremely quickly.”

These days, having someone Sam Soderholm’s age working in the construction trades is a rare find, said his father.

“There are definitely less young people than there were years ago,” Ken Soderholm said “I don’t know why that is, there is so much demand out there now.



20 year old Sam Soderholm, left, joins family members in other workers on a construction site last week’s family includes Ken Soderholm Sr, center, and Ken Soderholm Jr, right.

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Soderholm notices the gap in the age difference of contractors. Aside from his son he cannot find anyone in their 20s or 30s to work. He employs his 70 year old father, a 66 year old carpenter and a 40-year-old carpenter.

“People that age just don’t want to work that hard,” he said of the younger generation.

Contractors cannot keep up with all the work offered to them, and the lack of young workers makes it even more difficult to meet them and demands of the construction boom, local builders said.

Those conditions have boosted the salaries of many young workers, who now “are demanding and getting a pretty waged immediately out of high school,” McCadden said – up to \$20 an hour.

Local company owners said the have a hard time tearing young workers away from their computers to pick up a hammer or wrench.

“I think manual labor is different now that was years ago. There are less kids, not anywhere what is used to be, and there is more work,” said Paul Morris owner of Morse constructions in Somerville.

This could eventually create problems for the industry or said

“If we don’t get new blood, new energy, new labor there will not



Soderholm Carpentry Inc, workers put up “blue board at a construction site last week.

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be a desire for new methods,” he said. “It is always the next generation that thinks of new ways to do things. If that doesn’t happen, housing will suffer for it.”

Scouring the schools

Educators at local vocational high schools said they constantly get calls from companies looking for young workers but there are not enough students to meet the demand the state Department of Education could not say at Last week how many students attend vocational schools in Massachusetts.

“There really isn’t a trade right now that isn’t busting at the seams” said Eugene Carlo, superintendent of Assabet Valley Regional Vocational High School in Marlboro. “If we had 500 more kids graduate last year 500 more kids would have jobs there is that kind of demand out there.”

While enrollment has increased in the last few years, it is still down from the heyday of the late 80s, when it was well over 1000 students school officials expect about 200 freshmen to start in September, boosting enrollment to more than 900.

Paul Bento, superintendent at the Joseph P. Keefe Technical School in Framingham, said he gets the same phone calls from anxious employers looking for young workers the number of students in the different programs has increased but is still not enough to fill all the jobs that exist he said.

“Employers are calling us frustrated that we don’t have enough people for them”, Bento said “All the fields are very strong. There are tremendous opportunities for kids right now.”

Those select few who are getting into the construction trades said

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they have no second thoughts about not joining the Internet job bandwagon.

“The web, that just wasn’t me,” said Zach Peat who graduated from Holliston High School last year and now works as a carpenter.

“I wanted to work with my hands I knew all along this was something I would be doing,” he said.

Peat, 19, first tried his hand at landscaping and quickly got bored.

Now he’s a carpenter’s apprentice helping build the addition on the Westborough High School the learning process is slow he’s said but he plans to stick with it.

“Eventually I want to get the most out of what I’m doing I want this to be my career,” he said.

Brian Grass, a 17-year-old senior at Keefe Tech said he turned his back on the high-tech world because he did not want to spend his life doing something he did not really like he studies now to become an electrician.

“I’ve always liked working with my hands it’s something I feel more comfortable with,” the Hopkinton teenager said.

Grass is spending his summer working for the D.C. Electric, learning how to wire houses for electricity so far he is happy with his career choice.

“I thought it was good opportunity good paying hands-on job,” he said.

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Young contractors do not worry about the retirement of older workers will create a shortage of builders it only creates more work for them to do they said.

“It doesn’t really bother me. I figure that is more opportunity for me,” Peat said. “There will always be work for me.”