

INDUSTRIAL/COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Insider Tips

The following information was gathered by workforce professionals who maintain close working relationships with industrial/commercial construction and maintenance companies in the Gulf Coast area. Use these “insider” tips to help customers more effectively search for occupations in the industrial/commercial construction and maintenance industries.

The Company/Contractor Relationship

Most of the industrial construction and maintenance in the Gulf Coast area is performed by industrial construction companies contracted by “owner” companies in the energy and petrochemical industry. Examples of owner companies are Shell Oil, ExxonMobil, Lyondell, BP, and Dow Chemical. Contractors supply skilled craft professionals to work in these refineries and plants. The contracts can be long and short-term; job seeker customers need to know they can be laid off based on workload.

Ongoing maintenance in industrial plants is usually performed by a team made up of a small group of company workers and a larger contracted staff. Contracted workers typically work only the day shift. Due to the volume of business right now, most companies require overtime. Many contractors have longstanding working relationships with certain plants; a worker – even though they are “contracted” -- may be at one location for all of his/her working life. Owners hire their core staff from the best of their contractors’ craft professionals.

Plants also schedule major equipment maintenance called “turnarounds” or “shutdowns.” Turnarounds involve halting the refining or manufacturing process and performing maintenance around the clock so operations can resume quickly. Contractor companies move from plant to plant conducting turnaround work; however, there are gaps between contracts when workers are laid off.

Industrial Worker Information

Some workers specialize in turnarounds. They like the fast pace, the high pay, and the overtime. Lesser skilled workers, wanting to work in the plants, are relegated to turnarounds because owner companies don’t allow many maintenance helpers. Turnarounds require additional craft helpers and laborers so work can start at the plant again.

To work in a plant, refinery, port or other secure area, an individual must pass a background security check that meets Homeland Security requirements, which include a stipulation that the individual have no felonies in the last seven years. Candidates must also pass a drug and alcohol screening test. If they fail the test, they can retest in six months; if they refuse the test, they will not be allowed to re-test. Most local companies are part of a consortium that keeps drug testing and background check records, so candidates cannot skip from company to company.

Many jobs also hire contingent on passing a physical. Transportation is a must because jobs move, overtime hours are required, and many locations are in areas without public transportation. Workers must complete training through the Houston Area Safety Council to get a safety certificate required to work in the refineries.

Commercial Worker Information

Commercial construction includes bridge, highway, road and commercial building construction. Work hours are generally during the day with overtime required depending on the contract. Commercial contractors usually have a core staff but typically rely on contract labor for most positions. The majority of these companies make hiring decisions about individuals with felonies on a case-by-case basis. Hires are contingent on passing drug tests and, frequently, a physical. Access to transportation is important for these workers, too.

INDUSTRIAL/COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Insider Tips

Industrial/Commercial Work Environment

The work environment for this industry is usually outdoors or in non-air conditioned buildings. It often requires wearing protective gear, which is particularly uncomfortable in the long, hot Gulf Coast summers. Nearly every work site requires workers to wear hard hats, steel-toed boots, and gloves. Some jobs (such as welding) require the use of protective head gear and eye wear. The work is very physical and requires bending, stooping, lifting, climbing and standing all day. Workers must always be aware of their immediate work area and watch for dangerous equipment, machinery, and tools with the potential to cause accidents.

Skilled Crafts

Although construction workers get dirty and use their hands, it does not mean they don't need to use their minds. People need the ability to read and do basic math to progress past helper status and enter a skilled craft. The top level in crafts is journey level (or journeyman status), which is usually reached after four to five years of classroom education, on-the-job experience, and skill certifications. In the Gulf Coast, we currently have a shortage of journey level craftspeople. Because construction workers are making high basic wages and working a lot of overtime (at time and a half), they are not continuing with classroom requirements. And, many companies that previously offered on-the-job training have cut back due to workload.

Roughly 25% of Americans obtain a four-year college degree. For the other 75%, skilled crafts offer a career with real earning potential. To reach maximum salary, you must attend classes and obtain certifications. These are available either through the unions or through the merit shop (non-union) system, which uses NCCER (National Center for Construction Education and Research) curriculum.

- Electrician \$17-35/hr
- Millwright \$17-25/hr
- Painter \$15-23/hr
- Pipefitter \$17-32/hr
- Insulator \$15-25 hr
- Helpers \$12-14 to start up to \$16-18 w/exp.

The jobs listed above frequently come with a sign-on bonus, salary review/raises, per diem allowance, travel allotment, and benefits, less so for the helpers. Because plants and refineries limit the number of helpers on site, contractors are limited in the number they hire.

- Welders \$9-32

Welding is in a category by itself because of the unique nature of this craft. The salary range varies widely because it depends on the skill level of the welder and the type of welding involved. In the Gulf Coast, you can work at a shipyard as a welder/fitter, repairing ships, barges, and floating oil rigs. New vessel construction requires specialized welding skills and demands higher pay. Upper ranges on wages are around \$23/hr.; the low end is \$9-10/hr. Felonies don't preclude employment and transportation is not always an issue, since people mostly work in a shipyard.

Commercial contractors use structural welders. Wage ranges are higher on the skilled end (around \$30/hr.), but they use helpers and apprentice (mid-level) welders who are paid \$12-20/hr. Criminal background issues usually don't bar employment. Workers do need transportation, since job sites vary.

Inside a plant, welding is a maintenance profession requiring experience and high skills. Plant owners and contractors do not hire welder helpers. Welders must pass certifications on TIG, combo, stainless steel, and some specialty metals. Turnaround contract work does use welders, who also must pass certifications on carbon steel, TIG, and stainless steel. Salaries for experienced welders who weld specialty metals are around \$32/hr and are going up due to demand.

INDUSTRIAL/COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Insider Tips

- Firewatch/Holewatch \$12-14 up DOE

Firewatch/Holewatch is a safety-related position where a worker watches for sparks, fire or fumes from machinery or chemicals in a plant that would cause injury. It tends not to be a career; it's a short-term job that requires little trained skill but does require alertness. A person who does firewatch/holewatch has the advantage of understanding an industrial environment. Urge any of our customers performing this job to consider entering crafts for a career.

Construction craft courses are taught at local community colleges, particularly in the southeast area. Generally, courses run for 10 to 12 weeks and many are taught at night to accommodate working people. For merit shop companies, people should check for National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) certified instructors and curriculum when they sign up for a course. Possibilities are:

- San Jacinto College
- College of the Mainland
- Lee College
- Brazoria College
- Alvin College
- Houston Community College
- Limited courses at Galveston College and Lone Star College
- Professional Career Technical Institute, PCTI (proprietary school on I-45N)

The Construction and Maintenance Education Foundation (CMEF) is the education arm of the Associated Builders and Contractors (an industry group). CMEF periodically teaches a week-long Construction Overview course. Check in WorkInTexas under "GREAT" to see if a course is currently scheduled or for general information.

At The WorkSource, we work with the Houston Business Round Table and the Associated Builders and Contractors to address the shortage of skilled craft workers in the Gulf Coast region. Find information about them at:

www.houbrt.com and www.abchouston.org

Some of the contractors we work with include:

- Austin Industries
- Ref-Chem
- ISC (Industrial Specialty Contractors, Inc.)
- Bechtel
- Becon (Bechtel Construction)
- Jacobs
- S&B Engineers and Constructors
- Brand Scaffolding
- Aker Kvaerner
- Cajun Constructors, Inc.
- Pro-Inspect
- BASF
- Wolfensen
- Shaw
- Mundy
- Timec/Welltec

INDUSTRIAL/COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Insider Tips

Some of the owners we work with are:

- ExxonMobil
- Dow
- ConocoPhillips
- Lyondell
- Shell
- BP
- South Texas Project STP (nuclear energy)

Plant Expansions

Shell Oil Co. and Saudi Refining Co. are partners in Motiva, an expansion to the Shell plant in Port Arthur. Construction is starting. Bechtel/Jacobs are partnering to build the plant.

STP is adding two nuclear reactors and will hire construction crews for the building and new staff to run the plants. The new reactors are digital; the old reactors are analog. Construction is tentatively scheduled for fall 2009.

Unions

Unions also sponsor apprentices. Generally, a person works for a union employer and attends class two nights a week. People pay union dues, but union wages are higher and union members receive benefits after six to nine months (even if they do not work for the same employer all of those months). Union apprentices must pass a drug test, an Adult Basic Education test and have some experience (which can be discussed). Felonies will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Usually, transportation is required. Some of the local unions we work with are:

- Sheet Metal Workers #54 713-864-4594
- Pipefitters #211 713-649-0201
- Plumbers #68 713-869-3592
- AFL-CIO 713-923-9473
- Carpenters & Millwrights #551 713-641-0275
- Ironworkers #84 713-928-3361