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# With on-the-job or vocational training, HVAC techs can turn mechanical aptitude to career

By William Cracraft  
 Special to Sunday Jobs

If you like to putter around with machinery and tools, but don't know how to turn that into a career, think about becoming a heating and air conditioning technician. The demand for experienced workers is there, and options for schools abound.

Officially known as HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) technicians, these workers install, service and repair equipment in home and businesses. A technician can work for a sizable company or strike out on his or her own.

Bill Floyd is construction manager for Tenney A. Norquist Inc., a 45-employee Modesto HVAC company that installs and services residential, commercial and light industrial systems.

Floyd would like to hire experienced workers but, "Unfortunately, in our industry, there is not a good pool of people out there that are willing to change jobs ... so we are forced into hiring trainees," he says. That's good news for those thinking of joining the industry.

Because Floyd trains from scratch, he looks for someone who "comes across with a first impression that is original - a true portrait of himself." Ideal candidates have a reasonable mechanical aptitude, basic competency in math and good work habits.

Floyd notes that Norquist has in-house training and collaborates with Modesto Junior College to offer classes to help fill the need for trained HVAC workers

The two basic technical jobs in HVAC are installation and service. Installation techs cut holes in walls, shape sheet metal for ducts and



Photos by Bill Harris

John Dompeling, shown inspecting bearings on the condenser fan of a home air conditioning unit, applied at HVAC companies after completing an eight-month HVAC course at Institute of Technology's Modesto campus, but ultimately went into business for himself as owner of John Dompeling Heating & Air Conditioning. Open only a year, the business is good, he says.

install heating and air conditioning units, Floyd says. Applicants with general construction skills or plumbing or electrical experience will stand out.

An experienced installation technician will have refrigeration skills including an understanding of airflow and how to configure duct piping. "If you get a really good, on-the-ball person, in two years they could be effective and after four years would be working at a journeyman level," Floyd says.

Different skills are needed on the repair side. John Schulz has been repairing HVAC systems for Norquist for seven years, since right out of school. He works on electrical

equipment, pumps and other components of existing air conditioners and furnaces.

"I do all the service, repair and preventative maintenance on heating and air conditioning for residential and commercial, and also refrigeration work," he says.

Schulz used the G.I. Bill to get a two-year HVAC certification along with an associate degree from San Joaquin Delta College. More recently, he passed the tough new North American Technical Excellence test to buttress his qualifications.

The job is not without its challenges. "We are the ones that get really dirty. We are pretty much the ones who, the worse the weather, the harder we work," Schulz says. "I mean it's pouring down rain and I'm up on a roof with spikes on my feet so I don't slip off of it, working wires carrying 230 to 480 volts."

In his time at Norquist, Schulz has earned promotions and pay raises. "I feel confident there is an endless amount of work out there, so I never have a fear of too long of a layoff," he says.

Construction manager Floyd notes that he has "hired women in the service and installation areas and they did fine in both areas." Rookie HVAC techs are paid in the low teens per hour, he adds, and experienced technicians "somewhere in the twenties."

There is usually plenty of overtime and room for promotion at Norquist, which is not hiring at the moment, "but always looking at hiring," Floyd says. "When we are in a heavy recruiting (mode) we advertise through our Web site (<http://www.tenneyanorquist.com/>) and through the newspaper."

When looking for HVAC jobs, avoid Web sites charging fees, Floyd warns. "Look at the paper (and) if you know people in other industries that are related, word of mouth is a really good source."

The HVAC business is an option for entrepreneurs, too. John Dompeling started his HVAC repair service a year ago while still in school. He graduated from Institute of Technology's Modesto campus in March after an eight-month course in repair and installation of HVAC systems.

Dompeling became interested in HVAC when he was able to replace the air conditioning unit in his own home. He decided to give school a shot and the government helped out with a \$5,000 student loan—half the cost of the tuition. Dompeling applied at existing companies but in the end, "I just went into it on my own. The winter is tough but (the business) is doing well. I'm pretty happy with it so far," he says.

Dompeling adds that school did a good job of preparing him for the field, "I've been stumped, but I've always been able to figure it out."

For more information on training programs, visit the following Web sites:

San Joaquin Delta College, <http://www.sjcdcc.edu>

Modesto Junior College, <http://mjc.yosemite.cc.ca.us>



John Schulz, a certified HVAC technician with Tenney A. Norquist Inc. in Modesto, performs a preventative maintenance inspection on a commercial air conditioning unit. Schulz, who used the G.I. Bill to get his two-year certification and an associate degree from San Joaquin Delta College, has been repairing HVAC systems for seven years, since right out of school. An "endless amount" of available work offers job security, he says.

**Next week: Railroad jobs**