Chronicle Guidance Publications

Lathers

Occupational Brief Title Codes:
- D.O.T.: 842.361-010
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Work Classification Based Related D.O.T. Occupations:
- Dry-Wall Installers
- Plasterers
- Tapers/Finishers

Interests Based Related G.O.E. Occupations:
- Casting Repairers
- Chimney Repairers
- Glass Installers
- Tile-Conduit Layers

Skills Based Related O*NET Occupations:
- Brickmasons and Blockmasons
- Carpenter Assemblers and Repairers
- Helpers-Carpenters
- Rough Carpenters

Noteworthy Quote:

"While studying for my degree in Architecture, I worked between semesters as a carpenter, lather, and tile setters helper. The time spent as a lather and the experience I gained was invaluable when I finally went to work in an architect's office. Lathing requires thinking as well as physical exertion."

Walter F. Pruter,
Construction Consultant and Writer
Palm Desert, California

Lathers (`lath-ers) erect light gauge steel studs, joists and rafters, and metal framing for lath and plaster and for drywall. They also install a metal, gypsum wood, or plastic lath accessories and gypsum drywall or fiber reinforced cement panels on ceilings, walls, partitions, and ornamental frameworks to be covered with plaster, tiles, stone veneers, or acoustical materials. They also apply gypsum sheathing and rigid polystyrene panels for exterior and interior finishing systems (EIFS).

The reinforcement that holds plaster to walls and ceilings is called lath. For centuries house builders used wood lath (thin slats about one fourth of an inch thick and up to five feet long). Lathers nailed these strips to wood studs, leaving a small space between each strip. Layers of plaster spread on the lath squeezed through the spaces and stuck to the strips. When smoothed and dry the plaster became the finished surface of walls, ceilings, and partitions in buildings.

Lathers erect light gauge studs, joists and rafters, and metal framing for lath and plaster and for drywall. *Photo by Amy Elliott*

After 1939, although lathers still used wood lath, they began to replace it with metal lath, especially in commercial buildings, and in applications where the plaster will be exposed to weather or water. Metal lath consists of wire mesh, or sheet metal with small openings. With these materials a plaster material is forced through the openings and slumps over and around the openings to form a bond. This process is called keying. Metal lath is lightweight, fireproof, and long-lasting.

Gypsum lath is a product made of plaster sandwiched between two sheets of absorbent paper. Lathers today use both metal lath and gypsum lath for interior plaster. They use metal lath for curved or irregular surfaces where the rigid gypsum lath is not practical. They also use it when an exterior surface (such as stucco) applied to it will be exposed to the weather.

Work Performed

Lathers in construction work erect light gauge steel framing for walls, partitions, and ceilings intended to be covered with lath and plaster, or drywall. To erect light gauge steel stud framing for walls and partitions, "C" shaped floor

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tracks are secured to the floor at predetermined locations. With the use of lasers or plumb-bobs, ceiling tracks are located and attached to overhead construction directly above the floor tracks. They then install steel studs (upright members), securing them by friction fit, screwing, or welding, depending on the application. To create complex curved surfaces, smaller channel shapes may be used instead of the larger, less adjustable steel studs.

After they set up the framework, they cut the lath to fit the frame. They nail, clip, screw, or staple the metal lath to the framework at about six-inch intervals. As they put up the lath they cut openings for electrical outlets and pipes. They also make sure the wire lath overlaps at joinings.

Lathers install the framework for suspended ceilings. They fasten hangers to the roof or to the underside of a structural floor above. To these hangers they fasten runners extending from one wall to the opposite one. They then attach crosswise strips called furring channels to the runner channels. On these rectangles they may attach sheets of gypsum wallboard, or gypsum, or metal lath in preparation for plastering. On some jobs they may prepare a framework for the installation of acoustical panels. Many times they prepare recesses for ceiling lights or other special effects. Skilled lathers may create artistic shapes, such as domes, vaults, and groined ceilings, impossible to duplicate with board-like materials.

On curved or block walls lathers set up thin metal strips called furring to which they anchor lath. Lathers use vertical furring to enclose columns and beams. They wrap lath around the furring, overlap the edges, and fasten with wire. To prepare a base for cornices (decorative moldings where the wall and ceiling meet), lathers build a frame similar to the form or shape of the cornice design. They then cover the frame with metal lath.

Lathers use many devices to prepare surfaces for plastering. They use V-shaped strips of expanded metal, called corner beads, to protect the finished edges of outside corners. They install metal lath or wire mesh reinforcements in inside angles and corners to prevent cracking. Wood, plastic, or metal trim often covers joints at floors, doors, and windows.

Lathers also put up wood or metal strips to serve as a gauge for the thickness of the plaster or other material applied over the lath. They use casing beads, which help the plasterers do a neat job around doors, windows, and other openings. They put expansion joints in place to relieve stresses and strains caused by expansion and contraction within buildings.

New shapes in construction are creating a demand for lathers to do outside work. They may install metal lath for exterior stucco, cement, or plaster finishes.

In their work lathers use measuring rules and tapes, drills, hammers, chisels, saws, shears, wire cutters, bolt cutters, lath axe, end nippers, staple guns, automatic screwdrivers, wood and metal drills, welding equipment, lasers, and plasma cutters.

Working Conditions

Lathers usually work indoors. Lathing is hard physical work. Lathers lift and handle furring and partition studs, and cut and fasten lath to furring and supporting beams. In their work they may kneel, squat, stand, or work on overhead surfaces for long periods.

Lathers share some of the risks of other construction workers. They may fall from scaffolds or get cuts from materials or tools. They wear hard hats and other protective equipment.

Hours and Earnings

Like other construction workers, lathers work a forty-hour week. Deadlines on construction may force overtime. Bad weather may halt the work. Slowdowns in the construction industry may cause layoffs.

Earnings for lathers vary with education/training, experience, employer, and responsibilities. For example, union wages, in general, tend to be higher than non-union wages. Apprentices start at about 50 percent of the rate of skilled lathers. They receive regular pay raises until, at the end of their training, they are earning about 90 percent of a skilled lather's rate.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000, drywall workers and lathers earned an average of $17.07 an hour (approximately $650 a week). However, earnings ranged from a low of about $20,000 a year to a high of over $56,000 a year. Nearly half of the drywall workers and lathers reported earned between $25,350 and $43,620 a year.

According to the International Institute for Lath and Plaster, the wage and fringe benefits schedule (effective through June 30, 2006) for union affiliated drywall installers/lathers is $29 per hour base pay. Additional fringe benefits amount to $7.20 per hour for a total package of $36.20 an hour.

Lathers receive overtime for Saturday, Sunday, and holiday work. Union contracts may give workers health insurance, pension plans, and other benefits such as paid vacations.

Education and Training

Employers prefer workers with a high school diploma or the equivalent. Shop courses in carpentry will prove helpful in this work. Lathers should have a good grasp of basic mathematics. This learning will also be useful to lathers who plan to advance to skills beyond those of an expert lather.

Most lathers start as apprentices and learn their skills on the job and in related training. New workers carry materials, lift and hold panels, and clean up debris. They

learn how to handle the tools and materials of the trade. Later they learn to cut and install materials. They learn how to install furring and metal lath. Eventually, they become fully experienced lathers.

Most lathers learn their craft in an apprenticeship program. The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, in cooperation with local contractors, offers an apprenticeship program in carpentry that includes instruction in drywall and lath installation. Local affiliates of the Associated Builders and Contractors and the National Association of Home Builders conduct training programs for nonunion workers.

These trainees learn to develop surface shapes such as formed ceilings. They learn to integrate electrical and mechanical equipment with the furring structures. Apprentices learn to design supporting structures, and they learn about other trades directly connected with their work. Classroom studies include instruction in drafting, geometry, blueprint reading, welding, estimating, and safety practices.

Unions

In many industrial regions lathers belong to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. In New York City, some belong to the International Association of Bridge, Structural, and Ornamental Iron Workers.

Union membership is not a requirement and not all lathers are union members. However, unions often help to provide their members better training, wages, benefits, and working conditions.

Personal Qualifications

Apprentices must be at least sixteen years old and have a driver's license. After receiving a job offer, they may have to take an aptitude test.

Lathers must work well with others as well as alone. Lathers should have the strength and dexterity to perform the work with precision and accuracy. They should enjoy working with their hands and they should be ready to accept outdoor work when necessary. In their work lathers should exercise patience and attention to detail.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000, drywall carpenters and lathers held about 188,000 jobs. About 25,000 lathers work for lathing, plastering, and drywall contractors. Others work for contractors doing many kinds of construction. About a third of them are self-employed.

Lathers work throughout the United States, especially in new residential, commercial, or industrial construction. In most parts of the country, whether northern or southern, work goes on year-round. Some lathers move from one section of the country to another to follow construction work. Most lathers, however, especially those who live and work in industrial and residential centers, stay in one locality. Most lathers work in urban regions. In other areas, where there may not be enough work to keep lathers steadily employed full time, the work is usually done by carpenters.

Many lathers work in outside construction work. For example, they may construct the framework for metal cladding on buildings, and the framing and lathing for portland cement stucco figures, shapes, and imitation boulders and rocks at theme parks and other recreational sites.

Employment Outlook

The demand for lathers has been steadily declining. Little growth in the employment of lathers is expected through the next ten years. Most openings will become available as workers retire or leave the work. Lathers may also experience layoffs during slowdowns in construction activity. In addition, drywall, which is less expensive than lath and plaster, is replacing plaster walls. For this reason, many drywall installers are also trained lathers.

Although population growth and new business may create a demand for the construction of new buildings, the call for lathers will not be great. They may find special work such as lathing on curved or decorative shapes in new buildings. The nationwide resurgence of interest in restoring and preserving historical buildings will require the skills of some lathers and other craftsworkers. Some lathers will, for example, find work in the renovation and restoration of courthouses, libraries, schools, hospitals, and commercial buildings.

Entry Methods

Persons interested in this craft can look into an apprenticeship or on-the-job training at a local branch of the state apprenticeship agency or with a lathing or plastering contractor. They can also write to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. Union-management apprenticeship committees and state employment offices may have job leads.

High school students might acquire valuable experience in this field by taking a summer job or part-time job as a helper to a skilled lather.

Advancement

Lathers with years of experience may become supervisors of other lathers. They can also learn other building trades such as drywall and moveable partition installation.

Alert lathers can adapt new materials on the market to lathing purposes.

Workers skilled in these crafts may become estimators who figure the cost of lathing on building projects. Some start their own business and then work their way up to become contractors.

For Further Research

Associated Builders and Contractors, 1300 N. Seventeenth Street, Suite 800, Rosslyn, VA 22209. Web Site: www.abc.org

Associated General Contractors of America, 333 John Carlyle Street, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314. Web Site: www.agc.org

Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International, 307 East Avondale Road, Suite 200, Falls Church, VA 22042-2433. Web Site: www.awci.org

Home Builders Institute, National Association of Home Builders of the U.S., 1201 Fifteenth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005-2800. Web Site: www.hbi.org

United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, 101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001. Web Site: www.carpenters.org

Acknowledgments

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