

Apprentice Electrician

I worked for my father's plumbing, heating and electrical business during all four summers of high school. The business served my 400-person hometown and the surrounding farms. Because my father had such a good reputation for quality work we would some times do work in nearby towns. When I was younger my father also sold appliances in the front of the store and had an employee in the store at all times. But he learned that he did not make much money from the appliances and started focusing only services.

The service business only had my father and one other person, Jace, as its employees. So adding me during the summer was a significant increase in our capacity. We worked 5½ days/week – the ½ day being Saturday morning.

We worked on both new and existing homes, as well as farm related services (e.g. wiring a barn). I look on those four summers as an apprenticeship for becoming an electrician, plumber and heating/air conditioning technician.

My favorite projects involved building new houses, especially when we won all three bids (electrical, plumbing and heating/air conditioning). I loved seeing the house go through all its construction stages. We would start working when they had framed the house. Often I would place all the electrical receptacles and then run the wires to them. I would also assist my father and/or Jace in the plumbing. If the house were going to have forced air heating/air I would help install the ducts. My father would have custom built the sheet metal ducts in our shop (the back half of the store).

My least favorite projects usually involved existing homes. Sometimes we would do a major job like putting in a new heating/air system. As an example we might tear out the hot water radiators and then put in a new hot water baseboard heaters system. Other times we would do more minor projects on an existing house, e.g. adding extra outlets in an older house. With an existing house you don't have the luxury of working with no walls and only studs.

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INSIGHTS

I learned a lot of trade skills working for my father. It was also interesting to actually know what your father does for a living. But it was clear I would not be as accomplished at those 3 trades (electrical, plumbing and heating/air) as my father. I did not have the natural practical approach needed to be a good tradesman. Working for my father, working on farms and working on a road crew convinced me I should pursue a career that was more intellectual. I needed to make use of my natural strengths. I ended up going to engineering school.

I also got my 1st lesson in running a business. My father made sure the customer got quality work at a fair price. He knew he would be successful by getting repeat business. Because I also helped him with billing customers and paying vendors I was able to learn about that side of the business. I remember discovering he was charging \$8/hour for my services but only paying me \$5/hour. He told me the extra \$3 pays him to tell/show you what to do and to inspect your work.