

The Case For Working With Your Hands

As distasteful as it may seem to some students and parents, working with your hands may be a good alternative in this changing economy. When you look around, people still are needed to fix your car, rewire or paint your house, fix your broken power lines, teach you to play the piano, and bypass your clogged arteries. All of these people work with their hands and have skills that can't be duplicated by foreign countries. The real difference in the new service economy will be jobs that have the potential to be offshored, versus jobs that must be done face to face with the customer. This article makes the case that working with one's hands is not only a worthy career, but it can also give some people more job satisfaction and security than many other careers. Let me begin by introducing the learning styles suggested by Neil Fleming is his VARK system, which delineates 4 basic kinds of learning:

Auditory — The auditory learner depends on hearing and speaking, as in a classroom with a teacher lecturing. The student may struggle to understand when reading a textbook but can get the full understanding of the topic when the instructor explains the chapter.

Visual — Visual learners prefer to have information presented in graphs, pictures, maps, drawings, etc. When I first began consulting with small manufacturers, I learned to always have a white board close by so that I could draw symbols and illustrations of concepts like machine setup, future sales, cash flow, and other important factors.

Kinesthetic learning — This is a style where learning does not take place until the student does a physical activity. In my career in robotics and automation, we would ask students to read the manuals and then take a class where the techniques of preventative maintenance were explained over and over with slides and drawings. But when the student went out on the floor and actually lubed all of the lubrication points on the machine, he or she learned the lesson immediately.

Reading and writing — This type of learner is very good at gaining their information through reading and writing. This style, along with auditory skills, might be the perfect college student.

But what about the kinesthetic and visual learners? They may struggle with the "book learning" atmosphere of college, yet they might excel at jobs where using your hands is required. These types of people usually do not like to be cooped up in a classroom, and they would rather do something other than take notes. They might go to college based on pressure, but find that they are better off pursuing a skill that uses their special way of thinking.

Higher Skills Mean Higher Pay

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Tool and die, mould making, and advanced machining are becoming lost arts in the U.S. In fact, any of the careers requiring advanced skills and some kind of journeyman status are going to become more and more in demand. A good example is the person who learns to do maintenance and trouble shooting on automated production lines. When a line stops, there are a lot of variables to consider. Many of the large manufacturers think that they can teach these workers complex trouble-shooting by simply making them read complex operation manuals with a lot of step-by-step instructions and photos. But this is fallacious reasoning or perhaps wishful thinking.

First of all the worker may be a kinesthetic or visual learner who does not learn by reading or training lectures. Secondly, the symptoms may have many causes and these causes may interact. In my experience on these automated lines, the problem is seldom as simple as a faulty photocell. Finding the problem takes experience, a lot of training, and some real advanced thinking.

Matthew Crawford, author of *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, says that in trouble-shooting a problem, "The gap between theory and practice stretches out in front of you, and this is where it gets interesting. What you need now is the judgment that arises only from experience; hunches rather than rules." Yes you are working with your hands, but this is about advanced reasoning.

Another reason to consider working with your hands is to avoid the problem of becoming a corporate drone. Many giant corporations no longer have a compact with their employees and their primary focus is on share holder value and continued efforts to reduce costs, no matter what. These kinds of jobs lead to disillusionment and seldom give the employee a feeling of job satisfaction.

The Satisfaction

In 1953 I took my first shop class at public school in Portland Oregon. In 1956 as a sophomore in high school, I built a birch plywood coffee table with 2 drawers for my mother. The joy of building things with my hands led me to pursue auto mechanics, scratchboard art, drawing, and eventually building my own woodshop — which has spawned hundreds of projects.

Learning how to create things with my hands both enriched my life and my thinking. As I gained confidence, I learned to lay roofs, make cabinets, thread pipe, and install gas lines, tile floors and myriad other skills. I reached a point where I didn't believe there was anything I could not build given time and study. I began to see working with my hands as an art form and recognized the true value of the people in manufacturing who were very good at it.

I admit that making things with your hands will not in and of itself make the U.S. competitive in the global climate. But when you connect this set of skills with the new requirements of mathematics, computers, software, reading, writing, and the need to get ahead, you have created the 21st century manufacturing workers that we need to save American manufacturing.

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