

Try at trade

Blue-collar jobs
are a good fit for
former troops

Grant Montgomery, a former Marine corporal, left a job in aviation maintenance in 2008 to go to work as a civilian pipe fitter. Here, he works on a construction site at a hospital in West Frankfort, Ill.

Before laptops, spreadsheets and yellow stickies, people used to make the things they needed with their hands.

And they still do. Look at former Marine corporal and aviation maintainer Grant Montgomery, who in 2008 left the Corps to work as a civilian pipe fitter. It isn't glamorous — “We basically put up pipe all day” — but he earns an

honest dollar and the union guarantees he'll make more as he gains experience.

“It's work that I can stand back and look at and say that it's a really good job,” Montgomery said. “It's something I can feel good about.”

Blue-collar life is alive and well, and for some former service members, it can be a perfect fit.

“They show up for work, they follow process,” said Ron Krannich, author of “The Blue-Collar Resume and Job Hunting Guide.”

“Employers really understand that, and they appreciate it. Not all workers have those same work habits.”

Become an apprentice

Montgomery found his job through Helmets to Hardhats, a program that helps former service members enter the skilled trades. With basic skills in hand, Montgomery was able to approach the local union, demonstrate his welding abilities and begin his pipe-fitting career as an apprentice.

“They really don't need to see experience as long as we are working with someone who is experienced,” said Montgomery, who works alongside a field-tested journeyman.

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4 TIPS FOR LANDING A BLUE-COLLAR JOB

Advice from Ron Krannich, author of “The Blue-Collar Resume and Job Hunting Guide”:

CRAFT A RÉSUMÉ

Blue-collar jobs have gone beyond the interview-and-a-handshake days. Many jobs are advertised online, and you'll need to submit a résumé that emphasizes your relevant skills and experience.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Where will that final moving allowance take you? Identify the top employers in the area. Find out what kinds of workers they need.

HIT THE MILITARY-FRIENDLY JOB FAIRS

Employers go to the events looking for a range of workers, not just desk-sitters but also those who toil with their hands.

TAKE AN INVENTORY

Prepare a checklist of your specific accomplishments while in uniform. These will be your talking points in the interview.

— Adam Stone

Now, Montgomery earns 60 percent of a journeyman's \$33 an hour. The percentage will increase as he works through his five-year apprenticeship. In the meantime, the union keeps him steadily employed on a range of projects.

Nonunion jobs

Not all blue-collar workers belong to a union — only 14.7 million U.S. workers are union members, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Especially in smaller communities, many employers hire directly for these jobs.

Unlike the unions, these smaller companies won't offer the grace period of an apprenticeship. You'll need to have skills in hand to land these jobs, Krannich said.

"A lot of them are very small companies and so they want someone with experience who can pick up on Day One and run with it," Krannich said. This means being ready to show a track record of related work.

"They will want to know that you can work in a particular area, that you can work with the equipment they are using. They are going to have a very specific set of job-performance questions," he said.

For those who choose the blue-collar path, the rewards can go beyond financial compensation.

TOP-PAYING JOBS

Not all the money in this country is earned behind a desk. For those who choose to labor with their hands, compensation can be considerable. Median earnings for some of the top-paying blue-collar jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau for Labor Statistics:

Elevator installer and repairer	Power plant operator
\$34.09 per hour	\$30.33 per hour
\$70,910 per year	\$63,080 per year
Electrical and electronics repairer, powerhouse, substation and relay	Gas plant operator
\$31.36 per hour	\$27.50 per hour
\$65,230 per year	\$57,200 per year
	Locomotive engineer
	\$22.42 per hour
	\$46,630 per year

"It's something that I can take pride in," Montgomery said. "And there's always some progress I can make. I know that I can make it just a little bit better the next time." ■

— Adam Stone

5 CITIES FOR BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS

Philadelphia is stocked with manufacturing and chemical jobs, along with opportunities in cable and the Internet.

If you can stand the cold, **Buffalo, N.Y.**, has attracted a strong base in high-tech, industrial, medical and food manufacturing jobs. Nearly 20 percent of the workforce is blue collar.

The third-largest city in the nation, **Chicago** is home to food processing, medical products and manufacturing firms. Aerospace also plays a prominent role. Huge warehouse complexes employ thousands, though the work is far from steady.

With strong transportation ties to the railroads and canals, not to

mention the Cuyahoga River and Lake Erie, **Cleveland's** geography has made it a natural hub of manufacturing. Steel and iron remain strong, with electrical equipment, fabricated metals and other materials helping to provide employment for a blue-collar workforce. Drivers are always in demand.

In **Detroit**, the Big Three auto companies remain a mainstay of employment, both directly and indirectly. Off the auto assembly line, area manufacturers create related items such as batteries and alternative fuels, all with the help of a strong blue-collar workforce.

— Adam Stone

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