

Career Spotlight: What I Do as a Plumber



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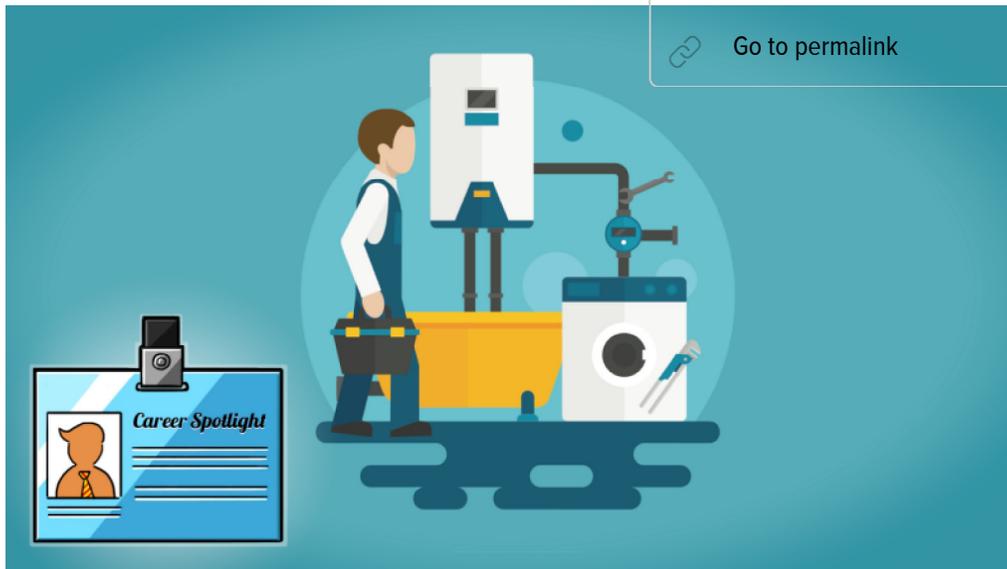
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You might think of a plumber as someone who drives around with a tool box to fix your leaks, but their role in building design and infrastructure directly affects much more than just your dripping faucet.

To learn about what a typical career is like for a plumber, we spoke with Fred Schilling, founder and CEO of Pipeline Plumbing in South Florida. Fred's long career started in the Air Force where he was trained in the plumbing trade by the U.S.

Navy Seabees and U.S. Air Force Civil Engineers. Following his service, at 25 he became one the youngest certified ‘master plumbers’ in Florida ever—a distinction that requires a 7 year apprenticeship and certification test, on which he is the only person to ever receive a perfect score. Fred’s been running his plumbing contractor business ever since.

He’s also the Vice President of a non-profit trade organization called Plumbers Without Borders, which strives to improve health and sanitation by connecting humanitarian organizations with tradespersons throughout the world.

First of all, tell us a bit about your work and how you’ve arrived where you are today.

We are and always have been considered as “Commercial Plumbing Contractors.” We like to think we work on the most complicated of plumbing systems—that has been the ticket to our success. We have one of the best reputations for quality workmanship in South Florida. What helped us the most arrive at where we are today is our relentless commitment to doing the best job possible, every time for every customer. As the founder, I always hear my late dad telling me, “I don’t care what you do as a career in your life as long as you become the best.” I’d like to think I’ve lived up to that request.

What drove you to choose your career path?

I actually never considered becoming a plumber. No one in my family had ever been involved in any of the trades as a profession. I spent my childhood and youth as a professional

drummer, always thinking that would be my career. The Air Force drafted me close to my 18th birthday and I joined to avoid Vietnam. Since I'm colorblind, my choices for a career in the Air Force were very limited. I was offered plumbing as one of my choices and you might say the rest is history.

How did you go about getting your job? What kind of education do most plumbers need? (I hear you became a master plumber at quite a young age!)

I often say that I received a "Harvard Education in Plumbing" while in the Air Force. I attended the Navy Seabee Construction School every day for almost a year, then continued my education with the Air Force Civil Engineering program for the next three years. Along the way, I worked alongside some of the best master plumbers in the world, all over the world. When I returned home from the service I opened the yellow pages and was hired by the first plumber I called. He was the mayor of Miami Beach and I worked there until I started my own business.

I would recommend taking classes in Physics, Science and Math. Every day we use all three.

Yes, I'm considered one, if not the youngest person to ever become a master plumber in Florida history. I knew that was my ticket to success... and it certainly has been!

What kinds of things do plumbers do beyond what most people see? What do plumbers actually spend the majority of time doing (e.g., paper work, driving to locations, etc.)?

We cover a large geographical area, so we do spend a great deal of time in traffic.

I'd like to think in my career I've helped elevate the public's impression of a plumber. I've certainly worked very hard to do so. The typical impression the public has of a plumber is a rough looking fellow, bent over a clogged toilet with a plunger. Nothing could be further from reality! For example, the oxygen you receive in an operating room for example was installed by a plumber. The dental chair you sit in was installed by a plumber. The decorative fountains you enjoy while strolling Lincoln Road on Miami Beach were installed by a plumber. The gas ovens and stoves that prepare your dinner at your favorite restaurant were installed by a plumber. The pneumatic (air lines) at factories and similar facilities were installed by a plumber. Just a few examples, there are many more.

What misconceptions do people often have about plumbing as a job?

They think all we do is unclog sinks and toilets. That it's only a profession for the people who could not go to college. That we dig ditches all day.

What sort of work hours does an average plumber keep? I imagine some people specialize in emergency on-call work, but that's not for everyone.

You are a plumber 24 hours a day, seven days a week.... it's the life we choose. Plumbers do not keep banker's hours. Regardless if you are doing only new construction or service and repair, the phone—or in more recent times—email will change your plans for the day or evening. We pay close attention to our phones as at any moment (including while I'm typing, things could and do change) Over the years you get used to it.

Is there anything that you do differently from your coworkers or peers in the same profession?

We seek out the most complicated plumbing projects. While many of our fellow plumbers steer clear of complex plumbing problems, we specialize in them.

What's the worst part of the plumbing as a job and how do you deal with it?

Today it's the traffic! All of our trucks have great sound systems!

What's the most enjoyable part of the job?

Ahh, the feeling of accomplishment for one. I've helped build more than one thousand commercial buildings here in South Florida as the plumber, so everywhere I go, everyday, I see some of them. I am so very proud of them.

Recently one of my first buildings was torn down to make way for a new bank; I watched the demolition for a bit and cried a little. I had worked so hard on that building. They become part of you. Where else do you get to have a picnic lunch with your pals every day?

What do people under/over value about what plumbers do?

Protecting the health of the nation is number one without question. We have historically—and still today—protected the world from disease. Over value? We charge too much.

If you don't mind me asking, what would you say is a realistic salary for the average plumber?

Working plumbers average between 75 and 100k per year, more if you own your own company.

You've come a long way in your career. How do most people "move up" in your field?

Hard work! Get every kind of license and certification you can!

What advice would you give to those aspiring to join your profession?

Do It! I speak to many high school and youth groups as State Building Commissioner. A story that I always tell to inspire them to become master plumbers: "In the next 10 to 15 years, society will be so desperate for a master plumber who can bring a new building out of the ground—like the new World Trade Center—and see it through to completion. That at the beginning of the

project when they are arranging the job trailers and office trailers on the site they will provide a garage for the master plumber to park his Ferrari. They will pay you more than a neurosurgeon, because so few will have the skills to do what we do.”

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Career Spotlight is an interview series on Lifehacker that focuses on regular people and the jobs you might not hear much about—from doctors to plumbers to aerospace engineers and everything in between. If you’d like to share your career, email us at submissions+career@lifehacker.com. Image by Macrovector (Shutterstock).

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