

Choosing a Nontraditional Career: Women in the Electrical Industry

By *Reina Mora-Blackwelder*



Judy Nicita



Trina Rodriguez

Imagine an electrician. What image does your mind capture first? Did you picture a man? Most people do – and understandably so. According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s list of nontraditional occupations for women, of the 912,000 electricians employed in 2007 only 1,700 were women. However, with each passing year, statistics show that women are increasingly entering careers in the electrical industry - earning a good living and enjoying their work. What motivates a woman to choose a nontraditional job such as those offered in the electrical industry?

Nontraditional jobs are careers for women that are highly-skilled, have a high wages and have traditionally been held by men. The U.S. Department of Labor defines this as an occupation in which women make up 25% or less of all workers. More and more women are drawn to these careers because, unlike some jobs traditionally held by women, the nontraditional jobs have opportunities for paid training (electrical apprenticeship), wage advancement, benefits, and career advancement. Women in nontraditional careers are able to earn 20 to 30 percent more than women in traditional careers. For example, a daycare worker earns an average of \$7 to \$12 an hour, but a journeyman

electrician earns \$15 to \$22 an hour, and once she advances, she can earn upward of \$30 per hour. In addition, women in nontraditional jobs often receive better benefits than traditional jobs offer, such as sick leave, paid vacation, and health insurance.

Judith Nicita, a fourth-year, electrical apprentice with the IEC Florida West Coast Chapter’s program, claims that pursuing her high school diploma at

your life?” When offered several elective courses during high school registration, Judith chose two, electrical wiring and auto mechanics. After graduating, and in an effort to break out of her career rut, she applied for two new positions – one with an electrical firm and one with an auto repair firm. She was hired by the electrical firm and has never looked back.

As an electrical apprentice, she does not find it difficult to grasp electrical concepts and “the hands-on seems to come to me naturally.” She emphasized that women have the physical or mental strength to be successful in the electrical field, and that it has been the men with whom she’s worked who have encouraged her the most to persevere in the career. Always looking forward, Judith hopes to someday earn the master electrician designation. Her only regret is not starting the career earlier in life, thereby attaining economic security for her family; but she feels that “women are programmed to take the traditional job routes” and it took the maturity she gained over time to resist the limits of a conventional career path.

Women may also experience an increased sense of job satisfaction in a nontraditional career. The work offered in these jobs is often interesting and challenging. Most nontraditional jobs require math and science skills. The math

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age 41 “opened a door” that eventually led to a position with what she considers to be the number one electrical firm in the state of Florida, APG Electric. After 29 years of waiting tables and struggling to raise two children, Judith was motivated to make a career change by her daughter who asked, “Is this really what you want to do all

required is usually hands-on and is very different from classroom mathematics. Nontraditional jobs may allow women to exercise skills that they enjoy but previously may not have been able to utilize at the workplace.

For Trina Rodriguez who, as a teenager, helped out as a summer receptionist at the electrical

contracting firm where her father serves as president, the lure of the electrical industry came only after following what she thought was a logical career path that built upon the academic excellence she demonstrated in her high school science classes. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry from Furman University (Greenville, South Carolina), Trina worked as a chemist in the research and development department of a firm concerned with improving chemical formulations of various building supplies. When that company relocated out of Florida, she decided to return to

general contractors. Shortly, she took charge of complex proposals, bid forms, qualification statements, and history management. In her current role as the firm's accounting manager, she continues to implement quality control processes and has made necessary changes to streamline processes. According to Trina her past prepared her for a future career in the electrical firm. "Scientific education and experience helped to develop my analytical thinking and processing skills, all of which allows me to continually learn something new, expand my skills, and contribute to an awesome company."

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the business which employs her friends and several family members. As an assistant to the head estimator, the attention to detail so valued in the scientific community worked to serve her well in her new career. She learned the materials of the



Female apprentice competes at the 2008 IEC National Apprentice of the Year Competition held in Atlanta, Georgia.

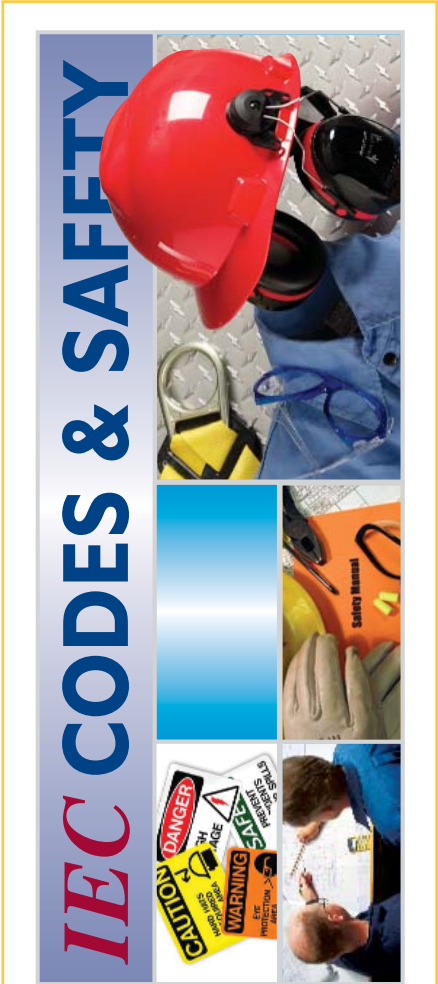
electrical trade by “starting with very basic tasks such as counting fixtures and outlets.” Once Trina became comfortable with the estimating process, her duties led to interactions with suppliers and

Each year the United States alone adds more than \$600 billion worth of new construction projects. That means that there are over 240,000 jobs available annually in construction. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average age of workers in the skilled trades nationwide is 48. Combined with the fact that the first wave of baby boomers will start retiring within the next five years, it's no wonder that labor statisticians are forever warning of an impending shortage of workers in the skilled trades.

Who better to fill this void than the labor force that's historically “stepped up to the plate” in an era of need? With women now regularly working their way to the top of the financial, commercial, military and government sectors, it's time for the construction industry, school counselors, and ambitious women to recognize and embrace the potential of a nontraditional job such as those offered in the electrical industry.

INSIGHTS

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