



#PROJECT BOOTSTRAP

WOLVERINE 

GEN Z & THE TRADES:
HOW PERCEPTION & PATHWAYS ARE
SHAPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF WORK

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LETTER FROM THE GLOBAL GENERAL MANAGER

At Wolverine, we have always believed in the people who build, fix and move things, and make the world work. As the original American work brand, Wolverine has spent more than 140 years designing boots and workwear for real workers: the ones who show up every day and rely on gear built for long hours, tough conditions and work that cannot wait.



Mike Maloney,
Global General Manager

For generations, skilled tradespeople have been at the center of our brand. They are the workers on job sites before sunrise, the apprentices learning by doing, and the craftspeople solving real problems with their hands and minds. They are the people whose work keeps communities, businesses and families moving forward. Their work is essential. But too often, their career choices are misunderstood, underestimated or overlooked.

This report was created to better understand how the next generation views the skilled trades. What we found is encouraging, and also illuminating. Young people see the potential. They recognize the earning power, the stability and the value of hands-on careers. But interest alone is not enough. Many still face outdated perceptions, limited exposure to the skilled trades, and a system that too often presents college as the default measure of success.

This matters because the country is facing a real and growing skills gap. The need for skilled trades workers continues to rise, yet too many young people are not being shown what these careers can offer, or how to find their way into them. This is exactly why Wolverine created Project Bootstrap: to help break down misconceptions around the trades, support those learning the skills, and inspire the next generation of workers who will keep our communities and industries moving forward.

We believe it is time to tell a broader story.

The skilled trades are not a backup plan. They are a path to purpose, independence, financial opportunity and making a lasting impact. They deserve to be treated with the same respect as any other career path, and members of the next generation deserve clearer ways to see themselves in this work.

For more than 140 years, Wolverine has stood alongside skilled trades workers with work boots built for durability, protection, and comfort that holds up through long shifts. Through Project Bootstrap, we are extending that commitment beyond the jobsite by raising awareness of skilled trades careers, supporting workforce education partners, and equipping young workers with the tools and confidence to build something for themselves.

Our commitment is not only to support today's tradespeople, but to inspire and equip the next generation that will follow in their footsteps.

We hope this report sparks conversation, challenges assumptions, and helps more young people see the skilled trades for what they truly are: meaningful, respected and full of possibility.



INTRODUCTION

The skilled trades are essential to the way people live, work and move. Whether in construction, manufacturing, electrical work, plumbing, HVAC, transportation, agriculture or another hands-on sector, skilled workers help build and maintain the systems vital to society. However, young people still must navigate outdated perceptions of the skilled trades, uneven exposure to them, and limited information about what these careers can offer.

This report was created to better understand how the next generation views skilled trades careers today. It explores awareness, interest, perceived barriers, career priorities and the influences shaping young people's decisions after high school. It also looks at the tension between growing interest in hands-on work and the continued cultural pressure to follow a traditional four-year college path.

For Wolverine, a 143-year-old institution in the work boot industry, this conversation is deeply connected to the people that the brand has always served: real workers, skilled tradespeople, and those who show up every day to do essential work. This report is not meant to argue that one career path is right for everyone. Instead, it aims to help broaden the conversation, challenge outdated assumptions and make the skilled trades easier to see as respected, stable and future-focused career paths.



METHODOLOGY, DEFINITIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

METHODOLOGY

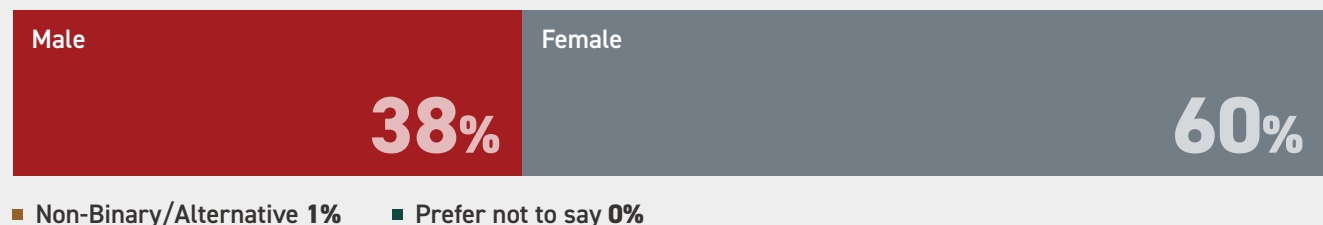
This online survey of 2,000 U.S. 16-28-year-olds was commissioned by Wolverine and conducted by market research company OnePoll, in accordance with the Market Research Society's code of conduct. Data was collected between 8 and 17 June 2026. All participants were double-opted in to take part in research and were paid an amount depending on the length and complexity of the survey.

This survey was overseen and edited by the OnePoll research team. OnePoll are MRS Company Partners, corporate members of ESOMAR and members of the British Polling Council.

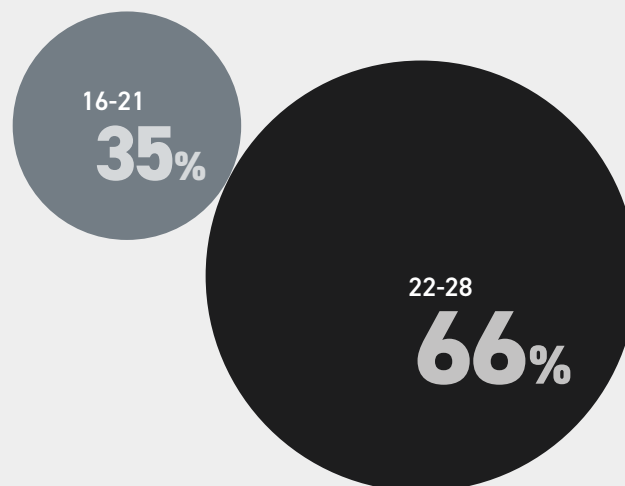
The survey participants were asked about their awareness, perceptions, interest and decision-making related to skilled trades careers. Where relevant, findings are broken out by age, gender and current relationship to the skilled trades. The survey included people who already worked in the trades, as well as those not currently active in the industry.

WHO WE TALKED TO

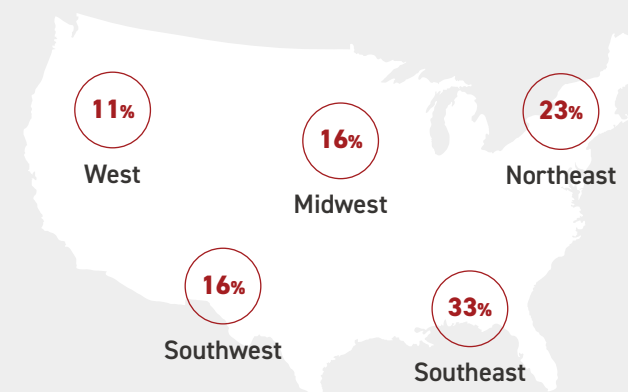
GENDER



AGE



REGION*



NOTES ON LANGUAGE

To ensure clarity, the following notes provide context on how key language is used in this report.

Gen Z

For the purpose of this report, “Gen Z” refers to respondents aged 16-28. The report also considers differences between younger and older respondents when these are significant.

Skilled Trades

In this report, “skilled trades” refers to hands-on careers that require specialized training, technical skill or applied experience. These include fields such as construction, electrical work, plumbing, welding, HVAC, manufacturing, automotive, transportation, agriculture, maintenance and repair, as well as other essential trade professions.

Trade School and Vocational Training

“Trade school” and “vocational training” refer to education programs designed to prepare students for specific skilled trades or technical careers. These programs may take place through dedicated trade schools, technical colleges, community colleges, high-school career and technical education programs, or other training providers.

Apprenticeship

An apprenticeship is a structured training pathway that typically combines paid, hands-on work experience with classroom or technical instruction. In many trades, apprenticeships allow people to earn while they learn and progress toward long-term career credentials.

Career Pathways

“Career pathways” refers to the different routes people may take into employment after high school, including four-year college, community college, trade school, vocational training, apprenticeships, military service, entrepreneurship or direct entry into the workforce.

Skilled Trades Workers

“Skilled trades workers” refers to people currently working in trade-based or hands-on technical fields. Throughout this report, the term is intended to reflect a broad and diverse group of workers across industries, experience levels, backgrounds and career stages.

College

When this report mentions “college,” it generally refers to a traditional four-year college or university path unless otherwise specified.

Work

This report uses terms like “real work,” “hands-on work,” “skilled work” and “essential work” to describe the value and impact of the trades. These terms are intended to recognize the skill, training, craftsmanship and commitment required in trade careers without using stereotypes or narrowing who belongs in these fields.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

04

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reveals a clear tension: Gen Z is increasingly open to the skilled trades, but interest alone is not enough to shift career decisions. Young people recognize the earning potential, stability and value of hands-on work, but many still face outdated perceptions, limited exposure to trade careers, and a system that often presents college as the default path.

The overarching theme is simple. The skilled trades do not have an interest problem as much as they have a perception and pathway problem.

KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:



Gen Z is open to the trades, but many are not yet choosing them.

Among respondents not already working in the skilled trades, 71% said they would be interested in trying a job in the industry. But when asked to choose between college or an apprenticeship, only 21% of all survey participants would choose an apprenticeship, while 32% would choose college and 35% considered both equally likely.



The gap between interest and action is established at an early age.

While 58% of the high-school age group (16-18 years old) said they had considered a trade career or embarked on one already, only 11% of them could see themselves going to trade school or starting an apprenticeship.



The economic appeal of the trades is breaking through.

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents said someone could reach \$100,000 a year faster as a tradesperson than by following the traditional college route. This shows that young people increasingly recognize the earning potential of skilled work.



Avoiding student debt matters.

Eighty-seven percent of respondents said avoiding student debt is important when choosing a career path. This produces an opportunity to present the trades as a practical, financially viable path into the workforce.



College still carries strong cultural pressure.

Seventy-three percent of respondents said they felt “a lot” or “some” pressure to attend college after high school, while 41% believed that a college degree was the only way to be successful.



Trades are seen as essential, but stereotypes remain.

Seventy-three percent of respondents agreed that trade jobs are essential to society, yet many still associate the trades with physical demand (28%), risk (28%), messy environments (25%), limited flexibility (19%) or lower status (17%), compared with office-based careers.



Parents, educators and online sources shape the path.

Respondents identified parents and family (37%), school or teachers (35%), social media (35%) and online research (35%) as major sources of career information. This shows that career decisions are influenced by many voices before a young person enters the workforce.



For Wolverine, these findings point to a clear role:

Help make skilled trades careers more visible, better understood and more respected for the next generation. As a leading American work brand, Wolverine has a credible opportunity to bring attention to the people, pathways and possibilities representing the future of skilled work.

WHY THE SKILLED TRADES MATTER NOW

05

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a grey knit beanie and a brown and black plaid shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is holding a pair of pliers and working on a white pipe. The background is slightly blurred, showing some wooden beams.

WHY THE SKILLED TRADES MATTER NOW

The skilled trades have always been central to America. These are the jobs that build and maintain homes, roads, job sites, manufacturing floors, farms, vehicles, utilities and the everyday systems that people depend on. Yet for many young people, the trades have not always been afforded the same visibility or status as other career paths.

That imbalance is becoming harder to ignore. As of 2026, the skilled labor gap remains a workforce concern. In construction alone, industry estimates point to a need for hundreds of thousands of additional workers this year, while broader outlooks warn that shortages across skilled trades could deepen in the years ahead. The implications reach far beyond individual job openings. When the trades pipeline does not keep pace, the effects can show up in delayed projects, strained infrastructure, higher costs and slower economic growth.^{1,2}

At the same time, young people are making career decisions in a different reality than previous generations. They are weighing the cost of education, the value of job security, the desire for meaningful work and the necessity to choose a path that can support long-term independence. That makes this a critical moment to better understand how the next generation views the trades: not just whether they know these careers exist, but whether they see them as respected, attainable and built for the future.

This context matters to Wolverine, because the brand has spent more than 140 years connected to the people who do essential, hands-on work. But Wolverine's commitment does not stop with supporting workers already on the job. Since 2016, Project Bootstrap has been building the next generation of skilled tradespeople — breaking down misconceptions, supporting workforce education partners, providing boots and resources to students, and helping more young people see the trades as a path they can pursue with pride.

The opportunity now is to help bring greater visibility to the skilled trades — and to start a broader conversation about the challenges, pathways and perceptions influencing the next generation of the workforce.

1. "Skilled Trades Shortage 2026," Trade Colleges, March 17, 2026. [Tradecolleges.org/blog/skilled-trades-outlook/skilled-trades-shortage-opportunity](https://tradecolleges.org/blog/skilled-trades-outlook/skilled-trades-shortage-opportunity)
2. "The State of Skilled Trades in America: 2026," TradespeopleHQ, March 26, 2026. www.tradespeoplehq.com/guides/state-of-skilled-trades-2026-report

WHAT THE SURVEY FOUND

06

KEY FINDING #1

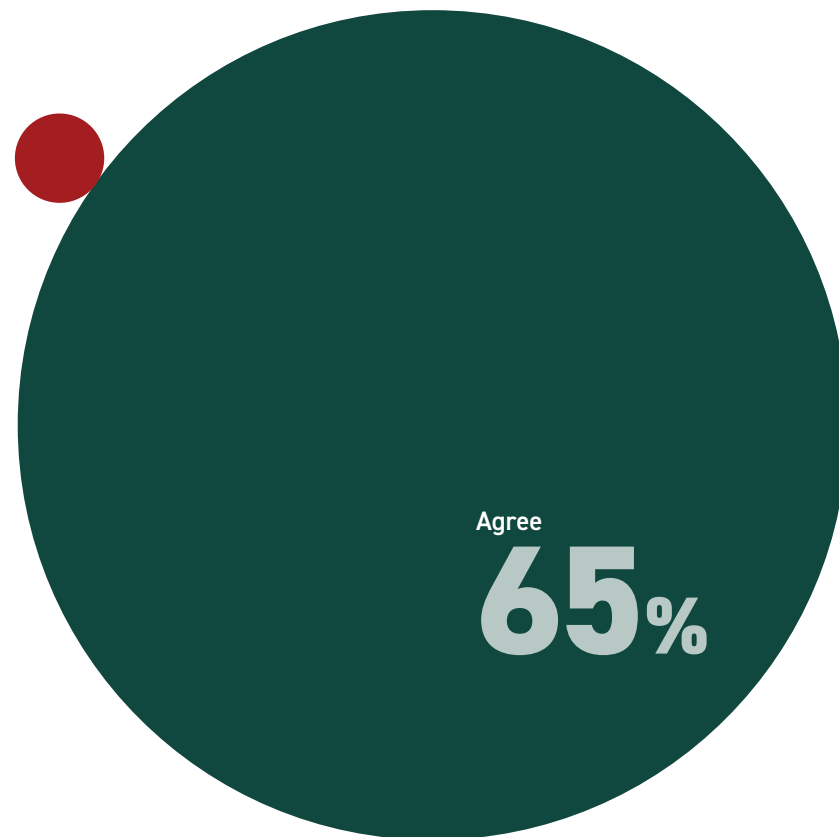
GEN Z IS OPEN TO THE TRADES — BUT INTEREST ALONE ISN'T ENOUGH

Gen Z is not dismissing the skilled trades. In fact, many young people see their appeal: strong earning potential, hands-on work, faster entry into the workforce and an alternative to the cost of a four-year degree. But interest has not yet been translated into action. The data points to a clear disconnect. Young people are open to the trades, yet many still do not see them as a path they are expected or encouraged to choose.



THE INTEREST-TO-ACTION GAP

“SOMEONE COULD EARN \$100K A YEAR QUICKER AS A TRADESPERSON THAN GOING DOWN THE TRADITIONAL COLLEGE ROUTE”



■ Disagree **7%**

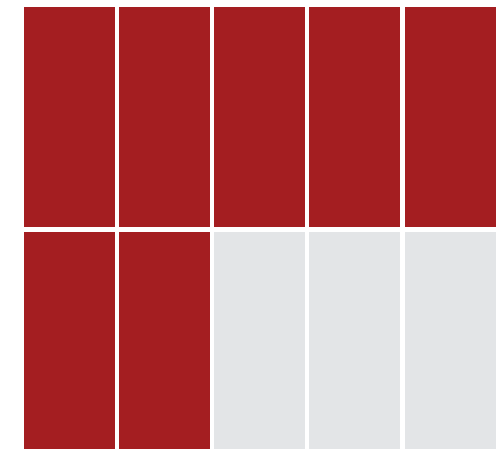
■ Neither, N/A or Not Sure **27%**

Among respondents who were not already working in the skilled trades, 71% said they would be interested in trying a job in the industry. Yet, when asked to choose between college or an apprenticeship, only 21% of all respondents would choose an apprenticeship, while 32% would choose college and 35% considered both equally likely. That gap matters. It suggests the skilled trades are gaining consideration, but college still holds the stronger default position in many young people's career planning.

More than half (58%) believed skilled trades careers are becoming more appealing to people in their age bracket. A quarter (25%) thought they are becoming much more appealing. Just over 1 in 10 respondents hold the opposing view: 12% say that skilled trade careers are becoming less appealing, including 3% who believe they are becoming much less appealing.

Interest in trying a skilled trades job was especially high among male respondents at 77%, but the broader finding is more important: openness to the trades is not limited to one group. The opportunity is to make that interest feel attainable, visible and welcoming across audiences — especially for those who have not historically seen themselves represented in skilled trade careers.

The earning potential of trade careers is breaking through. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) agreed that someone could reach \$100,000 a year faster as a tradesperson than by following the traditional college route.



Over

7 in 10

not already working in the industry would be interested in trying out a skilled trades job

WHAT GEN Z WANTS FROM WORK

When respondents thought about their future careers, pay was the leading priority. Nearly three in 10 (29%) selected a high salary as the most important factor, ahead of work-life balance (20%), doing work they enjoyed (19%), and good benefits (19%). For a generation entering adulthood amid rising costs, student debt concerns and a changing job market, the appeal of the trades may be less about rejecting college and more about finding a path that feels practical, stable and financially worthwhile.

A high salary was even more important to those who said they valued personal growth (35%) or valued building a meaningful life (36%). This latter group also cared deeply about doing something they enjoyed or were passionate about (29%). Meanwhile, job flexibility revealed a wide gender split. While 20% of female respondents chose it as a priority, only 14% of male respondents rated it as important.

Across all groups, the less popular responses included doing creative, non-repetitive work (9%), working as part of a team (9%) and having clear career progression opportunities (8%).

Taken together, these findings suggest Gen Z is looking for more than a paycheck. They want work that can support a good life financially, personally and practically. That creates an opening to position the skilled trades as modern career paths built around earning potential, independence, purpose and pride in doing real, hands-on work.

MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN CHOOSING A CAREER

A high salary



29%

Work-life balance



20%

Passionate about work/enjoy it



19%

Good benefits (e.g. healthcare, paid leave)



19%

Flexibility (e.g. hours, location)



18%

Job security



17%



THE DEFAULT PATH IS STILL HARD TO DISRUPT

Most respondents are willing to consider the skilled trades, but consideration does not always lead to commitment. Nearly seven in 10 respondents were either already working in the skilled trades (30%) or had considered doing so (39%), yet a significant share (31%) — especially younger respondents and women — had not considered the path at all. The data suggests the issue is not simply whether young people know the trades exist. It is whether they see a clear, respected and realistic path into them.

Providing that path requires more than information. It includes early exposure to real workers and real work, through high-school shop classes, hands-on technical education, jobsite visits, mentorship or other opportunities to experience the trades firsthand.

It also requires clearer education around apprenticeships and trade schools, and a more accurate picture of what skilled work looks like today: topics such as jobsite-ready expertise, long-shift endurance, mobility, safety, problem-solving and taking pride in work.

Behind the headline figures, there were some big variations by age group and gender. Within the high-school age group (16-18 years old), a total of 58% reported they had considered a trade career (42%) or had begun one already (16%). However, just 11% of this age group saw trade school or an apprenticeship as their most likely path after leaving secondary education.

HOW AWARE ARE YOU OF THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TRADE WORK?

■ Neither 22%

Aware

Unaware

66%

12%



Among 16 to 21-year-olds, 39% said they had not considered a skilled trades job. This figure dropped to 27% for the 22-28 age group. Out of the pool of female respondents, 24% currently had a skilled trades job, while 37% said they had not considered one. The situation was almost reversed in the male group, with 39% already working in the industry and just 20% never having considered it.

Across the board, a majority of participants recognized the potential benefits of trade work, including flexibility, strong pay and long-term stability. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) stated they were either very or somewhat aware of these career advantages.

Awareness appears to be a critical unlock. Respondents who understand these benefits of trade work are better positioned to see the trades as a serious career option. That makes education, exposure and credible storytelling essential — especially for those who are currently less receptive to the message, such as younger respondents and women. Awareness of the potential benefits of trade work was considerably higher in male respondents (73%) and the 22-28 age group (68%) than in female respondents (63%) and those aged 16 to 21 (63%).

WHAT THIS MEANS

Gen Z is open to the trades, but openness is not enough. The next step is making the skilled trades feel visible, viable and personally relevant, and helping young people see that meaningful careers can be built through skill, grit, craftsmanship and the confidence to show up every day.

KEY FINDING #2

THE PERCEPTION GAP IS STILL SHAPING CAREER CHOICES

Young people recognize the value of skilled trades work. They see it as essential, practical and increasingly appealing. But old assumptions still have power. Outdated perceptions do not just affect how people talk about the trades — they affect whether young people can imagine themselves belonging in them. For many respondents, college remains the default marker of success, while trade careers continue to fight stereotypes around status, safety, flexibility and belonging.



HOW TRADES ARE VIEWED, COMPARED WITH COLLEGE

College still carries strong cultural weight — 41% of respondents agreed that a college degree is the only way to be successful, though there was a notable gap between male (47%) and female (38%) respondents who believed this statement.

However, the same respondents also recognized clear advantages to trade school or apprenticeships. Almost everyone (95%) could identify at least one advantage of bypassing college in favor of trade school or an apprenticeship.

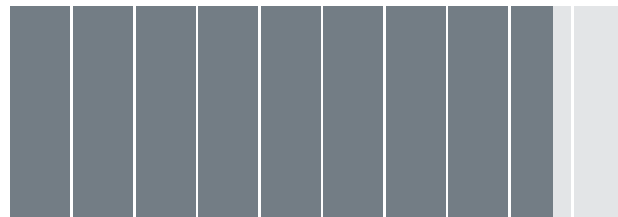
Five benefits were each mentioned by over a third of respondents: gaining hands-on experience (37%), earning a salary straight away (37%), avoiding student loan debt (36%), being able to earn while learning (35%), and gaining real-world industry experience (34%). Only 5% believed there were no benefits at all to bypassing college.

The survey showed that personal values have a big impact on attitudes to college. Nearly half (49%) of those who had said they valued connection within a like-minded community considered a college degree the only route to success. By contrast, there were higher levels of disagreement with this statement from those saying they valued personal growth (40%) or building a meaningful life (41%).

Almost three quarters of study participants (73%) said they felt “a lot” (36%) or “some” (38%) pressure to attend college after high school. A further 18% reported feeling “not very much” pressure, and 9% faced “none at all”.

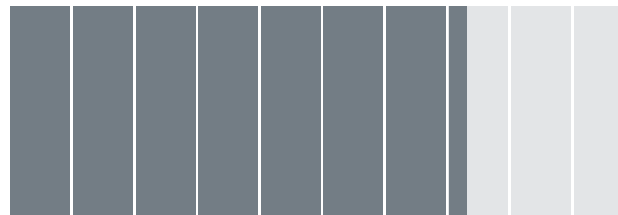
87%

say avoiding student debt is important when choosing a career path

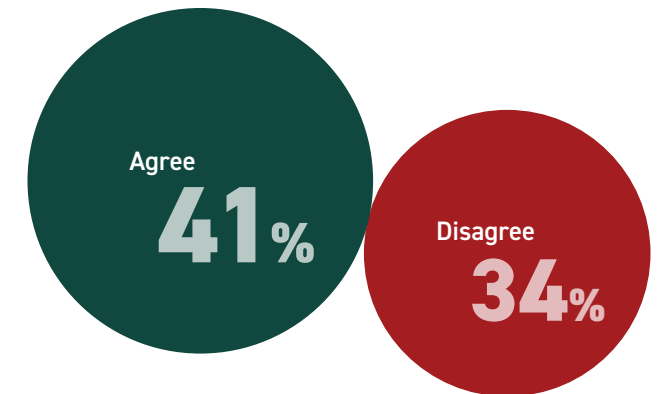


73%

faced “a lot” or “some” pressure to go to college



“A COLLEGE DEGREE IS THE ONLY WAY TO BE SUCCESSFUL”



■ Neither or not sure 25%

The study went on to ask a further question about the importance of avoiding student debt when choosing a career path. The number of respondents who considered this important (87%) outnumbered those who thought it unimportant (13%) by more than 6 to 1.

This may be one of the clearest signals in the report. Young people are not just thinking about what they want to do — they are also weighing what different paths will cost them.

The vital point is not that one path is right for everyone. It is that the skilled trades deserve to be presented as a serious, respected and future-focused choice alongside college, not a lesser alternative.

ESSENTIAL WORK STILL FACES OUTDATED STEREOTYPES

Respondents overwhelmingly understand the importance of the trades: 73% agreed that trade jobs are essential to society. But essential work is not always treated as aspirational work. The survey still surfaced stereotypes that trade careers are physically demanding (28%), risky (28%), dirty or messy (25%), more suitable for men (22%) or inflexible (19%).

The perceived low status of trade work was also raised. Around a sixth of respondents believed trade jobs were not as respected as office-based jobs (17%), only for people who didn't go to college (17%) or required less intelligence or skill (17%). These perceptions are not reflections of the value of the work. They are barriers to participation.

TOP NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES ATTACHED TO TRADE JOBS



Physically demanding
28%



Dangerous or risky work
28%



Dirty or messy environments
25%



More suitable for men than women
22%



Limited job flexibility
19%



Long or unsociable hours
19%



Not as respected as office jobs
17%



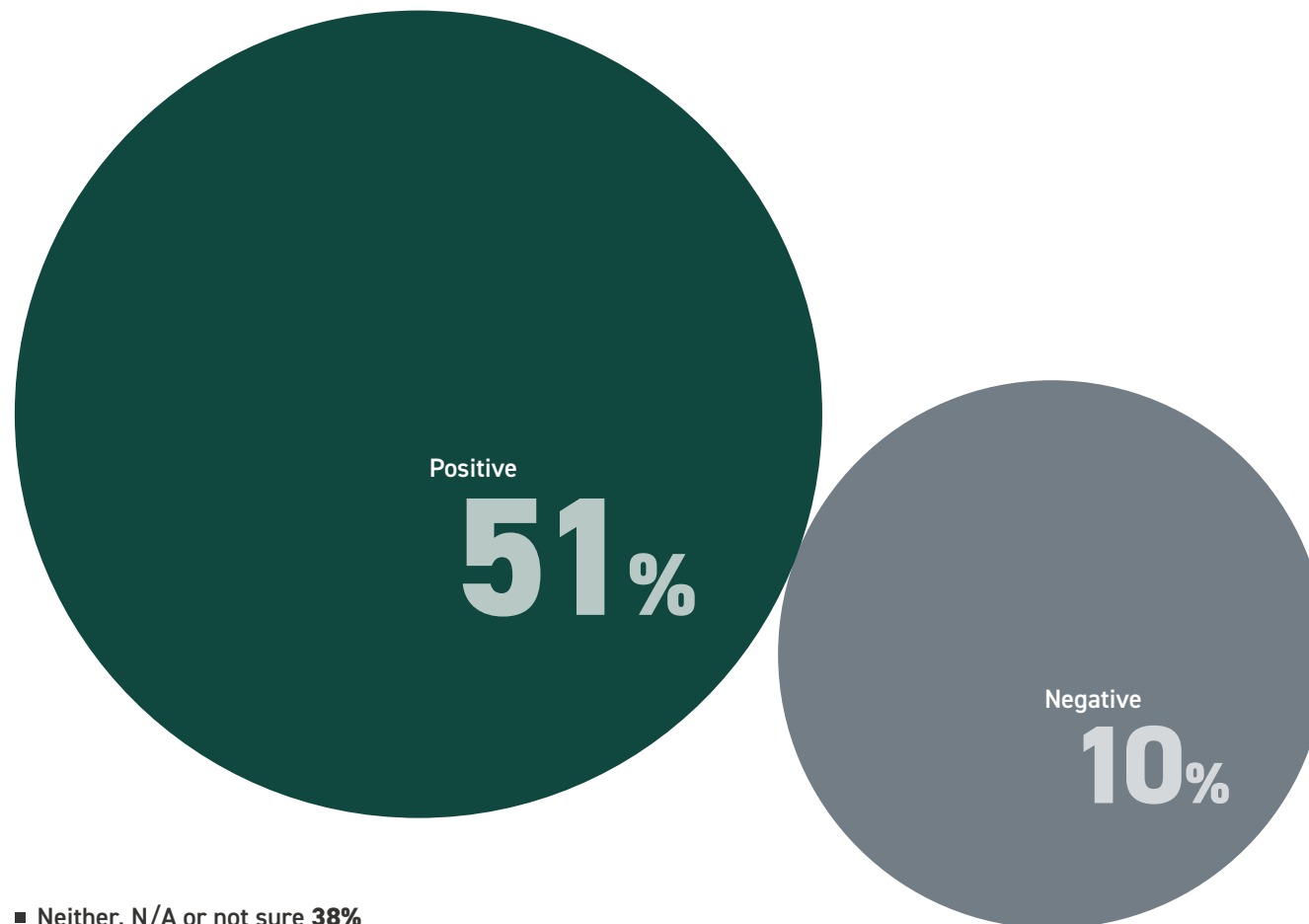
Only for people who didn't go to college
17%



Requires less intelligence or skill
17%

THE PEOPLE GUIDING CAREER CHOICES MATTER

WHAT ARE YOUR PARENTS' OR CAREGIVERS' VIEWS ON CAREERS IN THE SKILLED TRADES?



Career decisions are rarely made in isolation. Parents, family members, teachers, school staff, social media and online research all play a role in shaping what young people believe is possible. More than half of respondents said they had been encouraged to consider the skilled trades, but school-based guidance still appears weighted toward traditional college paths.

This points to a clear opportunity: helping to equip parents, educators, counselors and industry partners with clearer language, better stories and more practical information about where the trades can lead.

When asked for their main sources of information, more than a third of respondents picked out parents and family (37%) and school or teachers (35%), alongside social media (35%) and online research (35%).

Across all participants, 51% said that they had been encouraged to consider a career in the skilled trades. The figure was lower for the 16-21 age group (47%) and especially among female respondents (45%).

Of the people who received this encouragement, more than half (55%) were advised by parents or family members, and 34% by teachers or school staff. The other major sources of guidance were employers and industry representatives (35%) and career counselors (31%).



The study asked participants aged 23 or under for their parents' (or caregivers') views on a skilled trades career. More than half (51%) believed they had a positive attitude, with 27% characterizing it as very positive. Only 10% thought their parents held negative views.

Careers advice in schools is still heavily skewed towards the traditional college route. Teachers and career counselors encouraged 41% of respondents to consider a four-year college or university degree.

Community college was the second-most common recommendation (34%), followed by trade school or vocational training (24%), starting a business (17%), direct entry to the workforce (17%), an apprenticeship (17%), and entering the military (16%).

Male respondents (34%) were less likely to have been steered towards a four-year college course than female respondents (45%). There was an opposite, though less pronounced, gender split in trade school and vocational training (27% male, 22% female), and apprenticeships (19% male, 15% female).

Unsurprisingly, a greater number of participants who said they liked to work with their hands were also encouraged to explore vocational training by school advisors (31%).

The takeaway is clear. The skilled trades do not have an interest problem as much as they have a perception and pathway problem. Young people see the value, but many still need clearer exposure, stronger encouragement and a broader picture of who the trades are for. Closing that gap means changing the story that young people hear about skilled work at home, in school, online and in the wider culture.

WHAT THIS MEANS

The skilled trades are respected in theory but still misunderstood in practice. Brands, educators and industry partners have an opportunity to challenge outdated assumptions, make the path clearer and help the next generation see skilled work as a respected, stable and future-focused career choice.

KEY FINDING #3

BARRIERS TO ENTRY MUST BE OVERCOME

Correcting perceptions about the skilled trades is only part of the battle. Even when young people recognize the importance of hands-on work, and are willing to explore career options, they may face barriers in developing their interest.

This friction in the system takes several forms: difficulty in finding quality information, confusion about how to access training, and an absence of positive role models.



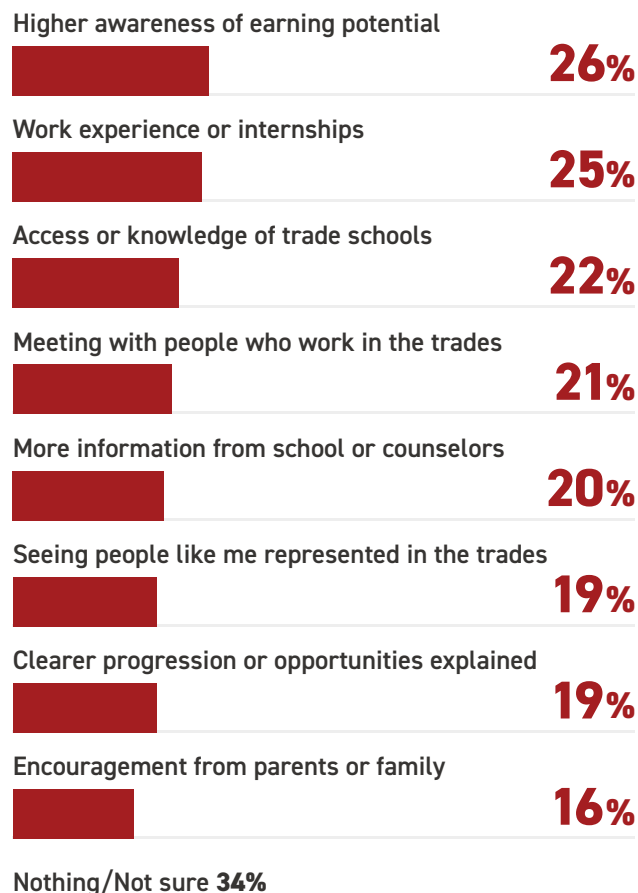
GREATER AWARENESS AND INFORMATION ARE KEY

An encouraging theme emerges from the survey data: many young people who have never considered a skilled trades career would potentially be open to doing so. Tapping into this pipeline of talent means listening carefully to the factors that prevent Gen Z from taking up the challenge, and finding ways to address them. All too often, these causes are driven by a lack of information, or an awareness gap.

Out of the 31% of respondents who have not considered a skilled trades career, only 34% say that nothing could make them consider one. The others all cited at least one factor that they think could change their minds.

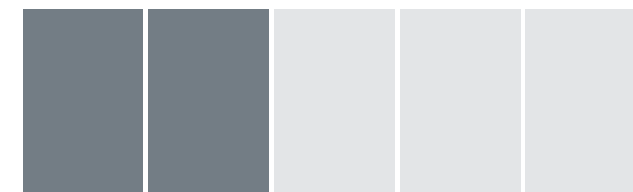
Just over a quarter (26%) said that better awareness of what they could earn would make them more inclined towards hands-on work. This was followed by more work experience or internships (25%), better trade school access or knowledge (22%), and meeting more people who work in the industry (21%).

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOUR MORE LIKELY TO CONSIDER A SKILLED TRADES CAREER?*



Digging down into this data suggests how parents, educators, industry partners and others could direct their efforts to make the greatest impact. Female respondents placed greater importance than the male group on work experience or internships (27% vs. 23%), access or knowledge of trade schools (23% vs. 18%) and more information from school staff and counselors (22% vs. 14%).

The survey suggested that efforts to bridge the information gap should begin at an early age. While around 61% of respondents felt their school had informed them well about career in the skilled trades, 40% reported that they had not been well informed, or were unsure about whether they had been.



2 in 5

felt their school did not inform them well about a trades career, or were not sure whether it did

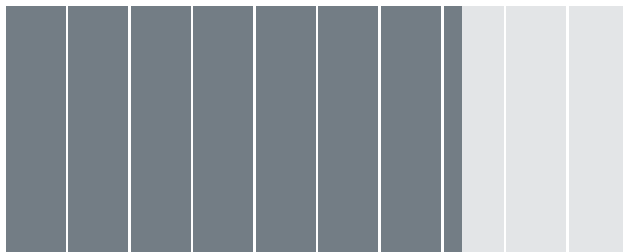
*This question was reserved for survey participants who said they had never considered a career in the skilled trades.

HANDS-ON TRAINING IS POPULAR, BUT NOT AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE

To bridge the skills gap, young people considering a hands-on career need to know how and where to find the right training to succeed. And to make an informed choice, prior experience of practical learning is invaluable.

It is a process that begins at high school. The survey painted a very mixed picture on practical skills classes within schools, with 28% of respondents saying that they were optional and encouraged, but 26% reporting they were not encouraged. Just over 1 in 10 (12%) did not get any opportunity to take part in practical training at all, while classes were mandatory for a further 18%.

76%
see the appeal in earning while they learn through an apprenticeship



PREFERRED WAY OF LEARNING

	Hands-on, practical learning	37%
	A mix of practical and classroom learning	48%
	Mostly classroom-based learning	9%
	Neither type of learning	6%

The idea of practical, on-the-job learning emerged as very popular with Gen Z. A clear majority preferred hands-on training (37%) or a mix of practical and classroom training (48%) to learning that takes place totally within the classroom (9%). Likewise, just over three-quarters of all survey participants (76%) found the prospect of earning an income while learning on an apprenticeship to be appealing. Of this group, 41% found it very appealing. Only 4% said they were not attracted to it.

The survey shows that many in Gen Z are open to the idea of an apprenticeship, trade college or vocational training. However, they may not have had the chance to experience practical education in the past — and may not easily be able to access advice about further training options if they want to pursue a trades career.



THE FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITY ISN'T UNDERSTOOD

While the economic appeal of a hands-on career is breaking through, there is confusion about the level of pay that skilled trades workers can expect to take home.

When asked to estimate a typical year's earnings, almost equal numbers of respondents opted for four of the pay bands: "less than \$30,000" (20%), "\$30,000 - \$49,999" (19%), "\$50,000 - \$69,999" (21%) and "\$70,000 - \$89,999" (17%). Fewer participants chose "\$90,000 - \$109,999" (9%) and "\$110,000 or more" (5%).

On average, respondents believed that individuals working in a skilled trade would typically earn \$57,005 a year, although 16 to 21-year-olds came up with a lower estimate of \$54,170.

A certain amount of imprecision can be expected. The survey asked respondents to come up with a single estimate for a broad and diverse group of workers, across industries ranging from construction and buildings maintenance to transportation and agriculture. However, the breadth of variation suggests young people do not currently have access to accurate information — and that this may be coloring their expectations.

Among those who said they were totally unsure about average earnings, there was a significant gender split: 6% of male respondents could not come up with a figure, but this rose to 10% in the female group. Meanwhile, those who had said they valued figuring things out for themselves and had a "ready for anything" attitude gave more generous estimates, with 39% believing the average trade worker earned \$70,000 a year or more.

On average, respondents thought trades workers earned

\$57,000
a year

HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK SOMEONE WORKING IN A SKILLED TRADE TYPICALLY EARNS PER YEAR?	
Less than \$30,000	20%
\$30,000 - \$49,999	19%
\$50,000 - \$69,999	21%
\$70,000 - \$89,999	17%
\$90,000 - \$109,999	9%
\$110,000 or more	5%
Not sure	9%

Addressing this information gap is crucial. As the study reveals, a good salary is by far the top motivating factor for Gen Z when choosing a career. And of those who have never considered a trades job, more than a quarter (26%) said that higher awareness of what they could earn would make them more likely to consider one.

REPRESENTATION AND BELONGING ARE LIVE ISSUES

When considering a career path, access to good information is a critical part of the decision-making process. But its credibility can be undermined when potential recruits do not see people like themselves forging successful lives in the skilled trades, and they cannot picture themselves fitting in.

Among those who had not considered a skilled trades career, almost one in five (19%) said they would be more likely to do so if they could see more people like themselves represented in the industry. Perhaps surprisingly, this figure was not markedly higher for female than for male respondents (19% vs. 17%).

However, as mentioned above, there is a big gender gap in the percentage of survey participants already working in the skilled trades: 39% of the male respondents, but only 24% of the female group. A similar split existed among those not working in the skilled trades who had not considered a job in the industry (20% vs. 37%).

WHY HAVE YOU NOT CONSIDERED A JOB IN THE SKILLED TRADES INDUSTRY?

"Because I am female, I don't believe I would qualify for those types of jobs."

"Because that job is not for women."

"Feels more like a man's job."

"You don't see women working in the skilled trades industry."

"Because I'm a woman... I feel as though it would be difficult for me to be taken seriously."

"I'm just a girl."





When asked to identify stereotypes that apply to trade jobs, 22% of all respondents agreed that they were “more suitable for men than women”, including 25% of female respondents and 17% of the male group. There were also pronounced gender splits in the response to many other questions throughout the survey.

Aside from gender, it is likely that many other forms of identity or social grouping can have an impact on personal attitudes to a skilled trades career. For example, race, disability, domestic background and parental or caring responsibilities were outside the scope of this survey.

This underlines the importance of visible role models and industry “ambassadors” from a wide range of backgrounds in showing young people that they could fit in, find their own niche, and thrive in a skilled trades career.

WHAT THIS MEANS

As far as possible, obstacles in the way of young people who are interested in a trades career must be eliminated. That means providing better guidance and more comprehensive information, and ensuring it is easily available to everyone. There is a need to show as well as tell — promoting role models and success stories that prove what dedication, grit and effort can achieve.

KEY FINDING #4

UNDERSTANDING WHAT MOTIVATES GEN Z IS VITAL

To start a meaningful conversation with young people about careers, it is vital to gain an insight into their values, hopes, ambitions and fears. The study suggested there is no one-size-fits all approach. Different individuals have differing outlooks, and their personal values deeply affect their attitudes to finding a job, earning a living and forging a meaningful working life.

By uncovering these connections, advocates for the skilled trades can discover how best to communicate with Gen Z and provide the right opportunities for its talents.



YOUNG PEOPLE IDENTIFY WITH A DIVERSE SET OF VALUES

Gen Z is a diverse group. When questioned on personal values, individuals defined themselves in a range of different ways, and attached importance to a broad spectrum of values and guiding principles.

WHICH OF THESE STATEMENTS BEST DESCRIBES YOU?

"I value personal growth and am always looking to improve my life"



21%

"I value building a meaningful life that I can be proud of"



17%

"I value working with my hands and have a passion for building and creating things"



15%

"I value connection with a like-minded community and am an outgoing person"



15%

"I value finding things out for myself and have a 'ready for anything' attitude"



14%

"I value my autonomy and independence"



12%

Nothing/Not sure 6%

The survey asked each participant to select a statement that best described them, from a list of six (plus a "none of the above" option). There was a fairly even spread of responses. No option scored more than 21% or less than 12% — aside from 6% who rejected them all.

Just over a fifth of respondents identified most with the statement that they valued personal growth and are always looking to improve their life. At 21%, this was the most popular response. It was followed by 17% who said they most valued building a meaningful life that they could be proud of.

A further 15% each identified most strongly with "I value working with my hands and have a passion for building and creating things" and "I value connection within a like-minded community and am an outgoing person".

Out of the 14% who said they valued figuring things out for themselves and had a "ready for anything" attitude, there was a notable gender split (17% for male respondents, 13% for female). "I value my autonomy and independence" best described 12% of participants.

The data that emerged elsewhere in the survey suggested that these guiding beliefs may correlate with career preferences and attitudes to work. These insights could be useful in helping to shape the messaging used to engage segments of Gen Z who hold particular sets of values — and in finding the narrative most likely to resonate with them.

EARNINGS POTENTIAL IS THE BIGGEST WORRY

The study looked into concerns as well as values. Earning enough money emerged as the greatest worry for respondents when moving on from secondary education.

GREATEST WORRIES AMONG HIGH-SCHOOL LEAVERS

	Earning enough money	31%
	Finding a job	28%
	Not knowing what to do	22%
	Choosing the right career path	21%
	Work-life balance	19%
	Student loan debt	17%
	Lack of opportunities	15%
	Job security/stability	15%
	Pressure from family/others	15%

Didn't have any worries 6%

Just under a third of those polled (31%) chose “Earning enough money” as one of their top three concerns after high school. This held up across all age groups, taking in those who were still at school and those who had already left. Concern about earning enough money peaked among 16-17-year-olds (41%). This worry was also higher among those who said they valued their autonomy and independence, at 41%.

Finding a job was the second-greatest worry (28%), and the only other one to poll higher than a quarter of respondents. Other popular responses were “Not knowing what I want to do” (22%) and “Choosing the right career path” (21%).

Only 6% reported no worries after leaving high school. However, the group of respondents who said they did not identify with any of the “personal values” statements were big outliers here, with a majority of this group (57%) reporting no post-high-school worries at all. Likewise, only 14% of this group were concerned about earning enough money.

These concerns seemed to percolate through other survey responses. When those who had considered a hands-on career were asked to give their reasons for doing so, many responses centered on the idea that skilled trades jobs could provide good financial rewards.

Despite some confusion about the exact salary level to be expected, the message that hands-on work can be well-paid work is making an impact.

WHY HAVE YOU CONSIDERED A JOB IN THE SKILLED TRADES INDUSTRY?

- “A lot of those jobs pay well.”
- “Because I could make **good money** by learning a valuable skill.”
- “Because I would like to earn **lots of money**.”
- “Careers in the skilled trades industry have **high incomes**, flexibility and career opportunities.”
- “**Good pay**, and I wouldn't have to deal with student loans.”
- “They are **well-paying jobs** and are needed, despite the rise in AI.”

FEW OF GEN Z YET IDENTIFY WITH ENTREPRENEURIAL VALUES

Only a small minority mentioned the ambition of starting a business, or placed high importance in gaining the ability to work more independently. The study did not deliver strong evidence that young people see a trades career as a fast track to entrepreneurial success.

Asked for their wish list in a future career, 10% included “Being able to work independently” as one of their three top priorities. This response was most popular among those who identified with the statement “I value my autonomy and independence” (15%).

Across all respondents, 17% were encouraged to look at setting up a business by careers counselors or school staff. However, only 13% went on to regard this as a realistic career path after high school.

A quarter of respondents agreed that “Feeling more independent sooner” (25%) could be a benefit of bypassing college in favor of trade school or an apprenticeship. Agreement was stronger among those who said they valued building a meaningful life they could be proud of (31%) and those who valued their autonomy and independence (31%).

The argument is not yet breaking through that entering the skilled trades can lay the groundwork for success as a business owner or independent operator. This could represent an untapped strategy for persuading Gen Z of the potential value and possibilities of a hands-on career.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Life-changing choices are based not just on information, but on a complex and deeply personal set of aspirations and concerns. For parents, educators, careers advisors and others, helping young people find the right career path means recognizing this individuality — and giving each person the tools to navigate their progression in a way that works for them.



WOLVERINE'S COMMITMENT

07

PROJECT BOOTSTRAP: THE STORY SO FAR

Wolverine exists to support the skilled hands and minds doing the world's most important work. The brand fulfils this purpose not only in the products it makes — boots that provide workers across many industries with the comfort and durability they need to perform — but in the causes it serves and the stories it tells.

Project Bootstrap is a vital part of this longstanding commitment to skilled trades workers. It is an embodiment of Wolverine founder G.A. Krause's strong belief in the power of opportunity — and in the importance of building for the future.

WHAT IS PROJECT BOOTSTRAP?

Project Bootstrap began in 2016 out of one simple truth: the skilled trades deserve a louder champion.

The project is Wolverine's holistic commitment to the next generation of skilled trades workers, raising awareness of how the skilled trades can offer fulfilling and meaningful career paths, and providing monetary and in-kind donations to national and local workforce development organizations.

As it reaches its 10th anniversary, Project Bootstrap has contributed nearly \$3M to building the next generation of skilled tradespeople, supporting them with the tools and confidence to build their own futures.



PARTNERSHIPS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Project Bootstrap works with a number of partners that share Wolverine's values and objectives, including the following organizations:

#1

SkillsUSA

is a nonprofit organization that prepares middle-school, high-school and college students for careers in the skilled trades industry. Since 2020, Wolverine has supported the SkillsUSA Hope Fund, which provides financial support to students in crisis. Wolverine and SkillsUSA also joined forces in 2023 for National Signing Day, an event celebrating high-school seniors committing themselves to pursuing education in the skilled trades.

#2

YouthBuild Grand Rapids

helps young people aged 16-24 to get their high-school diploma while also earning a construction certificate and gaining other valuable life skills. Wolverine has supported the nonprofit organization with equipment and financial donations since 2021, and a 2023 Mentor Month initiative helped highlight the importance of mentorship in the industry. Wolverine team members in Rockford, Michigan, also have the chance to volunteer with YouthBuild students.

#3

Metallica Scholars

is a major workforce education program providing financial support for students undergoing skilled trades training at community colleges. It is part of Metallica's All Within My Hands Foundation, which is dedicated to creating sustainable communities by backing workforce education, fighting food insecurity, and supporting critical local services. Wolverine has supported Metallica Scholars since 2020 with funding, exclusive product collaborations and in-kind donations.

#4

mikeroweWORKS Foundation

is helping to close the skills gap by highlighting the millions of vocational opportunities that are often overlooked. It challenges myths and misconceptions about skilled trades careers, and encourages young people to get the skills needed to thrive in the industry. The mikeroweWORKS Work Ethic Scholarship provides financial assistance for hardworking high-school graduates as they embark on a vocational program.

#5

unCommon Construction

is a nonprofit organization that works with high-school apprentices to build houses, furnishing them with vital technical, professional and personal skills. Wolverine has supported unCommon Construction since 2017, outfitting new apprentices with work boots and highlighting the successful careers of young people in the trades. In 2022, Wolverine invited past and present apprentices to collaborate on a special-edition product collection, including T-shirts, boots and socks. All proceeds were used to benefit students interested in a career in the skilled trades.

NEXT STEPS FOR SUPPORTING FUTURE TRADESPEOPLE

As a new generation enters the workforce, burdened by new challenges and pressures, curiosity is at the core of Wolverine's Project Bootstrap commitment. It is essential to gain a better understanding of Gen Z's motivations and difficulties, in order to equip tomorrow's workers with the most useful resources. As a direct result of this survey's findings, Wolverine's next steps in supporting future tradespeople are clear:

Create visibility.

Wolverine can play a meaningful role in closing the interest-to-action gap by making skilled trades careers more visible, better understood and more connected to what motivates Gen Z. Wolverine will seek to amplify the realities of skilled trades careers — from earning potential and job security to the pride that comes from building something with your own hands.

Bolster existing partnerships with trades programs and institutions, and forge new relationships with educators.

For Wolverine, it is a top priority to make sure the path to a trades career can be as smooth and frictionless as progression to a four-year college degree. Through sponsoring partner organizations that raise the profile of trade careers in a high-school setting, Project Bootstrap can help prevent talent and interest from slipping away from the industry. By engaging in direct dialog with teachers and counselors in skilled trades programs across the country, Wolverine can help ensure these career pathways are illuminated and supported by those closest to students as they make critical decisions about their futures — providing them with the role models and exposure they need to step into a trades career with confidence.

Show a fuller picture.

Skilled work is technical, demanding and essential, but it is also innovative, stable and deeply worthy of respect. Understanding these perceptions matters, because stereotypes influence whether young people can picture themselves in the trades in the first place.

Show the practical side.

Wolverine will challenge outdated ideas about what a "successful" career looks like, especially to a generation weighing income, debt and stability earlier than ever. The brand will talk about trades careers through the lens of practical ambition: the ability to earn sooner, learn on the job and build a future, without assuming a four-year degree is the only option. It is a message that meets Gen Z where it is, engaging with concerns about cost, stability and flexibility, and offering the chance to build a career without waiting years to begin.





#PROJECT BOOTSTRAP

WOLVERINE 