

Plumbing the Potential

Demand for plumbers, named Joe or not, is increasing.

Retirements, bath renovations and new construction projects are going to create thousands of jobs for plumbers and pipe fitters, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. No matter who wins the White House, the number of plumbers and pipe fitters will increase 11 percent by 2016, adding 53,000 jobs, according to the bureau's Occupational Outlook Handbook.

Almost one in eight plumbers nationwide is self-employed. Three in 10 are members of a labor union. Among the highest-paid construction workers, plumbers' median hourly wages are \$20.56; pay starts at \$12.30 an hour.

The career has some drawbacks -- and not just sewage back-ups and stinky leaking sinks. Plumbers lift large heavy pipes and may work outdoors in cold weather. Cuts from sharp tools or burns from hot pipes are work hazards.

"It's fun sometimes, and sometimes it's nauseating," said Bill Pulliam, owner of Thomas Plumbing in Washington and a plumber for 24 years. His crew of six heads home "extremely wore out and tired and dirty . . . Sometimes your wife tells you to take your clothes off at the door."