

Like father, like son

Taking on a mature-age apprenticeship is no easy task, but increasing popularity means it's no longer as daunting. Angela Tufvesson meets a policeman who hopes to one day take over the family plumbing business.

Detective Senior Constable Paul York joined the police force at 19, having rejected an offer to join the family plumbing business.

As his father puts it, "He didn't want to dig holes when all his mates were doing more exciting things."

Almost nine years later, having climbed the professional ladder in the force, 27-year-old Paul decided it was time for a change.

"Lots of people change jobs several times throughout their career and I thought this was the right time," he says.

"When I was younger I watched Dad running his business, but when it was time for me to get full-time employment after finishing school I wasn't in the right frame of mind to join the business – it wasn't what I wanted."

Higher-ranking police are often buried in paperwork, so a desire to work in a hands-on role – and spend more time with his young family – led Paul to take up a mature-age apprenticeship with NR York Plumbing.

Paul's father Neil York was surprised but pleased when his son decided to make the switch.

"I wanted Paul to become a plumber when he left school," he says.

"I thought he should have done it the other way – completed his apprenticeship first and then joined the police force – but I was quite happy because I didn't want Paul in the business if he didn't want to be there.

"I was surprised when he came back and said he'd done as much as he could in policing and wanted to do

an apprenticeship and become a plumber. Now it's the case that he wants to be here, not that he has to be here."

To compensate for the low wage while completing his apprenticeship, Paul continues to work part-time as a policeman.

The combined wage from the two jobs is comparable to Paul's earnings as a full-time policeman, but he now works a lot more hours.

"I work a 40-hour fortnight with the police and try to do 80 hours of plumbing a fortnight. I do a lot of afternoon, weekend and night shifts with the police to fit in as much plumbing as I can."

Balancing the two can't be easy. However, to support his family, Paul plans to continue the double-act until his apprenticeship is finished.

In addition to the low wage, many prospective tradespeople are put off starting an apprenticeship later in life by the age barrier.

Rather than see his new position as a fall to the bottom of the pecking order, Paul tries to take on a leadership role at TAFE and acts as a mentor to younger students.

"I'm not saying I know more than they do, but I definitely have more life experience. I try to teach them to think about things in a different way and educate them about time management."

Police work and plumbing may seem worlds apart, but Paul and Neil agree that policing skills are an asset in the new role.



After almost nine years in the police force, 27-year-old Paul York decided to change careers and began a plumbing apprenticeship with his father's company.

The company specialises in hydraulic work in multi-storey buildings, which involves frequent liaison between plumbers and building managers.

"Paul has been trained to talk to people and in public speaking," Neil says.

"A lot of guys just work on building sites and don't really have to talk to anyone. So in our situation it really helps me that he can confidently deal with members of the general public."

Paul believes an ability to think on his feet and well-developed problem-solving skills are as applicable to plumbing as they are to policing.

"Even though I'm a first-year apprentice, sometimes I need to make on-the-spot decisions, which is obviously a feature of police work."

However, there are some skills that Paul hopes never to need out on site.

"Hopefully in this job I'll never be confronted by a violent offender."

Father and son say working together is rarely an issue. Neil treats Paul as he would any other first-year apprentice



and Paul understands that he is an apprentice first and the boss's son second.

Despite an occasional argument the two are good friends, and the structure of the business means that they rarely work together.

"I've got the other boys he can work with," Neil says. "He doesn't have to put up with me all the time and neither do the boys. I enjoy it – we get on well and he's learning."

So is the situation at NR York Plumbing indicative of a growing trend in the industry?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is. Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE plumbing teacher Lyle Kelson estimates that one in 15 apprentice plumbers is over 21 years of age.

"In Bendigo we have 16 groups of apprentices across all levels, each

containing about 15 people. On average there is one mature-age apprentice plumber in each group – the oldest being 43."

Lyle believes these numbers are fairly consistent across regional Victoria and are higher than in previous years, suggesting mature-age apprenticeships are on the rise.

Paul agrees, saying that although he is the oldest apprentice in his class at TAFE, the average age of apprentices is rising.

"The average age has gone from about 16 to the mid-20s. There are definitely a lot more mature-age apprentices.

"People are realising that if you put your head down for a few years you can make some good money down the track and establish a good career – even if it is a bit later in life."

Neil says school-leavers may not consider a trade initially, but life experience and maturity may eventually lead them to take up an apprenticeship.

"People need to know where they are and what they want. I knew what I wanted to do earlier on in life, whereas Paul did one thing then realised it wasn't for the long term and that he was better off getting into a trade.

"Sometimes you need to have a go at something and then focus on where you really want to go."

In the long term, Neil plans to retire and hand the business over to Paul, who hopes – this time – to have made a career choice for life. ■

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