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Why Is It So Hard to Get a Plumber to Even Call You Back?

The same is true with pretty much any skilled tradesperson these days. Don't take it personally: There are all sorts of explanations, and only some may be your fault.

By [Beth DeCarbo](#)

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The water stain on the ceiling is growing, and the plumber won't return repeated phone calls. The air conditioner died, and the HVAC technician is a no-show. A new car-charging outlet in the garage must wait until September, the electrician's first available opening.

Why is it so hard to hire a skilled tradesperson?

There is blame to go around. Small businesses are strapped for resources. Homeowners are unwilling to pay enough to make the job worth taking. There is a shortage of workers.

In the end, though, everybody loses. The customer may get the job done, but only after countless phone calls and long delays. And the service provider engenders ill will and bad reviews from customers whose calls go unreturned and appointments missed.

Is there any way out of this lose-lose hole? Here are five reasons your plumber, electrician or other service technician may be ghosting you.

A labor shortage

The skilled-trades industry continues to experience high demand for workers, with job openings far outpacing the supply of qualified workers to fill them, according to [an analysis](#) by PeopleReady Skilled Trades, a specialty job-placement company.

To expand the pool of skilled workers, the Labor Department funds efforts [to attract more women](#) to careers in the trades. Some [states offer tax credits and tuition support](#) to businesses that hire and train apprentices, the first step toward gaining a professional license. The National Association of Home Builders, a trade group, has a [Workforce Development](#) outreach program to promote careers in the skilled trades.

To attract talent, bosses must be proactive. "I hear it all the time, business owners who say, 'You can't find anyone [to work] these days,'" says Jesse Kuhlman, owner of Kuhlman Electrical Services

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in Greater Boston. “My question to them is, “What are you doing to recruit? What are your benefits? What do you pay? Do your employees like working for you?” ”

When he started in 2014, Kuhlman says, his company had one employee. Now, he oversees 50 people, with licensed electricians earning \$35 to \$42 an hour, plus benefits and bonuses, he says.

What’s key, he adds, is a willingness to hire people who are “green.” Most of his employees started from the bottom and worked their way up. Three of his former apprentices are now managers in the company. That investment takes time, he says—four to five years to become licensed electricians capable of going out on their own. Still, he tells recruits, “These are great careers, and you can make a decent amount of money.”

Inadequate support staff

“These are typically small companies,” says Dan Holohan, a Bethesda, Md.-based HVAC expert who founded HeatingHelp.com, a forum for service providers and manufacturers. “It might be a husband doing the work and a wife doing the books. If people are asking for a free estimate and lengthy proposal, they’re going to just walk away because they [already] have plenty to do.”

But that is no excuse for poor customer service, Holohan adds.

One possible solution is a centralized call center. To support its 17 plumbing-business franchisees, Z Plumberz operates a 24/7 nationwide call center that routes customers to its closest location. Dispatchers also help franchisees rework their bookings when plumbing emergencies arise.

“When you call a brand, the chances of getting a plumber to come to the house and get the work done are much higher,” says Matt O’Rourke, president of the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based company. Franchisees also get training in business basics as well as marketing materials. “We know we’re not going to be the cheapest,” O’Rourke says. “But hopefully we’re not the most expensive.”

Kuhlman, whose company is independent, employs four full-time staffers just to take calls and schedule job estimates. In January, he installed a new customer-relations-management system that provides tracking data. Eighty-eight percent of the customers who call for an estimate end up booking one, Kuhlman says. Of those, 50% hire a Kuhlman electrician for their job. “That 88% call-booking rate is critical, otherwise you’re throwing money away,” he says.

For now, though, the labor shortage means that many customers will find themselves leaving pleading voicemails in hopes of getting a plumber or other repair person to come out. The odds of getting a callback aren’t great because repair people already have plenty of work. Why waste time answering a call if you know you don’t have the hours in the day to do the job?

That’s especially true if the voicemail makes it clear the problem is urgent—something that needs to be done quickly. On the [HeatingHelp.com](https://www.heatinghelp.com) discussion board, one technician posted this about whether they would respond to such a voicemail: “From an existing customer, a callback is given. New customers, no.”

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The job is too small. The job is too big.

Tradespeople today are picky about the types of work they take on, says Holohan, the HVAC expert. It used to be that homeowners would get three estimates and pick the best one. “That has reversed itself,” he says. These days, because of a surplus of demand, the tradespeople can decide which customers *they* want to work with.

For example, it might be worth an HVAC person to drive 50 miles to install a heating-cooling system, but an electrician won’t make that trip just to relocate an outlet. Many small service businesses also avoid new-construction projects because they are simply too big—they don’t have the staff to handle a job that involved. And not all tradespeople are equipped to handle off-hours emergencies. They may appreciate the extra money, but the last thing they want to do is alienate their staff. A few extra dollars isn’t worth losing an employee.