

Dear Dr Cutler

I wish to put forward a simple and straight forward idea that I believe can enhance productivity across a range of traditional blue collar trades.

There is a well documented shortage of qualified people in various trades. For at least some of the time, however, these qualified people undertake work that does not require a fully qualified person. For instance, as the population ages, plumbers and electricians are required by older folk to do minor tasks such as change light bulbs or washers in taps.

Although this may appear to be a somewhat trivial example, I have deliberately chosen it to demonstrate my point. This point may be summarised as: society cannot afford to allocate scarce highly qualified labour to low skill tasks. And there is a solution.

Many middle-aged people are looking for career changes. Similarly, many semi-retired people are looking for meaningful pursuits that will supplement their income. These people could be trained - and I mean formally trained and accredited - to undertake tasks within a range of trades at the lower end of the skill spectrum. This would free up fully qualified trades people to do the work they alone are qualified to do.

I see this working in a similar way to an apprenticeship works. The partially qualified person would need to be auspiced by a fully qualified person while training and possibly for a period of time after gaining their accreditation. In the domestic area, my idea fills the gap between the skilled home handyman and the qualified trades person. There are many jobs that people like me do in their own homes that they would not do in someone else's home (for legal and other reasons) They certainly would not be able to run a business doing such work. But if they were accredited in the way I am suggesting they could run such a business.

I can see many plumbing and electrical companies who service the domestic market adding these partially qualified people to their staff as a way of delivering better services to their customers while lowering their overall cost structures.

I do not know what tasks could be done by partially qualified people and what tasks could not. That would need to be sorted out on a trade by trade basis by people who know their industry.

Neither do I know what prospects this idea might have in the factory scene, but I believe it is worth asking someone who would know.

Also, the idea need not be limited to blue collar trades – my proposal is not unlike the idea of nursing aids and dental technicians.

Some young people may also be interested in becoming partially qualified in one or another trade.

Philip Rabl