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BEST-PAID TRADE
Fridges earning top dollar in Australia
Our industry often bemoans the difficulty of attracting talent, but perhaps we aren’t making enough of one of its biggest drawcards: the money. **Willow Aliento** looks at whether fridges really are the best-paid trades in Australia.
There might be some high-profile celebrity chippies about, but when it comes to steady wages and ongoing work prospects, according to SEEK’s 2019 salary data, air conditioning and refrigeration technicians are top of the ladder for trade salaries. In 2019, the average salary for fridges was $83,278 and salary growth, compared to previous years, a healthy 7.7 per cent. Electricians came in a close second with $82,782.

By contrast, other parts of the economy are in decline. A report late last year from Invoice2go found that Australian small businesses were feeling the pinch from a downturn in housing construction, invoicing 7.6 per cent less in FY 2019. But HVAC&R businesses bucked the trend, invoicing 3.8 per cent more.

AIRAH’s own 2019 salary survey found just over 50 per cent of respondents have a gross annual base salary of $100,000 or more, and over 10 per cent earn $150,000 or more.

Granted, the survey covered the wider industry and included not just technicians but also senior engineers, project managers and people in other parts of the business such as sales and human resources. But even looking just at the respondents who classed themselves as RAC mechanics, the average salary was $85,000 – right in line with the SEEK numbers.

It’s worth remembering too, that our industry is filled with people who started on the tools before moving into roles such as project management and business development.

More than half of those in the AIRAH survey rate their pay as “good or excellent”. A whopping 85 per cent said they were “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their pay and benefits, and most expect their wages will either stay the same or even increase in the near future.

**COMFORT CONDITIONS**

The vast majority – 89 per cent – are also in permanent part-time or full-time employment, another contrast to the broader labour market trend of increasing casualisation and “gig economy” employment models.

It seems that the nature of the work, pay rates, conditions and other factors also make the trade one with a high degree of steadiness in terms of retaining staff.

Around 70 per cent of those included in AIRAH’s survey expect to stay with their current employer for the next 12 months, and 42 per cent had been with their current employer more than four years.

While many young people considering their future employment are being urged to go to university and get a degree, there are many reasons here to make an HVAC&R sector career a first choice, including diversity of opportunities for learning and experience and the improved pay prospects.

From the outset, the pay proposition is pretty compelling. According to Fair Work Australia, a first-year apprentice can expect to earn at least $500 a week, and pay goes up every year through the apprenticeship. And many employers provide a phone and sometimes even a work vehicle.

A university student by contrast is entitled to a maximum of $462.50 per fortnight in Austudy – plus they build up a major HECS debt for the cost of each unit of study. There’s no car. No phone.

Entering the HVAC&R sector also means you’re entering an industry on a growth trajectory. Industry experts point out that the demand for controlled environments is on the rise, whether that is climate-controlled buildings or specialist plant and equipment such as cold storage, laboratories and greenhouses.

Good technicians are essential to keep it all working now, and into the future.

HVAC&R is also not “set and forget” equipment. It demands good maintenance and ongoing attention.

When plant and equipment doesn’t work properly, the risks include environmental impacts and higher energy costs, equipment failure, or even major public health impacts from spoiled food or medical supplies.

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MANY TRADES IN ONE

In comparison to some trades, HVAC&R is also a “specialist trade.” How the technology works and how to keep it working takes a body of knowledge and experience only those associated with the trade typically possess.

There are many aspects that make it appealing to those who enjoy a challenge and are keen on continually learning. Variety is the name of the game.

Senior hands in the business describe it as a problem-solving role that involves multiple sets of knowledge including plumbing, mechanical, electrical and IT.

“It’s also a role that involves the personal touch. Dealing with people including asset owners, asset managers, facility managers and others is a fundamental part of the job.”

“It suits a certain kind of person,” says Bryon Price, FAIRAH, Strategic Development Director at A.G. Coombs Group.

All of these factors make it relatively well paid compared to some trades jobs. There is also a supply-and-demand factor at play – the constantly growing demand and current shortage of workers gives qualified fridges a real advantage when it comes to having the pay conversation.

It also means employers are keen to offer good money to attract and retain talent.

The requirement for being a licensed specialist also means the playing field is restricted to those who hold the relevant qualifications and certifications.

In addition to trade certification, a qualified HVAC&R mechanic might also hold a plumbing licence, licences for handling refrigerants as controlled substances, natural gas and electrical licences.

On top of that, there may be project or site-specific credentials including OHS and site inductions, a confined space ticket, a working at heights ticket and others.

And fridges can look forward to continuing opportunities to learn and specialise through continued professional development. This includes training in digital technologies and the growing number of data-driven platforms and packages around mechanical systems and plant performance, advanced building management, data analytics, and smart systems including the Internet of Things. Australian

"Technology does make the trade more exciting, and it also gives you more marketable skills"

Standards relevant to HVAC&R are also constantly evolving, so it’s important to stay up to date.

Part of what employers are buying is this growing body of knowledge and expertise.

Technicians are also increasingly being regarded as a reliable authority by asset managers and facilities managers in areas including compliance, asset management, and environmental management and energy management.

“It is an evolving role,” says Price.

A COOL FUTURE

As part of the wider asset management domain, the profession has in many ways transitioned from being task-focused and reactive to being predictive and proactive.

It is much more analytical, and fridges are spending more time diving into the sea of asset information and digital data than they are driving around in a ute from one job to another.

David Hammond, Stud AIRAH, Commissioning Technician with Centigrade Commissioning in Western Australia came into the trade after trying his hand at civil construction, IT, carpentry and a stint as a law student.

There had been some pressure on him to look at university studies as a first choice after finishing Year 12. But he believes it is false to assume that’s the best path for everyone.

It was a mate who had become a refrigeration mechanic who inspired him to take the opportunity of an apprenticeship. He did his own research, he says, and found there were a lot of interesting aspects to the work and the plant and technology involved.

Once he started down the path of his apprenticeship, he never looked back.

Following a four-year mature-age apprenticeship, he moved into specialising in commissioning through a role with his current employer.

“I looked for something technically challenging,” Hammond says.

As well as undertaking jobs in commissioning HVAC&R plant, Hammond also does some fault-finding work.

He says he is “pretty happy” with the salary he’s on.

It’s a very broad trade, he says, with a range of opportunities for different personalities and interests, from the puzzle-solving of fault-finding to the hands-on skills of installation and everything in between.

Hammond points out that the job gets you out and about, constantly dealing with new places and new people. There are physical challenges – such as getting gas cylinders through tight spaces or across roofs and into plant rooms – and intellectual challenges too.

“The work varies a lot,” Hammond says. “One day you might be up in a roof space, the next day you might be in front of the computer.”

The industry is changing rapidly, including a growing emphasis on energy efficiency and a wide range of new technologies.

Communications, particularly digital-based, are also changing the trade, Hammond says.

“Technology does make the trade more exciting, and it also gives you more marketable skills.”

A VERY GOOD LIVING

Gary Ward, M.AIRAH, Senior Contracts Manager for Ellis Air Conditioning, says the Seek salary estimates reflect what he sees in the industry. The right candidates are able to make a “very good living” in the HVAC&R trade.

“We have recently found that we are being approached by previously qualified tradespeople who want to do a dual trade,” he says.

They are attracted by the wide variety of work HVAC&R technicians are doing, and the salaries they earn.

Ward found during his own apprenticeship that specialisation into either air conditioning or refrigeration as a primary discipline reflected the employer you worked for.

He says that although both disciplines finish their trade studies with the same qualifications, and both are related to the refrigeration process, he regards them as two different disciplines within the HVAC&R field.

“I personally look back and I am glad that I went the air conditioning side of the trade because of the opportunities that the wide range of AC work offers,” Ward says.

At the same time, he recognises many attractive aspects to the work in both air conditioning and refrigeration.

Ward mentions the people you meet, the systems both large and small you get to work on. There’s also the importance of the work in the broader context of keeping critical facilities such as hospitals, data centres and pharmaceutical manufacturers cool, as well as ensuring workplaces around the country are comfortable.

“Combine all this with the legislation around indoor air quality, essential services, building automation, energy consumption and NABERS ratings, and you have a very interesting work career indeed,” he says.
Getting a foot in the door with an apprenticeship is just the start. A qualified tradie in the sector can go on to specialise in diverse areas including installation, commissioning, service and repair, building automation, and fire and smoke control systems testing.

And according to Ward, getting that foot in the door is not hard. The biggest problem is actually one faced by employers, who find so many school leavers are more focused on getting an apprenticeship in plumbing or electrical than HVAC&R. Many only contemplate the sector when they find the other trade studies intakes are full. Of course, it’s valuable for a school leaver or career-changer to look at the sector first.

Ward’s best advice: complete an apprenticeship with a highly respected company.

Broader trends within construction and asset maintenance assure the sector of a bright and evolving future.

“We have seen a massive shift in focus to both workplace safety and measured energy consumption and the way in which buildings and the sub-components are designed, selected, implemented, strategically operated via the building control systems and ultimately maintained,” Ward says.

This is resulting in a highly trained and experienced workforce who have the ability to think laterally and provide a high-end outcome. And a workforce that is reaping the benefit of their career choice financially.

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

Check out the full results of AIRAH’s salary survey at www.airah.org.au/salarysurvey and have a listen to the AIRAH on Air podcast episode at www.airah.org.au/podcast