

Welding, Soldering, and Brazing Workers

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Significant Points

- Job prospects should be excellent.
- Training ranges from a few weeks of school or on-the-job training for low-skilled positions to several years of combined school and on-the-job training for highly skilled jobs.

Nature of the Work

Welding is the most common way of permanently joining metal parts. In this process, heat is applied to metal pieces, melting and fusing them to form a permanent bond. Because of its strength, welding is used in shipbuilding, automobile manufacturing and repair, aerospace applications, and thousands of other manufacturing activities. Welding also is used to join beams when constructing buildings, bridges, and other structures, and to join pipes in pipelines, power plants, and refineries.

Welders use many types of welding equipment set up in a variety of positions, such as flat, vertical, horizontal, and overhead. They may perform manual welding, in which the work is entirely controlled by the welder, or semiautomatic welding, in which the welder uses machinery, such as a wire feeder, to perform welding tasks.

Arc welding is the most common type of welding. Standard arc welding involves two large metal alligator clips that carry a strong electrical current. One clip is attached to any part of the workpiece being welded. The second clip is connected to a thin welding rod. When the rod touches the workpiece, a powerful electrical circuit is created. The massive heat created by the electrical current causes both the workpiece and the steel core of the rod to melt together, cooling quickly to form a solid bond. During welding, the flux that surrounds the rod's core vaporizes, forming an inert gas that serves to protect the weld from atmospheric elements that might weaken it. Welding speed is important. Variations in speed can change the amount of flux applied, weakening the weld, or weakening the surrounding metal by increasing heat exposure.

Two common but advanced types of welding are Gas Tungsten Arc (TIG) and Gas Metal Arc (MIG) welding. TIG welding often is used with stainless steel or aluminum. While TIG uses welding rods, MIG uses a spool of continuously fed wire, which allows the welder to join longer stretches of metal without stopping to replace the rod. In TIG welding, the welder holds the welding rod in one hand and an electric torch in the other hand. The torch is used to simultaneously melt the rod and the workpiece. In MIG welding, the welder holds the wire feeder, which functions like the alligator clip in arc welding. Instead of using gas flux surrounding the rod, TIG and MIG protect the initial weld from the environment by blowing inert gas onto the weld.

Like arc welding, soldering and brazing use molten metal to join two pieces of metal. However, the metal added during the process has a melting point lower than that of the workpiece, so only the added metal is melted, not the workpiece. Soldering uses metals with a melting point below 800 degrees Fahrenheit; brazing uses metals with a higher melting point. Because soldering and brazing do not melt the workpiece, these processes normally do not create the distortions or weaknesses in the workpiece that can occur with welding. Soldering commonly is used to join electrical, electronic,

and other small metal parts. Brazing produces a stronger joint than does soldering, and often is used to join metals other than steel, such as brass. Brazing can also be used to apply coatings to parts to reduce wear and protect against corrosion.

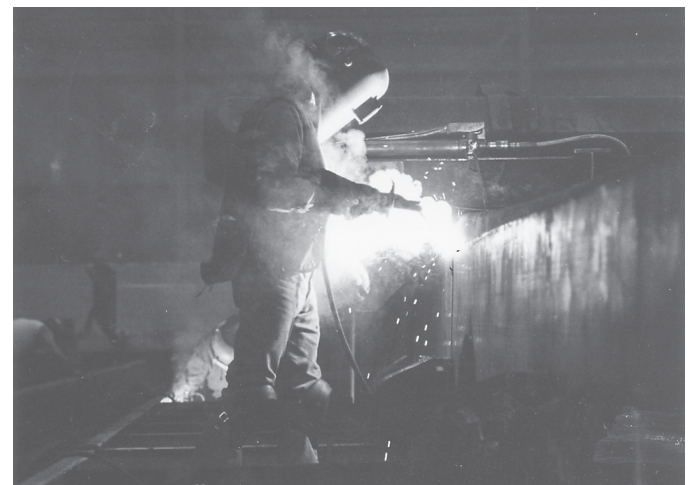
Skilled welding, soldering, and brazing workers generally plan work from drawings or specifications or use their knowledge of fluxes and base metals to analyze the parts to be joined. These workers then select and set up welding equipment, execute the planned welds, and examine welds to ensure that they meet standards or specifications. Highly skilled welders often are trained to work with a wide variety of materials in addition to steel, such as titanium, aluminum, or plastics. Some welders have more limited duties, however. They perform routine jobs that already have been planned and laid out and do not require extensive knowledge of welding techniques.

Automated welding is used in an increasing number of production processes. In these instances, a machine or robot performs the welding tasks while monitored by a welding machine operator. Welding, soldering, and brazing machine setters, operators, and tenders follow specified layouts, work orders, or blueprints. Operators must load parts correctly and constantly monitor the machine to ensure that it produces the desired bond.

The work of arc, plasma, and oxy-gas cutters is closely related to that of welders. However, instead of joining metals, cutters use the heat from an electric arc, a stream of ionized gas (plasma), or burning gases to cut and trim metal objects to specific dimensions. Cutters also dismantle large objects, such as ships, railroad cars, automobiles, buildings, or aircraft. Some operate and monitor cutting machines similar to those used by welding machine operators. Plasma cutting has been increasing in popularity because, unlike other methods, it can cut a wide variety of metals, including stainless steel, aluminum, and titanium.

Working Conditions

Welding, soldering, and brazing workers often are exposed to a number of hazards, including the intense light created by the arc, poisonous fumes, and very hot materials. They wear safety shoes, goggles, hoods with protective lenses, and other devices designed to prevent burns and eye injuries and to protect them from falling objects. They normally work in well-ventilated areas to limit their exposure to fumes. Automated welding, soldering, and brazing machine operators are not exposed to as many dangers, however,



Some welding, soldering, and brazing workers are employed in ship and boat building.

and a face shield or goggles usually provide adequate protection for these workers.

Welders and cutters may work outdoors, often in inclement weather, or indoors, sometimes in a confined area designed to contain sparks and glare. Outdoors, they may work on a scaffold or platform high off the ground. In addition, they may be required to lift heavy objects and work in a variety of awkward positions, while bending, stooping, or standing to perform work overhead.

Although about 55 percent of welders, solderers, and brazers work a 40-hour week, overtime is common, and some welders work up to 70 hours per week. Welders also may work in shifts as long as 12 hours. Some welders, solderers, brazers, and machine operators work in factories that operate around the clock, necessitating shift work.

Employment

Welding, soldering, and brazing workers held about 452,000 jobs in 2002. Of these jobs, about 2 of every 3 were found in manufacturing. Jobs were concentrated in transportation equipment manufacturing (motor vehicle body and parts and ship and boat building), machinery manufacturing (agriculture, construction, and mining machinery), and architectural and structural metals manufacturing. Most jobs for welding, soldering, and brazing machine setters, operators, and tenders were found in the same manufacturing industries as skilled welding, soldering, and brazing workers.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Training for welding, soldering, and brazing workers can range from a few weeks of school or on-the-job training for low-skilled positions to several years of combined school and on-the-job training for highly skilled jobs. Formal training is available in high schools, vocational schools, and postsecondary institutions, such as vocational-technical institutes, community colleges, and private welding schools. The Armed Forces operate welding schools as well. Some employers provide training. Courses in blueprint reading, shop mathematics, mechanical drawing, physics, chemistry, and metallurgy are helpful. Knowledge of computers is gaining importance, especially for welding, soldering, and brazing machine operators, who are becoming responsible for the programming of computer-controlled machines, including robots.

Some welders become certified, a process whereby the employer sends a worker to an institution, such as an independent testing lab or technical school, to weld a test specimen according to specific codes and standards required by the employer. Testing procedures are based on the standards and codes set by one of several industry associations with which the employer may be affiliated. If the welding inspector at the examining institution determines that the worker has performed according to the employer's guidelines, the inspector will then certify the welder being tested as able to work with a particular welding procedure.

Welding, soldering, and brazing workers need good eyesight, hand-eye coordination, and manual dexterity. They should be able to concentrate on detailed work for long periods and be able to bend, stoop, and work in awkward positions. In addition, welders increasingly need to be willing to receive training and perform tasks in other production jobs.

Welders can advance to more skilled welding jobs with additional training and experience. For example, they may become welding technicians, supervisors, inspectors, or instructors. Some experienced welders open their own repair shops.

Job Outlook

Job prospects should be excellent, as many potential entrants who could be welders may prefer to attend college or may prefer work that has more comfortable working conditions. Employment of welding, soldering, and brazing workers is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations over the 2002-12 period. In addition, many openings will arise as workers retire or leave the occupation for other reasons.

The major factor affecting employment of welders is the health of the industries in which they work. Because almost every manufacturing industry uses welding at some stage of manufacturing or in the repair and maintenance of equipment, a strong economy will keep demand for welders high. A downturn affecting industries such as auto manufacturing, construction, or petroleum, however, would have a negative impact on the employment of welders in those areas, and could cause some layoffs. Levels of government funding for shipbuilding as well as for infrastructure repairs and improvements are expected to be another important determinant of the future number of welding jobs.

Regardless of the state of the economy, the pressures to improve productivity and hold down labor costs are leading many companies to invest more in automation, especially computer-controlled and robotically-controlled welding machinery. This will reduce the demand for some low-skilled welders, solderers, and brazers because these simple, repetitive jobs are being automated. The growing use of automation, however, should increase demand for welding, soldering, and brazing machine setters, operators, and tenders. Welders working on construction projects or in equipment repair will not be affected by technology change to the same extent, because their jobs are not as easily automated.

Technology is helping to improve welding, creating more uses for welding in the workplace and expanding employment opportunities. For example, new ways are being developed to bond dissimilar materials and nonmetallic materials, such as plastics, composites, and new alloys. Also, laser beam and electron beam welding, new fluxes, and other new technologies and techniques are improving the results of welding, making it useful in a wider assortment of applications. Improvements in technology have also boosted welding productivity, making welding more competitive with other methods of joining materials.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of welders, cutters, solderers, and brazers were \$14.02 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$11.41 and \$17.34. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$9.41, while the top 10 percent earned over \$21.79. The range of earnings of welders reflects the wide range of skill levels. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of welders, cutters, solderers, and brazers in 2002 were:

Motor vehicle parts manufacturing	\$16.02
Agriculture, construction, and mining machinery manufacturing	13.74
Architectural and structural metals manufacturing	13.34
Commercial and industrial machinery and equipment (except automotive and electronic) repair and maintenance ..	13.06
Motor vehicle body and trailer manufacturing	12.83

Median hourly earnings of welding, soldering, and brazing machine setters, operators, and tenders were \$13.90 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$11.22 and \$17.77. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$9.36, while the top 10 percent earned over \$24.60. Median hourly earnings in motor vehicle parts manufacturing, the industry employing the largest numbers of welding machine operators in 2002 were \$18.29.

Many welders belong to unions. Among these are the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers; the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers and Helpers; the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America; the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing, Pipefitting, Sprinkler Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada; and the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America.

Related Occupations

Welding, soldering, and brazing workers are skilled metal workers. Other metal workers include machinists; machine setters, operators, and tenders—metal and plastic; computer-control programmers and operators; tool and die makers; sheet metal workers; and boilermakers. Assemblers and fabricators of electrical and electronic equipment often assemble parts using soldering.

Sources of Additional Information

For information on training opportunities and jobs for welding, soldering, and brazing workers, contact local employers, the local office of the State employment service, or schools providing welding, soldering, or brazing training.

Information on careers and educational opportunities in welding is available from:

► American Welding Society, 550 N.W. Lejeune Rd., Miami, FL 33126-5699. Internet: <http://www.aws.org>