



Skilled Trades in 2026: Key trends shaping the year ahead

A QUICK GUIDE



If you work in the skilled trades or employ skilled tradespeople, you're entering a period of major transformation. From how projects are funded to where work is happening and what skills are in demand, the trades are evolving fast.

As the industry enters 2026, forces like reshoring, rapid data center expansion, labor shortages and new technology adoption are reshaping job sites across the country. The trades that thrive will be the ones that stay informed and adapt early.

This guide breaks down the most important skilled trades trends for 2026, with a focus on what they mean for workers, contractors and industry leaders on the front lines.



Data center construction continues to surge

Data centers are no longer niche infrastructure. They are becoming mission-critical facilities powering AI, cloud computing, healthcare systems, financial services and national security.

[A new report](#) shows nearly 100 GW of new data centers will be added between 2026 and 2030, doubling global capacity. This boom is expected to remain one of the strongest demand drivers for skilled labor.

WHAT'S DRIVING THE BOOM?

- Explosive growth in AI and cloud services
- Increased domestic data storage requirements
- Demand for redundancy, speed and security
- Expansion into secondary and rural markets

TRADES IN HIGHEST DEMAND

- Electricians
- HVAC and mechanical trades
- Equipment installers
- Pipefitters and welders

What makes data centers different

Data center projects often operate under tighter conditions than traditional commercial builds. Clean work practices, precision installs and strict commissioning standards are the norm. Downtime is not an option, which means schedules are aggressive and expectations are high.

What this means for skilled workers and contractors

Those with data center experience (or who invest in learning it) will command premium pay and steady work. Attention to detail, safety discipline and comfort working in high-stakes environments are essential.



Reshoring fuels industrial and manufacturing builds

After decades of offshoring, companies are bringing manufacturing back to the U.S. In 2026, reshoring is the new strategy. Driven by supply chain risk, geopolitical pressure and incentives, new plants are being built at a rapid pace.

KEY DRIVERS OF RESHORING

- Supply chain disruptions and reliability concerns
- Federal and state incentives
- Demand for faster production cycles
- National security and critical manufacturing needs

HIGH-GROWTH PROJECT TYPES

- Semiconductor and chip fabrication plants
- Battery and EV manufacturing facilities
- Advanced manufacturing and automation plants
- Pharmaceutical and medical manufacturing

Trades seeing increased demand



PIPEFITTERS & WELDERS



INDUSTRIAL ELECTRICIANS & AUTOMATION SPECIALISTS



MAINTENANCE MECHANICS

What this means for skilled workers and contractors

Industrial skills are becoming more and more valuable. Workers who understand automation, robotics, PLCs and complex mechanical systems will have long-term career security.



The skilled labor shortage intensifies

The skilled trades labor shortage is still accelerating. [A new report](#) shows the construction industry needs to attract an estimated 349,000 net new workers in 2026 to meet demand for construction services.

In 2026, retirements will continue to outpace new worker entry, especially in experienced, journey-level roles.

Why the gap is growing

- ✓ Aging workforce nearing retirement
- ✓ Fewer young workers entering the trades
- ✓ Increased project volume across sectors
- ✓ Competition between industries for the same talent

How the industry is responding

- ✓ Higher wages and better benefits
- ✓ Faster hiring cycles
- ✓ More flexible staffing models
- ✓ Increased investment in training and upskilling

What this means for skilled workers and contractors

Qualified tradespeople will have more leverage than ever. And contractors should consider offering training, perks and other incentives to help attract and retain skilled workers.



Safety and compliance raise the bar

As projects grow more complex and high-value, safety expectations continue to rise. In 2026, safety performance is no longer just a matter of meeting minimum standards. It's a competitive differentiator. On top of this, compliance continues to be a hot-button issue across job sites.

KEY SAFETY AND COMPLIANCE SHIFTS



More stringent site access requirements



Increased documentation and digital reporting



Increased risk of compliance audits



Greater accountability for subcontractors and staffing partners



Expanded use of safety technology and monitoring

What this means for skilled workers and contractors

Strong safety habits, up-to-date certifications and situational awareness are essential. Workers who take safety seriously protect not only themselves, but their long-term employability.



Technology changes how trades work

Technology isn't replacing skilled trades, but it is changing how work gets done. This year, familiarity with digital tools will be a baseline expectation.

COMMON TECHNOLOGIES ON JOB SITES



Digital blueprints and tablets



Prefabrication and modular construction



Automation and smart equipment



Workforce tracking and scheduling tools

What this means for skilled workers and contractors

Those willing to learn new tools will move faster, make fewer mistakes and stay in demand. Adaptability is becoming just as important as technical skills.

What this all means for the skilled trades workforce

The outlook for skilled trades in 2026 is strong, but not passive. Opportunity will favor those who prepare for it.

TO STAY COMPETITIVE:

- ✓ Build experience in high-growth sectors like data centers and industrial manufacturing
- ✓ Invest in certifications and safety training
- ✓ Stay adaptable to new tools and processes
- ✓ Maintain a strong reputation for reliability and professionalism

The future of the skilled trades is being built right now. The workers and employers who understand and act on these trends will be the ones shaping the industry for years to come.

The skilled trades remain the backbone of modern infrastructure. By staying informed and proactive, you can make sure you're ready for what's next.



PeopleReady Skilled Trades (PRST) Your partner in 2026

Whether you're seeking skilled work or need dependable tradespeople, PRST is here to support your success. Our mission is to connect skilled tradespeople and work — a mission we've been dedicated to since 1987. As part of TrueBlue, we own our niche and have honed the craft of skilled trades staffing across the construction, energy and marine sectors.

We put a scalable workforce within reach

A skilled trades labor shortage is sweeping the nation. Without access to a scalable workforce, businesses are forced to weigh deadlines against profit, safety against risk and quality against completion. When you partner with PRST, a skilled workforce is always within reach. Whether you need a single trade worker or require a coordinated effort to dispatch skilled workers across multiple projects, we ensure you have the right people with the right tools, on-site and on time.

We Respect the Craft

Skilled tradespeople are at the heart of everything we do. Our respect for our tradespeople and the essential work they do every day runs deep. And, we show our respect by extending to them the same level of care and service that we provide to our customers.

Looking for skilled tradespeople for your next project?
Visit skilled.peopleready.com/request-tradespeople