Which Color Collar Fits the Future?

The helmet is bright pink, and so are the gloves. In the video, a young woman with a blond braid guides a welding rod along a glowing seam while metal music thuds in the background, and the caption makes a quiet joke at the expense of office life: she finds this easier than answering email. Her name is Lindsey Hover, she welds in California, and more than 160,000 people follow her online to watch her work.

She has plenty of company. There are truckers who run their own training academies, carpenters filming their morning routines, and an air-conditioning repairman in Florida whose employer is openly trying to turn him into a celebrity. Millions of posts now carry the blue-collar hashtag. What all this content is selling is the very career path that a generation of parents spent decades steering their children away from.

The timing is no accident. Young people entering the job market today are staring at two uncomfortable facts at once. The first is the price of a degree: the average American borrower leaves campus owing around $26,000 in student loans, many owe far more than that, and repayment often stretches past twenty years. The second is that artificial intelligence is coming for precisely the kind of work that degree was supposed to guarantee. The head of one leading AI company has warned that the technology could wipe out half of all entry-level office jobs, and demand for fresh graduates has already slipped below where it stood before the pandemic. Meanwhile, no robot yet climbs a ladder to fix a leaking roof.

Young people appear to be listening. In one recent survey, six in ten Gen Z respondents said they planned to pursue a trade such as construction, plumbing, or electrical work. Enrollment at trade-focused schools in the United States has risen almost 20 percent since 2020, and the building trades unions reported a record 88,000 apprentices last year. Even Jensen Huang, the chief executive of Nvidia, told an audience at Davos, the annual gathering of the world's business and political elite in the Swiss Alps, that plumbers and electricians would soon be earning six-figure salaries, since somebody has to build the data centers his chips will live in.

The financial case is stronger than most people assume. Hover likes to point out that the plumber people look down on probably earns more than they do, with better benefits, and she has the numbers on her side. Most of her generation believes a plumbing business cannot clear a million dollars a year in revenue. In reality, roughly two-thirds of them do. For a generation that dreams of working for itself, a van and a set of tools can be a faster route to owning a business than any corporate ladder.

But the story is messier than the videos suggest.

Start with the data. Payroll records show that the blue-collar share of workers in their early twenties climbed after 2020, then flattened around 2022 and has barely moved since. And for every survey finding a stampede toward the trades, another finds indifference: one large poll last year reported that fewer than 40 percent of Gen Z saw skilled trades as a promising option.

It is possible that what looks like a generational shift is partly a change in what people tell survey takers.

Then there is the work itself. Veterans of the industry are blunt about it. The job is physically punishing, swings with the seasons, and does not respect evenings or weekends, and bodies wear out in ways that spreadsheets do not. Getting in is also harder than advertised. Construction slows every winter, profit margins are thin, and small firms hesitate to gamble on an untrained teenager who might cost them a contract. The industry has a shortage of tradespeople and, at the same time, a shortage of entry-level openings. Both things are true.

And there is a third explanation, more cynical than the first two. Notice who is doing the encouraging. The loudest cheerleaders for manual work are billionaires whose own products threaten office jobs, and corporations that need hundreds of thousands of new workers and are funding influencer campaigns to find them. Trade wages are rising for a simple reason: workers are scarce. If millions of young people take the advice at once, the scarcity ends, and so does the leverage that comes with it. Seen this way, the campaign solves the employers' problem, not the workers'. It is hard not to notice that nobody on a Davos stage is suggesting that their own children skip university to learn pipefitting.

In South Korea, this choice would be even harder to make. Roughly seven in ten high school graduates go straight to university, and the name of the school can follow a person for life, into job interviews, family introductions, and casual conversation. The stigma that American surveys measure, where three quarters of young people say vocational school carries a social penalty, is arguably stronger here. Choosing a trade at eighteen would mean betting against not only the labor market but the whole social order.

So the choice facing an eighteen-year-old is genuinely hard, and the honest answer is that nobody knows how it ends. The white-collar path offers status and air conditioning, along with a technology that may hollow it out from below. The trades offer scarcity wages and work no algorithm can touch, at least until enough people crowd in, or the robots finally learn to climb ladders. Every previous generation could simply follow the route its parents took: study, graduate, find a desk. This one is being handed two competing maps, each drawn by people with their own reasons for recommending it, and asked to pick a direction before anyone knows where either road leads.

1) What kind of career did your parents hope you would have?
2) Have you ever done physical work for money?
3) How much of your current job do you think AI could do today?
4) Why do you think millions of people enjoy watching videos of welders, truckers, and carpenters at work?
5) Is a four-year university degree still worth the time and money it costs?
6) If a plumber earns more than an office manager, why do many people still respect the office manager more?
7) Would you trust career advice from a billionaire?

8) Do you think rich people are promoting blue-collar work simply because they need cheap workers?
9) How would most Korean parents react if their child decided to skip university and learn a trade?
10) Do you think the stigma around vocational school in Korea is getting weaker or stronger?
11) If you were around 18 years old today, would you be willing to learn a trade, or would you still try to get a white-collar job?

Braid	(n)	a length of hair made by weaving three sections together	She wore her hair in a long braid that reached the middle of her back.
Seam	(n)	a line where two pieces of material are joined, or a join in metal	The tailor ran his finger along the seam to check that the stitching was straight.
Thud	(v)	to hit something and make a dull, heavy sound	The bass from the club next door thudded through the walls until well past midnight.
At the expense of (sb/sth)	(exp)	causing harm or loss to someone or something in order to gain something else	He built his career at the expense of his health, working eighty-hour weeks for a decade.
Plenty of	(exp)	a large amount of; more than enough	There is plenty of time before the train leaves, so let's stop for a coffee.
Openly	(adv)	in a way that is not hidden or kept secret	The manager spoke openly about the company's problems instead of hiding them from staff.
Steer (sb) away from (sth)	(phr v)	to guide or influence someone so that they avoid something	Her parents tried to steer her away from acting, convinced it was too risky a career.
Come for (sb/sth)	(phr v)	to move toward someone or something in a threatening way; here, to threaten to take	Automation is coming for many routine jobs, and no one is quite sure which will survive.
Head	(n)	the person who leads an organization or group	As head of the department, she has the final say on who gets hired.
Wipe out	(phr v)	to destroy or remove something completely	A single bad investment nearly wiped out his life savings.
Slip	(v)	to fall or drop to a lower level	Sales slipped during the winter months before recovering in spring.
Respondent	(n)	someone who answers questions in a survey or study	Most respondents to the survey said they would prefer a shorter working week.

Trade	(n)	a skilled job that involves working with your hands	He learned his trade from his father and has been fixing cars for thirty years.
Trade union	(n)	an organized group of workers formed to protect their rights and interests	The trade union negotiated a pay rise for its members after months of talks.
Point out	(phr v)	to draw attention to a fact or detail	She was quick to point out that the plan had one serious flaw.
On one's side	(exp)	supporting one's position; here, evidence that backs up a claim	The evidence was clearly on his side, so the judge dismissed the case.
Clear	(v)	(informal) to earn a particular amount as profit after costs are paid	After paying his suppliers and staff, he clears about four thousand dollars a month.
Corporate ladder	(n)	the series of ranks in a company that a person climbs to reach higher positions	She spent fifteen years climbing the corporate ladder before deciding to start her own firm.
Stampede	(n)	a sudden rush of many people toward the same thing	The announcement of cheap tickets caused a stampede on the airline's website.
Promising	(adj)	showing signs of future success	The young engineer had a promising future until she left to travel the world.
Veteran	(n)	someone with long experience in a particular field or activity	As a veteran of three international campaigns, he knew exactly what could go wrong.
Punishing	(adj)	extremely demanding and physically or mentally exhausting	The training schedule was so punishing that half the recruits dropped out in the first month.
Wear out	(phr v)	to become damaged or useless through long or heavy use	Cheap shoes wear out quickly if you walk to work every day.
Profit margin	(n)	the difference between what a business earns and what it spends	The supermarket keeps its prices low by accepting a very thin profit margin on each item.
Gamble on (sb/sth)	(phr v)	to take a risk in the hope of a good result	The studio gambled on an unknown director, and the film became a surprise hit.
Shortage	(n)	a situation in which there is not enough of something	A shortage of nurses has forced several hospitals to delay non-urgent operations.
Entry-level	(adj)	suitable for someone who is just starting out, with little experience	Most entry-level positions pay little but offer valuable experience.

Cynical	(adj)	believing that people are motivated mainly by self-interest	Years in politics had made her cynical about every promise a candidate made.
Cheerleader	(n)	(figurative) someone who enthusiastically supports and promotes something	The mayor became the biggest cheerleader for the new stadium, mentioning it in every speech.
Scarce	(adj)	available only in small amounts; hard to find	Fresh water becomes scarce in the region during the long dry season.
Scarcity	(n)	a situation in which there is not enough of something	The scarcity of affordable housing has pushed young families out of the city.
Leverage	(n)	the power to influence a situation in order to get what you want	Owning the only bridge into town gave the company enormous leverage over local businesses.
Stigma	(n)	a feeling of social disapproval attached to something	There is still a stigma around asking for help with mental health at work.
Bet against (sb/sth)	(phr v)	to act on the expectation that something will fail	Few investors were willing to bet against a company that had grown every year for a decade.
Hollow out	(phr v)	to remove or destroy the important inner part of something, leaving an empty shell	Decades of factory closures hollowed out the town's economy.
Crowd in	(phr v)	to move into a space or market in large numbers	When a market looks profitable, competitors quickly crowd in and prices fall.