

Tackling the Bench Jeweler Shortage



Finding skilled workers to craft pieces is getting harder, forcing the industry to take a good look at its pay levels and recruiting practices.

Julie Bergstein Romanenko has a longtime bench jeweler, but that hasn't stopped her from fantasizing about having her non-jeweler husband learn laser soldering; business is so robust that she could use the help fulfilling orders.

"The silver lining is that these are growing pains," says the owner of Just Jules. Like many designers and retailers, Romanenko says competition for her jeweler's skills can be as brisk as sales of the styles he makes. And these days, it's not easy to find qualified craftspeople.

"This is the hardest it's been in 25 years to find bench help," says Vic Davis of Vic Davis & Associates, a jewelry industry recruiter. "I typically have eight to 12 quality bench jobs available, and right now, I have 32."

This dearth of available talent has been a growing problem for about a decade, experts say. Low pay is one reason. An aging workforce is another. Then there was the pandemic, when many businesses had to let jewelers go. A lot of them never went back after stores reopened; bench and computer-assisted design and manufacturing (CAD/CAM) employees learned they could make more money working for themselves — creating their own jewelry to sell online — or in other industries altogether.

“I’ve been a bench jeweler for 50 years, and I’ve never made six figures working for someone else, only for myself,” affirms Joel McFadden of Joel E. McFadden Designs.

Last year’s boom in jewelry sales exacerbated the problem by increasing the need for repair and bench departments in stores. “There’s a greater demand for custom work and CAD/CAM,” says Rick Borchert of Hobson & Co., another jewelry recruiting firm. “The schools can’t pump out the jewelers fast enough.”

Getting real about salary

The shortage has resulted in one plus for would-be employees: an increase in pay over the last two years. By Davis’s estimate, bench jewelers’ salaries have risen by about 20%. “I have more jobs right now at \$30-plus an hour, and I’ve never had that before,” he says.

A fair salary for a bench jeweler depends on skill, the cost of living in an employer’s location, and the money the department generates. The actual sums vary, but they should generally start around \$40,000 a year for entry-level work and go up from there.

Experienced jewelers earn more — Borchert has a client in Texas that has paid over \$150,000 a year, and another client in California that has paid over \$200,000 — but that takes years.

So when stores seek someone with five to 10 years of experience and then offer demoralizing wages, applicants look elsewhere.

Matthew Valentine is a bench craftsman at Chadwick’s Jewelers on St. Simons Island, Georgia, and has owned stores and a trade shop in years past. He knows of an area store advertising a bench position with pay at \$14 an hour, even though a restaurant just miles away offers higher pay and tip sharing for dishwashers. Another retailer in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, is offering \$20 an hour for a bench jeweler, but houses in the area start at \$450,000.

“The industry is light years ahead of where it was with regard to pay, but there is still a huge disconnect,” Valentine says.

Mark Grosser of M. Grosser Jewelry works for himself in a 1,400-square-foot studio in Carmel, Indiana. He knows a larger merchant nearby that pays based on production time, having the in-house bench jeweler write on the back of every job ticket how long the work took. “The store sees the value of having a jeweler in the back room,” Grosser says, since in addition to the convenience, the merchant recognizes that the jeweler is making the company money.

Division of labor

David Geller, founder of retail consulting firm JewelerProfit, struggled to determine fair compensation when he had a store. His efforts culminated in his writing *Geller's Blue Book to Jewelry Repair & Design* — now in its ninth edition — which enumerates prices for each jeweler technique, such as stone setting or ring sizing. To reach those numbers, he mapped out fees based on the time it took jewelers to accomplish the tasks. He recommends charging customers a fourfold markup of those sums.

Of course, not all tasks are created equal. Geller notes that the consumer markups in his book don't factor in the cost of polishing the final piece. "Hire a kid to do that — and charge [the customer accordingly] for it — so the jeweler does skilled work," he advises.

McFadden, too, understands the importance of having the right person for the right job. His own son is a bench jeweler who handles big jobs like building \$10,000 jewels, as well as small ones like changing watch batteries. But this isn't an ideal arrangement for most companies, he acknowledges: "Realistically, many could use a custom jeweler for high-end jobs and a repair jeweler for simpler tasks."

In that vein, it's important to be clear about the skill level you seek when recruiting. Someone who spends their time soldering and polishing chains would command a lower salary than staffers turning out custom. "It amazes me, the number of companies that do not have job descriptions," remarks Borchert.

Better incentives

To find qualified bench jewelers and CAD/CAM operators, the industry is getting creative. Pay increases, health insurance, and relocation costs are now the norm, as are paid jewelry-school programs and signing bonuses. Some of Borchert's clients have offered \$10,000 to applicants who stay at least a year.

Another incentive is a lower-stress lifestyle. A peer of Grosser's relocated from Indiana to Texas for a pawn shop job, working Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. for \$90,000 a year. He now largely solders chains, but there's less pressure.

Still more jewelers are trying to "grow their own" bench employees by hiring off the street and offering training, according to Geller. It can be risky, but the alternative — poaching talent from competitors — is pricey.

One merchant friend of Grosser's recently struck a deal with him: If Grosser would train a graduate of an art jewelry program to do professional techniques, the merchant's store would send him all its custom work for two years. The company "felt that if [the graduate] had the right amount of training, she could be what they needed," Grosser explains.

The industry needs to do a better job overall of interesting people in bench careers, believes Shannon Calloway, who would like the work to begin at the high school level.

As an instructor at the Texas Institute of Jewelry Technology — a division of Paris Junior College in Paris, Texas — she is frustrated when parents and counselors dismiss programs like hers as artsy pursuits with no guaranteed future income. In fact, her program has a 94% job placement rate.

“Being a jeweler is a career,” she asserts. “You’re not going to starve.”

Bringing back apprenticeships

To inspire more entrants to bench jeweler programs, trade body Manufacturing Jewelers & Suppliers of America (MJSA) debuted its Be a Jeweler initiative in 2015. The project gives interested individuals access to educational videos and a list of jewelry training programs, as well as a copy of the book *A Jeweler’s Guide to Apprenticeships* by educator Nanz Aalund.

Thanks to a cash influx from the 2022 JCK Industry Grant Fund, MJSA is now taking the program further: It plans to create a central database of available mentors, develop national standards and procedures for training bench jewelers, and work to spark more apprenticeships.

“We want to bring back that journeyman/apprenticeship model and make it as easy as possible to get jewelry careers off the ground,” says Rich Youmans, the group’s chief communications officer and publisher. Those interested in more information can contact him at rich.youmans@mjsa.org or call 800-444-6572, extension 3025.

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