

# FURNITURE & CABINETMAKER

BY LAURA BUCCI

Love working with your hands? A career in the skilled trades could be for you. And there's never been a better time: retirements in the booming construction industry mean job prospects are good, and many provinces are trying to attract more women into the trades. Eva Hoening, 42, trained in cabinetry and furniture making in Germany, and has enjoyed a fruitful career in both Germany and Canada. Hoening has worked on the West Coast for four years, most recently in one of Vancouver's high-end shops. She told *Shameless* that while the trades are still male dominated, the key to job satisfaction is finding a progressive shop.

**The job:** Right now, I work for a cabinet shop. We get a variety of projects, so what I work on really varies. Some of the things I have built include staircases, mouldings, furniture and cabinetry for kitchens and bathrooms. I usually work on one project at a time and I am responsible for it from beginning to end.

**Education:** I apprenticed as a cabinetmaker in Germany and then completed my studies as a master in woodworking (which took one year). The apprenticeship program was three years. It combined classes and apprenticeship work.

**Hours:** I work eight hours a day, starting at 7 a.m., but other shops start even earlier. Sometimes I have to work overtime to meet deadlines, but I don't get paid an overtime rate. Few shops have overtime rates. But if I work more hours than usual one week, I'll work less the next.

**Salary:** Apprentices start at about \$15 an hour, increasing to about \$18 in their third year. When I started working in Canada, I made around \$41,000 as a skilled worker. After being here five years, I now make around \$45,000. Because there's a building boom and a lack of skilled workers right now, rates could easily go up.

**Career break:** Before I even did my apprenticeship, I volunteered at a shop that built toys and furniture. I did everything — sanding, building and cleaning the shop. The owner was great. He taught me a lot. In Germany, they suggest you have some experience before your apprenticeship so you have a realistic idea of the work. In Canada, you wouldn't volunteer in a shop, but you can work as a helper to get similar exposure.



**Inspiration:** I knew I didn't want to go to university because I don't like to learn from books. I was 20 and I had to support myself. My first choice was jewellery-making, but I couldn't find an apprenticeship. So my second choice was woodworking. I was also influenced by my friends, who decided to go into the trades instead of going to university.

**Pros:** I can be myself, earn a good wage and build things. The building part is important because it is something that we are removed from more and more in our society. It's a versatile job, especially if you have your own business. Then you can be involved in the marketing, consulting, design, bookkeeping and building. Also, I like the idea that with this skill you can work all over the world.

**Cons:** Working in dust and noise. The job can be physically demanding if your health is poor. There's a lot of heavy lifting. And many people think that those in the trades are not smart.

**Work environment:** In Canada, workers' compensation only comes in after a major accident, so health and safety is an issue. In Germany, there were so many cabinetmakers with lung cancer that the government toughened up regulations. It's pretty much a male-dominated field in Canada, but that's slowly changing because of market need.

**A day on the job:** I'm usually the first one in, so I'll turn on the power, lights and compressor. If there's an apprentice, I make a quick plan so they have something to work on, and sometimes I'll have to train them. Then I work on my project. In most shops, the same machines are used by everyone, so I try to do all of my cutting and preparation as early as

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possible. Sometimes I'll have to go out to purchase materials and tools for the project.

**Work/life balance:** When I go home now, work is completely behind me. But it wasn't always like that. Before, if I was stuck with a problem, I'd continue thinking about it at home, too. Now that I'm more experienced, problem solving is easier. It's good to be able to talk things through with co-workers. Going to aikido classes four or five times a week also helps deal with stress.

**On being a woman in the field:** In some shops, you have to prove yourself before you are respected, and sometimes you have to put up with a lot of talk about women and fast cars. I've come to the conclusion that if people have a problem with me being a woman and a cabinetmaker, then I don't want to work with them. It's a male-dominated environment even when you go buy materials or machinery. If I'm buying wood with a male co-worker, salespeople will approach him first. It's only after they hear me talk and can see I know what I'm talking about that they'll pay attention to me. It used to be just as bad in Germany, but I think it will get better here just like it did there.

**Who or what inspires you?** I particularly like the work that came out of the Arts and Crafts movement before the Industrial Revolution. I also admire contemporary Japanese woodworking.

**Job satisfaction:** I'm generally happy with my job, but I wish people would respect you for your knowledge. There is a hierarchy in shops, which I don't think much of. Experienced workers should be flexible



enough to have parts of their jobs overlap with inexperienced workers. No one should find it beneath them to sweep floors.

**Career advice:** Work as a shop helper to get a realistic idea of the job. This can be tough because of the rough environment, but if you really want to do it, go for it. After you've gained some experience and finished your apprenticeship, you will have more options. When approaching new shops, follow your gut feeling. If you get funny vibes from an interview, don't accept the job — it's probably not worth it. When I started my apprenticeship, clients sometimes expressed surprise that the owner had hired a woman. But my boss always came back with, "What's the problem? The wood doesn't care." **S**

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