

AI Can't Touch These Skilled Trade Jobs. If Only Enough Humans Would

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Lucien Myette came to Crane Stationery after a stint at a Stewart's convenience store.

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Crane Stationery faces a shortage of master engravers, with only a dozen remaining and at least one planning to retire this year.

Training for engravers is rigorous, with only half of apprentices completing it due to the precision required.

Apprentice engravers start at \$18.50 an hour, and new engravers who complete the apprenticeship can earn up to \$60,000 annually including bonuses.

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LATHAM, N.Y.—Master engravers have etched the custom designs and lettering on Crane Stationery since the days of Paul Revere—who, according to company lore, was one of its first customers.

Today, with just a dozen left and at least one set to retire this year, these tradespeople are disappearing. Artificial intelligence and automation aren't the reason. It is because it is so hard to entice humans to learn the highly skilled precision craft.

"If you have a desire to print, saddle up—you have a job at Crane," says Robert Buhler, chief executive of the more than 200-year-old company.

The company cut off holiday sales two weeks early this past season because it didn't have enough engravers to fill orders. Just over 300 trained engravers, or presspeople, work in the U.S. today, according to the International Engraved Graphics Association. Buhler says some of the most skilled work at Crane.

The length and intensity of the training have a lot to do with the vanishing craft. Crane engravers like 33-year-old Spencer Goodrow etch fine lines into copper plates. The margin of error is less than the width of a strand of hair. They stand for as many as eight hours a day in front of an antique press, printing custom cards, invitations and stationery.

Only half make it through the training: People either quit or their work isn't up to the company's standard. Apprentices can spend at least one year working with a single color before they can move on to more complex designs.

"You're gonna get mad," Goodrow tells trainees about working with the printing presses. Some of the machines, he says, "are older than grandfathers."

Pay is another challenge. Unable to be replicated by machines, these kinds of [highly human-precision skills](#) are increasingly sought after. Yet wages haven't caught up. New apprentices start at \$18.50 an hour. With quarterly bonuses, a new engraver who has graduated from an apprenticeship can make up to \$60,000 a year.

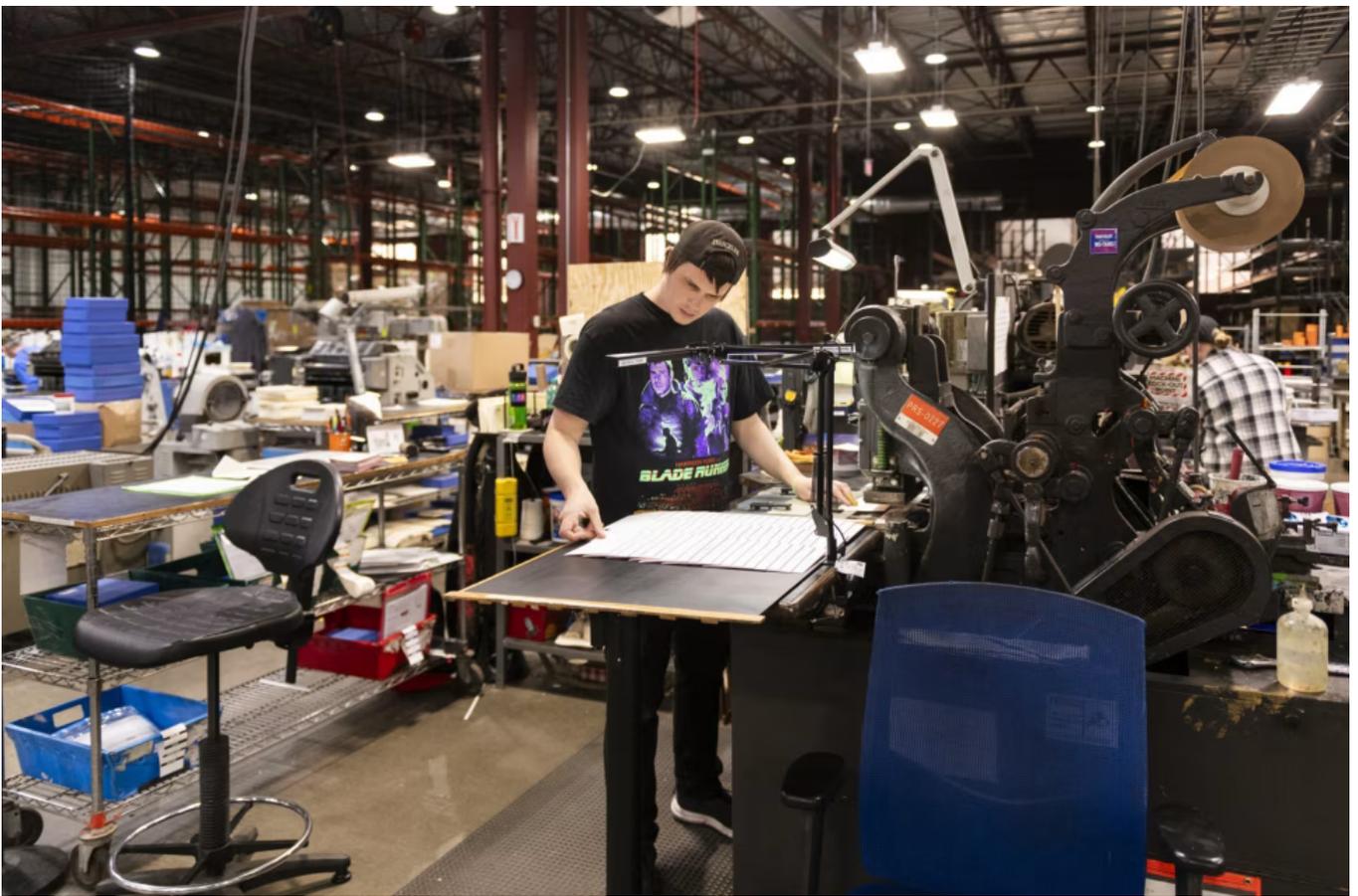
Buhler says he has raised wages about 14% across the board, and those for senior engravers by 22%, since he bought Crane nearly two years ago. He also bolstered the employee health plan and started reimbursing his workers' commuting expenses. Buhler says he plans to raise salaries again this year but recently spent a lot on moving the company to a new building.

At the start of the pandemic, after a 2018 change in ownership, the storied stationery company cut about 200 jobs when it relocated to the Albany, N.Y., area from North Adams, Mass. Its future was uncertain in early 2024 when its parent company, Mohawk Fine Papers, was acquired by an Italian company.

Crane had about 72 employees in 2024 when Buhler, a self-taught engraver with his own stationery business in North Carolina, took an equity stake.



Engraved holiday cards. History has unfolded across Crane's products, including invitations to the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty.



Engraver Spencer Goodrow says the job allows him to chase perfection.

“It could use some vision and help and excitement around it, and I wanted to make that happen,” says Buhler.

Before all of that upheaval, Crane was a big company in North Adams, giving job security and economic stability to employees like John Collins, its 66-year-old head of engraving. He now commutes more than an hour one-way to the Albany-area location because he didn’t want to start a new career in his 60s.

When Collins started in 1995, he walked in off the street and trained one-on-one for three months, eight hours a day, before he could use his own press. The company had no trouble filling open roles then, he says, and had about two dozen engravers 20 years ago. Now, “it’s not the same generation that I came up in,” says Collins, who plans to retire this year.

Everyone who the company hires to engrave starts with zero experience, and part of the challenge is the process itself. Every image that goes on a piece of stationery—a name, a floral design or an intricate Christmas tree

—is etched into a copper plate. This involves using lasers to etch the dye-plate, then using hand-carving tools to refine it.



Crane Stationery recently moved into a new facility in Latham, N.Y.

The most time-consuming part of the job involves crafting a counter, thick card stock that pushes the paper into the copper plate to make an impression, essentially serving as a negative. Once those pieces are put on the machines, the engravers make intricate adjustments to align the paper with the colored ink. The humidity, temperature and finicky nature of the old press can all influence the way the printing turns out.

To be an engraver at Crane, "you have to live in a state of perfection every single day," Buhler says.

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Each color has its own copper plate, making the process trickier as colors

are added. On a Christmas tree greeting card, for example, a miniature ballerina ornament had three separate colors, including red lips. If the lips end up even a hair's-width off, the engraver must start the entire process over.

Such flaws aren't visible to the naked eye, Buhler says, "but our customers know." (Among the company's many high-profile clients is Jimmy Fallon, who uses Crane Stationery in one of his bits on "The Tonight Show.") So does Crane's six-person quality-control department, which scours for imperfections, from scuffs on the card to any misalignments in the design.



Copper engraving plates lie arranged, ready for printing at Crane Stationery.



Auto engraver Neil Sprague works on a press that was built in 1910.

Some engravers take to the work quickly. Lucien Myette began engraving four years ago, after working at a Stewart's convenience store. The 31-year-old started in the packaging department but began coming in early to watch the engravers work. "I want it, I need it," Myette recalls saying to himself when an opening came up on the team.

Now, Crane relies on Myette for some of its most complex designs. The work is appealing, he says, because it is both artistic and technical. He is motivated by the desire to make each piece worth keeping forever.

"Even if I make wedding invitations every week, these people are only getting married once, and I want them to get the best thing they possibly can," he says.

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