

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Ruchir Shah, Skill Cat

00:00:05 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Welcome to The Fix, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts

00:00:35 **Katherine Lehtinen**

a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation. All right, Doug. Hey, listen, we're going to take kind of a different approach to an organization today than we typically have, but I'm really excited because there's an alignment here from a lot of what we've been trying to accomplish and kind of the dreams of our guests today, which is to solve the skilled trade shortage, which I think if we could do that, Would be really, really cool.

00:01:04 **Doug Buchan**

Absolutely. So let me take you on my little journey here. Katherine, you ready? Okay. So. You know, I'm always a big fan of things that can take long journeys to capture great opportunities, right? I want to I want to be around things and I admire things that can react to obstacles and change direction in an instant to achieve successes. Sure. Okay. I want things that can be feared, but also respected, right? Okay, because of the competition. And then I want things that can stand alone, but they can also do great things in packs, right? Absolutely. Well, guess what? and I'm a Leo, Katherine. I love big cats, right? I love those tigers and lions and jaguars, right? Well, today I'm adding a new cat to my fan. It's the skill cat and I'm ready to go.

00:01:51 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Katherine Van Arnam I love it. Well, what a great intro to the founder. Welcome Rushir Shah, who is the founder and CEO of skill cat.

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00:02:03 **Ruchir Shah**

Yeah, awesome. Yeah, excited to be here.

00:02:05 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah. Hey, listen, Doug's for hire. If you would like to have a new intro done, he could definitely work something up for sure. Well, Rajir, can you tell us a little bit about Skillcat and what inspired you to create it?

00:02:18 **Ruchir Shah**

Yeah, absolutely. So Skillcat is an online training platform for the skilled trade. So you have about 1500 hours of training through virtual simulations on HVAC, plumbing, and just general maintenance. And so we have virtual simulations that teach you how to do everything in a gamified way. And then certifications in a whole bunch of areas get you certified to actually start working. And we're only \$10 a month. And so still be cranking 300,000 people. And the whole goal is how do you make it a lot easier for people to get into the trades and grow in the trades. And that's a problem. really dear to me. So my background, how I got into this out of college, I did policy research on the BP oil spill. So that's how I got into the trades world. I started a company out of college, building online courses and simulations for rape workers. So folks working on the ring. And then I went to business school. And when I came out to the business, everyone was getting laid off during COVID. Oil was struggling.

00:03:21 **Ruchir Shah**

And so you had all these people making really great

00:03:26 **Ruchir Shah**

who got laid off and then went to go work at a grocery store because they had no idea how to get into other industries that also needed mechanical skills that also needed electrical skills and did some research and like since the 70s this has been happening all over the country there's been a 30 % decline in blue-collar income because folks moved from these great jobs in manufacturing and coal and they don't know how to reskill for other industries and so That's really how Skillcapped came to be, is how do you make it easier for folks to get

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into the trades without having to go to a trade school where you may have to spend a lot of money and you may have to take two to three years out of the workforce. And so it's how do you make it as easy and accessible as possible for those folks who a trade school doesn't work for. And we've just grown since then.

00:04:15 **Katherine Lehtinen**

So is that, you know, as you talk about one of your, you know, passions is to, you know, fill this trade shortage and the major issue that we have, would you say that's really where SkillCat fits into the mix and what you see is the biggest problem? Or are there any other biggest challenges contributing to this problem? Yeah, so I think the two biggest challenges,

00:04:34 **Ruchir Shah**

there's an awareness issue and there's an access issue. And so we just started a new nonprofit organization called the Grit Foundation, which is a

00:04:42 **Doug Buchan**

nonprofit organization that's

00:04:42 **Ruchir Shah**

focused on the awareness part and then skill cuts a little bit more on the on the access part. But I think awareness people just don't realize how incredible these jobs are. Right? Nobody gets it like you have zero debt. You make more money in almost all cases than someone with a college degree. These jobs are pretty much AI proof. I mean, nothing. I mean, nothing. Yeah, we're a lot less likely to get automated away. And people are happier. Job satisfaction in the trades is 90 % or higher, where it's 40 to 50 % in office jobs. These are just phenomenal jobs people don't realize. So the Great Foundation is an organization we started to get more kids excited about the trades. We're hosting camps all over the country, just changing the narrative on, you know, what's a good, meaningful career and why trade jobs are awesome. So that's kind of the awareness side. And

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the Even if they want to get into the trades, they don't really know how to get into them. They don't have all the opportunities.

00:05:39 **Ruchir Shah**

They can't leave the workforce for, you know, multiple years. And so that's where SkillCat comes in, where we try to make that process a lot easier for folks. And so we have people all across the spectrum from middle school, high school, all the way to people in their 40s and 50s who are career changers, all of whom just want to figure out how to get into the trades, how to grow in the trades, really anything along that spectrum. So awareness and access and we're trying to fix both of them.

00:06:06 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, I and I would imagine for yourself graduating in the last 20 years, that you probably didn't have a lot of awareness that this was even a route that you could have gone down when it goes into the trades. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. that that connection. So I love the fact of the nonprofit that has a nice focus on how do you start to build that awareness? Because it really has been such as we've talked to a lot of people, it is such a college focus still mindset with our counselors, parents, and that there is such a great opportunity to put your hands on tools. And if that's the way you learn, and that's the way you thrive, why not open that door and show someone all the opportunities that are there for them?

00:06:45 **Ruchir Shah**

No, absolutely. We just had a conference and we had our Banner and the tagline was rescue 100 ,000 kids from college.

00:06:53 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, I love it.

00:06:55 **Ruchir Shah**

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Because the college is great for so many people, but a lot of people get pushed into college who just they're not it's not the best fit for them, right? And, you know, so I think the trade should be option one. If the trades don't work out for you. then spent \$250 ,000 in college.

00:07:09 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, no kidding, right?

00:07:13 **Katherine Lehtinen**

That's for sure. Your platform has incredible reviews and also a really high star rating. What do you attribute that to? I mean, do you bring in experts from the field to help you? How do you build out your content? How do you understand what's going to resonate best?

00:07:29 **Ruchir Shah**

Yeah, absolutely. So all of our courses, we build them out with a subject matter expert, someone with years of experience in the field, working with like an e-learning instructional designer and an animator. And so every course is like very animated and interactive. And then we have to work really hard to make sure everything is applied in terms of the rating. I would say that when we first launched, we were at like one or two star rating and been all about feedback. And so I'm sure you know this Doug, but trades people are not shy about giving out feedback.

00:08:00 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Doug, we feel it on social media. If they don't like something, they're going to let you know.

00:08:08 **Ruchir Shah**

We're constantly improving the experience. And you know, it's been a, it's been a, it's been a slog to get us off to like 4 .9, 4 .0, or 5 .0, we're always, it's always like whatever you can do to get to that highest rating possible. Even right now, we're getting a lot of feedback, some of our courses, people want them to be a little bit more

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applied and, you know, interactive, we're going through and revamping a bunch of courses. So we're all about how do you take feedback, feedback is a huge gift. And, you know, instead of getting affected by it, it's all about how do you take that feedback, and then do better. And then that's how you eventually get to a place where you have a have a nice, nice rating.

00:08:41 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yep. Well, Doug's gonna ask you a little bit more about the plumbing portion, not that we expect you to know and understand how to change a P -trap. But he's gonna ask you a little bit about it.

00:08:50 **Doug Buchan**

Yeah, I tell you, I only have a you know, a few seconds here to kind of give a review of the online access that you have. And I'm going to tell you something. Everybody needs to visit your website. Okay, I went on there. And I found a boomer. I'm telling you. Yeah, I my daughter even has me in her phone is

00:09:12 **Doug Buchan**

But I went on there in the online accredited certs that they have. I mean, I saw math, I saw physics, chemistry, hand, you know, basic hand tools, right? And then blueprints, individual fixtures, OSHA classes, how to lift properly, you know, confined spaces, they went through multiple traits. It was just absolutely incredible. Okay. And in today's world, that gives me the opportunity sit down at night in my comfortable space and really focus on what I'm doing. Complete five star on your website, my friend. But with that being said, the trades are really hands on, you know, because I can simulate anything on a video. I can describe it to you, but hands on gives me all of those variables. How do you ensure that, you know, these folks are getting that

00:10:08 **Ruchir Shah**

No, absolutely. It's a great point. So I think like nothing beats obviously hands on for any of these things. I think our thinking is, hey, first, we're a pre -apprenticeship for folks. So whatever it takes to get you in the door. Right. So we can you can demonstrate that you have a good understanding and awareness of a lot of key concepts. We

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have virtual simulation to get you kind of build your confidence and get you as close as possible, something in the field. And then often that's enough to get your foot in the door. Then you get an apprenticeship. Right. get you get certified through everything you can through our platform. And then go knock on doors, talk to a company, get someone to actually put you, you know, into a truck and train you on the job while you continue learning through skill cat as you're actually working. That's generally how we think about our program. And I think if there's a really good trade school that actually gives you

00:11:03 **Ruchir Shah**

You can't take the time for it. Or if you can't, you know, there are a lot of bad trade schools out there as well. If you don't have it and some of those don't have much hands on at all either. So if you can't do those things, come to Skelcat, do as much as you can and then try to get a job in the field. And the other answer is through this great foundation. One of the things we're working on, they're trying to set up centers at plumbing and HVAC contractors all over the country where right now they're going to be hosting these camps for kids. But step two is we wanted to start building out a hands -on portion of our school. That's more flexible, or you may be coming for a weekend or a series of weekends to a school, to a contractor near you to complete the hands -on piece of your training. So you have some hands on before you actually get out there in the field. Okay. I agree with you. Nothing beats, I mean, nothing, especially for plumbing. I think HVAC there's like an electrical, there's

00:11:54 **Ruchir Shah**

like a lot of troubleshooting or some other things you can do really well, but for plumbing, I think it's hard. It's really, really hard to be, you know, hands on, right?

00:12:01 **Katherine Lehtinen**

So I like that combination between finishing it off with hands on.

00:12:05 **Doug Buchan**

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What is your vision for the future as far as your relationships with contractors who are going to come to skill cat and say, Hey, you know what? You're going to do all the groundwork for me. And then I'm going to take him. I'm going to build the rest of the house with these guys. You know, what's your vision for that?

00:12:20 **Ruchir Shah**

So we work with, so right now we have this whole portion of our app that's focused on want to get into the trades or grow. We also work with a lot of companies who kind of as an apprenticeship program. So folks who've already hired people but don't have full resources for training or they want support, they'll put their new hires through our three or four year apprenticeship program through our app where folks can get trained up and skilled up and keep growing and learning. And so that's been really great with contractors. It's also been really great with multifamily. So a lot of apartment maintenance technicians who often and have no training and have to learn like five trades at once. Yeah, that's been really useful

00:12:59 **Katherine Lehtinen**

for that. That's great. That makes a lot of sense. So, you know, one of the goals that I saw was to make world class trade education affordable and accessible. You know, how do you keep your costs low, but also maintaining high quality training? So I think the real way we do it is by having a

00:13:16 **Ruchir Shah**

lot of students and then keeping them on for their whole lifetime, right? So, you

00:13:19 **Doug Buchan**

know,

00:13:19 **Ruchir Shah**

for \$10 a month. And because of that, the only way we can actually succeed as a company and stay in business, we have to bring a lot of value. So people actually want to stay on the platform month over month, year over

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year. We have to bring a lot of people onto the platform. And so luckily, those are the things we care about, right? We want to bring a lot of value, and we want to spread the word about the trade. So it all aligns, like a lot of the certifications

00:13:46 **Ruchir Shah**

are \$200 \$300, you know, at other places, right? And we always raise our prices. I think for us, it's all about how do we because this is the core value of ours. The only way we do it is by bringing enough value that people stay on the platform. And, you know, we just spread the word and get as many people into the trades as possible. So yeah, what about virtual reality? Are

00:14:07 **Katherine Lehtinen**

you starting to incorporate that in some of your trainings? And what does that future kind of look

00:14:16 **Ruchir Shah**

I think there's some really cool technology out there. Just right now, most straight people don't have VR headsets, right? Most folks, you know, have much access to a computer during the day. So for us, it's all been about, like, how do you bring simulations and like as close to VR as possible, but on a phone? That's easy for a folk, for someone to use in the field and accessible. I think someday VR could be really cool if you could. Like there are things like a lot of a lot of plumbing skills, like actually take apart piping. Some of those things are hard digitally, right? And like brazing solder is really hard digitally. I don't think VR is there yet. So I think like VR is somewhere in the middle where for everything you can learn online, you can do really well on a phone. For everything you can't learn online, you just really need hands on. Right. I don't think VR is there to do that yet. So that's why we've really focused on just like how do we make it super accessible to folks on their

00:15:10 **Ruchir Shah**

phone?

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00:15:12 **Katherine Lehtinen**

It makes a ton of sense. Let's talk a little bit about the foundation that you started that's going to help try to build awareness. Can you talk to me a little bit more of when that came about? What are some of the things that you're working on? I would love to learn a little bit more.

00:15:26 **Ruchir Shah**

Yeah, so it's the last few months really just come together. We partnered with this really incredible YouTuber in HVAC, Brian Orr. He has this channel called HVAC School.

00:15:38 **Ruchir Shah**

this massive platform across HVAC. And we started this partnership. The initial goal is just to build camps for kids all over the country. So one day came to be their first one. It was incredible where kids learn how to braise, they do some carpentry, they get exposed to a bunch of different trades and a bunch of hands on tasks. And they take home something at the end that they've actually built, you know, through that day. And so that's step one. And so as we scale

00:16:06 **Ruchir Shah**

and facilitators all over the country who are going to lead these camps and so contractors that host them and instructors who lead and are trained up and how do you teach young people effectively about the trades. So that's phase one. I think phase two I mentioned we're trying to build out this classroom kind of flexible hands on trade school that allows the flexibility of like weekends and folks to come in at later stages in their career. And then step three is

00:16:34 **Ruchir Shah**

are on helping people reskill. And we really struggled with this when we were bringing people in from like oil and gas is, hey, you've had years of experience working with mechanical troubleshooting, years of experience working with motors. But if you apply to a job in an HR company, you start at zero. And some sort of a

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statement that makes it easier for folks to adapt as a lot of these industries change and they have to move in between industries more frequently. So that's kind of the plan over the next few years. I think right now we're just getting started with our first few camps. And so if you know anyone who wants to host a camp or wants to get involved in any way, please reach out.

00:17:09 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, I mean, we actually Doug and I are sitting at Oatey University right now. So it is a building across from our manufacturing where we have a solvent cement lab. We've got hands on in the back in a classroom that seats up to about 65. So we do Girl Scout trainings here. We've done Habitat for Home. Habitat for Home. Anyone who has a home that we do kind of plumbing 101 for them. So they know how to take care of their their home. So

00:17:34 **Doug Buchan**

DHCC has been here before.

00:17:38 **Katherine Lehtinen**

happy to host if you know of someone or maybe I know of an instructor that might be a good fit. But yes, I think even just letting our communicating to our social network would be a great one too that there's a lot of companies out there that one would love to share more about the work that they do and two are looking for skilled labor to come into the trades and they're everywhere from Canada to the east to the west to the south. So it's definitely

00:18:08 **Ruchir Shah**

Yeah, absolutely. Where are you guys based here?

00:18:11 **Katherine Lehtinen**

We're in Cleveland, Ohio.

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00:18:13 **Ruchir Shah**

Oh, very Cleveland, Ohio. Yeah, I will definitely hit you up on for that.

00:18:19 **Katherine Lehtinen**

All right. We would love that. Well, let's just I want to wrap up with just a couple of different because I think we could sit here and talk about all the things that we'd love to do in the future. But you know, what advice would you give someone considering a career in skilled trades that's kind of unsure of where to start?

00:18:35 **Ruchir Shah**

Well, first of all, great, great, great decision. Great, great to consider the skill trades. It's really an incredible choice that'll that'll help you throughout your life. I would say go online first. So the first step is to figure out what trade you want to do. Right. And so there's great solution. And so that's a great choice. You can go through and actually look at a bunch of different trades and understand. But also does YouTube. YouTube and TikTok both have incredible influencers that are creating content on a day in the life. pretty much every single trade out there. So like before you even pay for anything, go through and like look up a bunch of trades, watch some videos, see what the job looks like, see what gravitates. And there's so many tests online and like what trade is right for you. So there's first do that, do a bunch of research. And then if you actually want to get started, I think still got the great option where you can go through and get some of your stuff online.

00:19:24 **Ruchir Shah**

There's some other programs to just get your certs and then just get your foot in the door and find a company that will actually train you on the job. Yeah,

00:19:31 **Katherine Lehtinen**

I love it. Yeah, you're, you know, I would say young in your career and with all the things that you have been building. So as you look out across the next 3040 years, what do you want to see as kind of your end goal of what you were able to accomplish with skill cat in the trades?

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00:19:47 **Ruchir Shah**

Yeah, I've started this is my fourth company I've started and I've never enjoyed a company as much or never felt like this is the one but I think this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. It's just incredible to be building a platform that helps so many people. This contributes to society in so many meaningful ways. I love people, people in the trades. Folks are so nice. They're so real. Like I just I've really enjoyed just the last four years building stuff. So for me, it's really if we can bring this platform to millions of people. Right. And have millions of people on the platform. They never turn. Folks stay on the platform. They continue getting value and growing. and stay on the platform for years and years and years. So that would be my goal is like over the next 30 to 40 years really build into something that just transforms how trades education works and and helps a lot of people.

00:20:35 **Katherine Lehtinen**

I love it. Great answer. Perfect answer. Perfect way to end it. Well, thank you so much for joining us today was so great to learn about the work that you're doing not only for your foundation, but also through skill cat will make sure that when we post we'll have links to your site and all information. So those that want to get involved and I'm sure you'd be more than happy if we have any of our social media influencers that would like to connect and open up a location

00:21:04 **Ruchir Shah**

Awesome. Yes, please. Anytime. My email, reach here. R -U -C -H -I -R at skillcutapp .com. Feel free

00:21:09 **Katherine Lehtinen**

to reach out with anything. Wonderful. Thanks for joining us today. Thank you. All right. Thank you.