

# THE FIX

## A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

**Guests:** Bart Battiga, National Tile Contractors Association

**Run Time:** 25 minutes, 34 seconds

**Questions or Feedback:** [thefix@oatey.com](mailto:thefix@oatey.com)

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00:00:07 **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 in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast. It's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

00:00:47 **Katherine Lehtinen**


Well, Doug, our guest today is going to be highlighting a trade we haven't talked about

00:00:53 **Doug Buchan**

yet on the show. I know it's an unforgotten trade, but you know what, though? One of the most featured center points of a bathroom. Absolutely. Is a beautiful shower, right? Yeah. And those tile setters that go in there, they make it beautiful. I remember when I was an apprentice to first starting to learn about tile. My mentor had told me, he says, you know what? A good grout guy can make a bad tile guy look good. Oh yeah. But a bad grout guy can make a good tile guy look bad. And let me tell you something. I found that out first hand. I bet you did. But I think today's guest is gonna give us good on both ends, so.

00:01:27 **Katherine Lehtinen**

That's right. Well, welcome Bart, who is the National Tile Contractors Association.



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00:01:33 **Bart Battiga**

Yes, thank you very much. I can't believe you guys haven't talked about ceramic tile yet. That's so, you know, I mean, I know that they said you were a master plumber, but the reality is people see the tile. That's right. It's the visual, it's the aesthetic that is so important. Of course, it's essential to have everything behind done correctly as well. but yeah thank you for having us. Ceramic tile is a growing trade in this industry and has really

00:02:03 **Katherine Lehtinen**

just a lot of potential to grow even more. That's right and you know we not only do plumbers obviously utilize a lot of our products, so do the tilers because they do a little sometimes a little bit more than just laying down tile. They might take care of some of the bathroom needs that are there or some of the kitchen needs. So can you tell us a little bit about your background and an overview of the National Tile Contractors Association and its mission

00:02:26 **Bart Battiga**

within the installation industry. Sure yeah I'm a long -term veteran of the ceramic tile industry so I'm the executive director of the National Tile Contractors Association. I've been in that position for oh about 22 or 23 years but a 40 year 40 year tile person in sales management distribution and and then into running a trade association, which is a national association headquartered in Mississippi, but with employees all over the country. Almost 2 ,000 members, which are anywhere from sole proprietors, like Doug mentioned, like a remodeling contractor that does everything from the plumbing to the tile work as well, and all the way into large commercial tile contractors that do work such as in the Mall of America and hotels and shopping malls. So we run the gamut because we're an education association. We don't lobby related to union or non -union. We welcome members from both. We're about 75 % open shop and 25 % union companies. but again, we're an education association. We're unique

00:03:43 **Bart Battiga**

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in a lot of trade associations in that we have almost seven full -time trainers that are in mobile vehicles, vans and big trucks, and they travel all around the country. They're on the road 75 -80 % of the year performing training programs all the way from two -hour overviews that help designers, architects, builders, remodelers, yes, Doug, plumbers, understand even more about tile and the importance of having it designed properly, specified properly, and most importantly from our end, installed properly. So we work very closely around the country with other tile manufacturers, tile distributors, retailers to help educate both new installers on the proper installation, but also long -term veterans because one thing about long -term veterans is sometimes we hear them say, you know, I've been doing that way for 30 years and you know, I've never had a problem or I've never had a failure. and you're like, okay. But what you haven't been doing for 30 years is installing tile that's five feet

00:05:00 **Bart Battiga**

by 10 feet now that's a quarter inch thick that goes in a shower in three or four pieces. You know, there's just so much that's changed technologically in the ceramic tile industry, probably like it has in other trades as well. But ceramic tile has experienced vast growth in technology, which has opened the doors for it to be used in so many other places, such as exterior living spaces, as well as obviously in bathrooms, showers, kitchens, and all over the house.

00:05:33 **Doug Buchan**

That's great. You actually answered one of my questions, because I was going to ask you about innovation. How is it acclimated in with the tile industry? Because in plumbing, electric, HVAC, a lot of times innovations will change the whole makeup of a system. In the tile, the innovation that you see in the industry right now, and then how does your organization implement that and get that message out to others so that they know it's there?

00:06:02 **Bart Battiga**

That's essential. It's a great question. 75 % of ceramic tile installed in the United States is imported from overseas. So about 25 % is produced domestically, most of it in the state of Tennessee. That's where the clay is.

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So it makes logistically sense to have the factories in the state of Tennessee. But Italy and Spain are the leaders, and other countries, Mexico, Brazil, and some others as well. But they lead in design and fashion. But it's the technology that you mentioned, Doug, that really drives the tile industry. They've been able to create inkjet impressions on the ceramic itself, the porcelain body of the tile itself that replicates almost anything you want it to look like. So you know, you can look like wood, it can look like stone, and it can look like concrete or terrazzo, just whatever the designers are really into. We can create tile to look that way. What makes it uniquely different is its high performance. Its porcelain tile is very dense, it performs, it lasts. When it's

00:07:12 **Bart Battiga**

installed properly, it can be put really anywhere, all the way from schools into the shower floor, shower walls, and really anywhere. So it's functionality, it's easy maintenance, easy to clean, and as I said earlier, I was kind of joking about the size of the tile, but they are, they can make tile as much as five feet by two feet. These large panels are really exploding for showers Mm hmm. Because you can do in a bathroom is you can install the panel on the floor and then piece it in on the showers and then also put that on now on the vanity. So the whole bathroom has a uniformity that might look like a beautiful marble that 30 years ago you you you to put that marble in the bathroom would create high maintenance and in a shower if there was any leaking whatsoever or just a little bit of a drip behind the scenes, that white marble could rust or stain, because natural stone is what it is. It's relatively porous and requires some maintenance. Although, when it's properly maintained, it's

00:08:18 **Bart Battiga**

gorgeous. And our members do install natural stone. But by having these porcelain tiles now with the density and the maintenance -free capacity, and they can also replicate marbles, for instance, that, you know, when they mined them, they became extinct 300 years ago. So but so you can't you can't get that marble anymore because it comes from the ground and there's nowhere to mine it. But now because they know that was installed in Italy 600 years ago, you can inkjet a porcelain tile to resemble a marble that was maybe five or six hundred that's been become extinct. So there's just so much of that and they can bookmatch and piece these pieces together to make it look like a beautiful flow. So, that's one example, and they can produce that in a

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variety of thicknesses and also in a variety of shapes. So, what we're seeing with ceramic tile now also is just this explosion of geometric shapes, octagons, hexagons, rectangles, different patterns. So, the design capabilities for builders and designers

00:09:23 **Bart Battiga**

is almost limitless. And so, the challenge then is for us, and that's where we come in, is how do you lay that kind of product out? How do you make those niches in the corner shelves? How do you properly grid something like that? And as you mentioned, how do you minimize the grout joints or use a proper grout that's easy to take care of? A lot of these products have very little grout joints. Some of them have much more, but they're also producing grout now that's so much more high performance than it used to be. So we have to try to educate our contractors use premium products, use proper systems behind, you know, because a tile system, don't let anyone fool you that anything is waterproof. We get frustrated when we hear the vinyl companies or people say waterproof flooring, waterproof, no, nothing is waterproof. Tile is not waterproof. When it's installed properly with waterproofing systems behind it, Yes, it can perform as a waterproof assembly, but that takes proper planning and installation.

00:10:35 **Katherine Lehtinen**

We always say, too, that you can't get to the beautiful stuff if the behind the wall isn't working correctly or installed correctly.

00:10:43 **Bart Battiga**

Absolutely.

00:10:44 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, and it's interesting because we talk a lot about some of how our evolution of shower drains here at Oatey has evolved because of how the tile space has evolved. So, we now have shower drains that are linear, that can go the whole width of an actual shower, so you can accept a big slab and not have to do the four-way

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compound slope. So, it's interesting to see how the different trades play in together and how those trends are impacting each other.

00:11:12 **Bart Battiga**

Yeah, without a doubt. You know, the tile industry and the plumbing industry, if you will, you know, they're very crucial to each other. And in some areas and in some codes, you know, who hooks up that drain, right? It's generally the plumber that has to hook up that drain, but it's the tile guy that has to properly pitch the floor and get that pitch to allow the water to flow properly. Linear drains in our industry have changed, truly changed the tile industry from an aesthetic standpoint as well as a performance standpoint. And both residentially and commercially. Right. And I think they have just allowed us to just install larger format tiles on the floors. We used to have to put like one by one mosaics in almost any shower because you wanted it to flow through the grout. So yeah, linear drains are a significant component of the tile industry.

00:12:10 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah. So you talked a little bit, the NTCA has been supporting the TAO trade since 1947, which is remarkable. You know, and you talked about technology and how things are changing, but can you talk about how over the years it's evolved and you address that change? You said you have the seven mobile units that go across country, but how else do you really help educate your, those that are part of your association on the changes and the technology

00:12:38 **Bart Battiga**

that's happening? Yeah well I mean we certainly communicate to the whole tile industry of what's going on but I think one of the biggest challenges that we're faced is in the tile industry is kind of like what you guys alluded to which is hey we haven't talked about tile yet but you know an awareness of ceramic tile as far as the career opportunities and the jobs out there so as we travel on the around the country, we're also creating content and programs for our members and to communicate in to communities and to the local schools and the local trades and starting to try to create an awareness of job opportunities that are out there for tile. Because it can be, as

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plumbing can be I'm sure, but ceramic tile can be a very lucrative career. And more importantly, it's a while to learn how to set tile properly. It's not, it's about a four year training. If you were immersed in it 100%, it's about a four year apprenticeship to learn it, to learn all the functions of it. So, but just great

00:13:49 **Bart Battiga**

opportunities. And what we're seeing is, you know, artistic people, people with just a little bit of a math background, you know, maybe they don't want to go into major debt in school with engineering, but they may fit that category. These are perfect people to join the tile trade. We're also seeing a lot of young women join the tile trade because of the artistic components of tile and working with geometric shapes and sizes and mosaics and things of that nature. So in addition to training people on how to install tile, how to waterproof tile, we're also creating awareness of the opportunities in the trade.

00:14:26 **Doug Buchan**

You had mentioned about women in the trade, okay. a lot of young ladies because of the artistic portion of it. And I agree with that a hundred percent. What does the NTCA do to promote women to take that chance and join into the tile industry?

00:14:45 **Bart Battiga**

Yeah, we launched a program about a year and a half, two years ago called Women in Tile. And what we wanted to do is we've seen a lot of movement towards women in the trades or women in construction, But in tile, it seemed like it was still more on the design side, in the sales side, and the distribution side, even in manufacturing positions. And we always knew there were a lot of women in the tile industry, but they were generally partnering with their husband who was installing the tile, and the women were running the showroom and the retail showroom and doing the invoicing and sending in the bids, and that was a very common mom - and -pop shop. But we just started to see more women out there just, you know, here and there and just start talking to them and started realizing, wow, with this labor shortage that we have, right, you know, they really

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seem to like what we would go to a high school to try to promote the tile to a local job fair. And we would find all these young young ladies,

00:15:47 **Bart Battiga**

you know, in there playing around with the mosaics. And so that kind of said, we're going to start this women in tile effort, but with an emphasis on women learning how to install tile, not just to sell tile. And and we started to feature some women installers. We've got a couple of a woman that's one of our trainers. So that is so we employed one because that way you could nobody can speak to young women better than a woman who's doing it. Absolutely. Yeah, buddy. You know, like one of our guys that's been set in tile for 40 years. So, you know, that's kind of the way we've kind of done it from a grassroots approach. And we've, we've been really surprised with the results, we have a long way to go. There's not a high percentage of women that are tile setters yet, but we're starting to see that when they do pick the trades, they seem to be navigating towards a trade like ceramic tile.

00:16:40 **Doug Buchan**

That's fantastic.

00:16:41 **Katherine Lehtinen**

So we talk on The Fix, as we said about, you know, inspiring this next generation, getting into trades and very similar as you were just talking when we were highlighting women, but what other initiatives does the NTCA have in place to attract new talent into the installation tile trade? That's a great question. So about six or

00:17:02 **Bart Battiga**

seven years ago, it seems like it's gone fast, but we were able to get the department, we partnered with or we asked the Department of Labor for some help in creating an apprenticeship program and the difference there is that We're an open shop organization. Most apprenticeships are union apprenticeships or labor apprenticeships. And so we created guidelines and for an apprenticeship program. And it's a four year program. What was



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uniquely different about what we did is that we got involved with it being on a strong component of it online. So it's called a hybrid apprenticeship, which is you have to have X amount of hours that are in the field. So, nothing can replace learning how to do a trade in the field, nothing. But it also composed a significant amount of online study that you would go on, that you could do on your own time, take the online courses, and then meet as a group in the field, either with a bunch of other sponsors, or it could be one company that has 80 employees that's

00:18:08 **Bart Battiga**

doing 10 apprentices. So, it could be done by a company, or it could be done by groups of companies, the apprenticeship program. We don't administer the apprenticeship program. We help create the guide, we have the guidelines that they can use as a member of ours, and then we help them apply for approval in their particular state. We help them, you know, help them develop that. and then we help them to, then they use our online university to access the courses and then they have someone come in to give them a small amount of classroom. So it's a full -scale four -year apprenticeship program. We thought that that would change the industry, but it's been very successful for just certain pockets. But what we found was, like a lot of things, as companies, it's a lot of work to develop an apprenticeship program. So what a lot of them are doing is they're hiring people because the tile industry is this way. You hire someone, they might have a little bit of experience, they might have no experience.

00:19:16 **Bart Battiga**

You put them in the field, you assign them to a mentor, and you find out what they're made of, right? So what a lot of this is, is that a lot of our members are using the online university to help expedite that person, get them caught up on what the industry standards are the proper methods, and train them in the field. So it's a combination of we have we have been successful in helping some companies develop apprenticeship. But we know we've been really successful in helping people train in the field by utilizing our courses and making awareness

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00:19:54 **Doug Buchan**

of industry standards and best practices. Yeah, I like that format because, I mean, COVID obviously proved that we can do certain things virtually, so I kind of like that. It gets their feet wet, make sure they're interested, and then get them in the field for that practical

00:20:10 **Bart Battiga**

experience. Yeah, and a lot of them, you know, it's not in your mind you're thinking about an online university. It's a lot of these people are not necessarily going and doing it at home. A lot of them are actually doing it, six guys are at the shop, they watch a 10 -minute course on showers, then they watch another. So they get a little bit on what's the standards, what's the system, how do you install, what kind of backer board do you put in a shower, a good example, what kind of waterproofing, what are your options, what are approved methods for a shower. They'll watch that and then they'll go with the superintendent or with the business owner and they'll practice with a specific product that fits what they just watched. And that way they're watching together, interacting together and then practicing together. And that's something that our members are implementing a lot of and I think it's an effective way to train and utilize online education.

00:21:09 **Katherine Lehtinen**

case. So finally, as you look towards the future, you know, where do you see the tile installation industry heading in the next five to 10 years? I mean, gosh, when we step back, we look at what happened over the last four with COVID. A lot of things have changed. So I know that's a big question to ask the next five to 10. But how do you how will the NTCA, you know, continue to support its members through these changes over the next five to 10 years?

00:21:33 **Bart Battiga**

I think it's an excellent question. I, first of all, I say, just like any trade, a construction, you know, we're going to follow the economy, right? I mean, to some, to some degree, housing starts, you know, multifamily trends, all of that affects all of us. But that's something that's out of our control. But one thing we do know is that from a per

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capita consumption, ceramic tile is widely used in other parts of the world. In other words, there is so much more tile used in Europe and in Asia and in other parts of the world than there is in the United States. And we have we have a lot of opportunity to use tile in more areas per capita consumption. And we're seeing it. We're seeing it with people moving in the trends towards the south and southeast, you know, where you have warmer climates. Ceramic tile is extremely popular, where you have slab on grade construction and warmer climates. So we have to keep up with the market opportunities for ceramic tile. That's where NTCA comes in, because

00:22:39 **Bart Battiga**

we have to continue to train and educate. One of the problems, I don't know about plumbing, Doug, but one of the problems with ceramic tile that I can't seem to fix, my next, the next generation can address it, is that there's very little licensing requirements anywhere around in ceramic tile around the country. You know, you have some local codes, but there are really very little license requirements, which means somebody can just give you a business card and say they set tile at their house and they're looking for a job and all of a sudden they're a tile setter. And without that, it's a real challenge. So we launched a certification program several years ago. There's now about 2000 certified tile installers and it's tough to pass. About 55 % of our certification test takers do not pass that test. And by the way, they do it in a shower module, a shower pod. So and one of the reasons they don't pass is because there's a time commitment or time constraint as well as some really bad tile.

00:23:43 **Bart Battiga**

You have to get really creative to make it work. And the reason I bring that up is, you know, we see ourselves, the tile industry will only grow, Katherine and Doug, if the installers are installing it properly. And so we promote qualified labor. We promote, you don't have to be certified to be a good tile setter, but it's a good way to compare yourself to others. So, you know, that's actually one area that we see that we are going to try to continue to promote, create consumer confidence in our trade, promote certification and promote best practices. The tile industry has a lot of growth opportunity.

00:24:23 **Katherine Lehtinen**

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That's wonderful. Well, I learned a lot today And I really actually think that there is more ways that plumbing industry and tile industry can connect and just some of the advancements that are happening on both sides makes a lot of sense for that partnership to continue to grow.

00:24:40 **Doug Buchan**

Yeah. And Bart, I applaud you for creating a certificate, we'll say, of successful training, okay, because it not only gives the installer that noticed, Hey, I really achieved something. I work hard and now you know I'm an approved installer. It gives those others who haven't maybe met that requirement yet something to look forward to and if that's on a business card someday that'll show that homeowner or that building owner hey this person was trained by the best and they passed. So I applaud you for that. Thank you. Well thank you so much for your time today

00:25:19 **Katherine Lehtinen**

we greatly appreciate it and look forward to talking more about the initiatives that the National Tile Contractors Association is executing.

00:25:26 **Bart Battiga**

Thank you for the opportunity to promote ceramic tile.