



Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

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Guests:

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Katherine: Welcome to *The Fix*, a 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 trade's people and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation. Well, Doug, we have quite the dynamic duo on our hands today.

Doug: Let me tell you something, this is like a Twix bar. You have to have the right and left sides, or else it just doesn't work. Here in the US, we have codes. UPC-IPC. Well, I'll tell you what, today's IPC is the International Plumbing Contractor. Let me tell you something. I am ready for this.

Katherine: I love it. Well, welcome to Alex Gwen and Josh Hopkins. Thank you both for being on the fix today.

Alex Gwen: Oh, thank you for having us.

Josh Hopkins: Yes, thanks so much.

Katherine: We are so looking forward to getting to know both of you a little bit better about your friendship and partnership and as well as learning a little bit more about

Canada and the work that's being done up there to try to bring awareness to the trades. Alex, let's get started. Give us a little bit of background about who you are, how you got to where you're at, and maybe a fun story about you.

Alex: Absolutely. I'm no stranger to the Oatey team, especially everyone here, Katherine, Josh, everybody that's on the podcast. It's so nice to see you guys again and being part of this program. My name's Alex Gwen. I'm from Windsor, Ontario, Canada, which is the most southwestern point of Canada. I basically live right across the lake from you guys, across the river from Detroit. I'm a residential service plumber just getting my feet wet, opened up my own business as a licensed contractor in the city that I live. I've been doing plumbing for 12 years.

I'm strictly focusing on residential service. The guy that goes to your grandma's house to fix the toilet when it's not working or it's leaking. Trying to give that white glove treatment, stepping above and beyond to provide an elite-level customer service, making sure that we're taking care of the customer, taking care of their home, and then doing it all for a reasonable rate. That being said, I enjoy what I do. I often joke that I've been working for 12 years, but it feels like I've been working for 3. Working with tools and new products. I go to work and I get to play.

That's something that I really enjoy about what I do in the service industry. Going to somebody's house who may be going through a very serious leak or a minor issue that's been giving them a headache and then showing up, taking care of it properly and professionally, and then leaving and seeing that smile or relief on their face that, "Hey, this has been taken care of." That's what I do. I'm very passionate about it.

Funny story about myself is that for the longest time growing up through high school playing sports and stuff like that, the immediate thing I want to do getting out of high school and college was I wanted to get in policing or fire or paramedic or something like that as a first responder, and be able to serve the community and help the community grow. I found that way by becoming a plumber.

Katherine: Awesome.

Alex: Going to somebody's house is completely flooded and they need somebody to go there and fix it, and they pick up the phone and they call us and we go there and we do it. Giving myself that responsibility to help the community, help people that are in need as far as with their homes, so getting that fulfillment. That's about it.

Katherine: That's awesome. Well, thank you for sharing. Hey, Josh, give us a little bit of background on you and how long you've been in the industry, and what got you here.

Josh: Yes. I started about 20 years ago. This is as I said, my 21st year in the industry.

Katherine: Awesome.

Josh: I went to school for a tool and die-making, so looking to be in the trades. When I started out, it wasn't for the right reason. I had no idea what I wanted to do, and my uncle had a tool and die shop and he said, "You can make a bunch of

money." I said, "Okay, I guess I'm going to do that." That wasn't for me. My heart wasn't in it. I started working at a little shop here in New Market, Ontario making pipe thread sealants in the back, and worked my way up through the channel a little bit through different roles here in manufacturing, distribution.

I went back to school for business marketing to back up what I was starting to learn when I took a marketing role, learning a bit more about strategy and marketing, sales. Eventually got a sales territory in beautiful Northern Ontario, and then eventually went on to run national sales for Masters, GF Thompson, who was acquired by Oatey in 2018, actually five years ago to the day.

Katherine: Awesome.

Alex: That's so cool.

Josh: I spent the better part of my career really fighting Oatey.

Katherine: [laughs] You came to the other side.

Josh: Came to the other side. Now I'm undoing all those bad things I said.

[laughter]

Katherine: "Remember when?" Yes, for sure. That's awesome. Well, I'm so glad that you've obviously been in 20-plus years but also even happier that you've been on this side for the last 5. It's been quite the fun. Alex, tell me a little bit about what got you into plumbing.

Alex: Well, there's actually a pretty interesting story. Our cities, Windsor and Cleveland, are very similar being blue-collar cities, industrial manufacturing heavy. You guys had the big three there, we had the big three here. My dad worked at the plant forever, and he worked his way up. I was like, "Dad, when I'm done football, when I'm done this, I'm going to go work at the plant." He was like, "No, you're not, because you're going to be laid off 12 weeks a year."

Seeing those struggles that my family went through working at the plants where dad would go to work for four months and then he'd be home for a month, and then he'd go to work for four weeks and he is home for a week, I got into a manufacturing position, and it wasn't for me. There was actually a program that was put out for young workers. It was called Second Career, where basically you could approach an employer, the government here would pay that employer your salary and they could train you and invest time into you, and it wouldn't cost them anything.

I went to a local shop in Windsor, I would probably now is where I started learning how to do service. I rode around with owner for about six months. He showed me everything that I needed to learn about how to treat a customer. The fourth day, he said, "You don't need that program. I'm going to hire you." I think I dug a ditch or something like that. I went back to the shop the other day and he said, "What size of your uniform you want?" It was like, "I want a big one." [chuckles]

Katherine: Awesome. A big one.

[laughter]

Alex: Ever since then it's been fantastic for me and my family. It's crazy. I played all these high-level football, Canadian collegiate football and trial with the Tiger-Cats and I had a great football career. My family was so proud of that, and my mom and stuff, coming to the games, I think it's really cool to see how happy she is where I'm at now compared to that. I thought she was a really happy back at Brandon House.

Katherine: Well, Josh, obviously your career in plumbing started just by your first job and getting into it, but could you see yourself doing anything else or being in any other trade, or do you feel like that this has been your calling to be part of this trade?

Josh: I'd say it's part of my calling. I love my job. I love the people that I get to meet. I love learning about it, but originally, it was definitely not in the cards. It wasn't something that I shot for. Better part of growing up, I didn't really have much interaction with people in the trades, but as life went on, I started to be a lot more connected. My stepdad's a general contractor, my father-in-law's a mechanic, my brother-in-law is a red seal carpenter, my brother's a hydro line tech, so I'm surrounded by the trades now.

Alex: Josh doesn't have to worry about his car breaking down. Got all taken care of.

Josh: Yes, I built my circle well.

Katherine: For sure. Absolutely. Alex, I know you just went out on your own, and you have an apprentice who's working for you now. Can you tell us what's the name behind the name of your business, and how has it been going having an apprentice working for you?

Alex: The name of my business is Ole' Walkerville Plumbing. Me and my partner, we purchased a home in Walkerville, which it used to be its own little township within our city. It's an area of our city that's pretty large. I specialize in old home and repair, and we're so proud of where we live and our community and stuff like that. I just wanted to pay some type of palmage to it.

It's been great being able to go out there and give the type of level of service that I always wanted to give and just working for yourself and taking everyone one service call at a time. It's helped grow my business substantially, leaps and bounds there. I never thought I would have an apprentice within my first year, but I'm so busy, the phone keeps ring so much because we're out there doing good work, using good products like Masters, that we're not getting callbacks and we don't have problems. We've been busy. Funny story, Caleb, the apprentice, he started with me because I did a service call at his dad's house and--

Katherine: Oh, that's awesome.

Alex: Now, his dad's like, "Hey, my son's spinning his tires. He's in a factory. Can you help him out and give him a shot and see if he could-- Just come ride around with you for a week? You don't even have to pay him. Just have him ride around and go for lunch and talk about it and stuff because I think this is where I want my son direction to go." The kid came and so polite, and obviously, doesn't know anything

about plumbing, but the way that he was interacting with the customers, is right away I was like, "Wow. This has got some potential. He reminds me very much so like myself."

Within the first 90 days, I finish up jobs, and we always ask customers when we leave, "Hey, has this call been performed up to your standard? Are you happy with the service? Is there anything that we need to do? Do you need us to clean up more? Anything like that?" We always want to get feedback from our customer. They're always like, "That kid is so polite, so nice."

He comes in and he's sweeping and mopping and cleaning up and just having discussions with the customer. I'm downstairs working, he's up there talking to this customer about whatever, and I'm like, "Oh yes, this is perfect." Doing the service side of things, you have to be personable, you have to be respectful and you have to have your manners and you need to be able to watch your p's and q's. This kid just check mark every box.

Josh: He's always got a smile on his face. Every time I've seen him he's got a smile on his face.

Katherine: Josh, he's with me. How can he not? He's with me every day.

[laughter]

Katherine: It was such a layup.

Alex: How can he not? We've practiced Josh on this. It is great to see somebody who's going to have a future because he's learning things. I'm not going to say I do everything the right way 100% all the time. We try to do. He's picking up on that. He just hit six months. We are able to look at the books and we are able to afford to give him a raise to keep him motivated. He's earning his keep, he's able to install toilets, he knows the procedures and policies on how we do things here. It's going to be a seamless transition.

Katherine: I think it's great. I think the fact that you're able to bring an apprentice on in your first year and the fact that you're already starting to give back to the trades, and I want to dive into that a little bit more. Josh, I want you to start and talk a little bit about the work that you're doing from your side and how you're trying to bring awareness in working with others for the trades.

Josh: Through Oatey, we do a lot up in Canada certainly and in the US, a lot of trade school presentations, a lot from sales and marketing angle, get them while they're young type of idea. Go in, do a presentation, talk about life out there, talk about the products that they can use every day, and give the instructor a bit of a break every once in a while to have a guest come in and present.

Through CIPH, which I'm heavily involved with, we also have a huge initiative to get young people into the trades and into the industry in general. Also, the manufacturing industry within, but ultimately, we're looking to do partnerships with different associations like Mechanical Contractors Association to help bring young people into the trades because ultimately, that's helping our business as well. We

need that pipeline. Doing things like academic competitions, sponsoring wherever we can, youth in the trades, women in the trades, diversity in the trades, wherever we can, wherever there's opportunity, we want to look at it.

Katherine: Let's talk about then this work that you two partnered with St. Joseph Plumbing School. I believe it's because of your famous social handle, Josh, that got you attention with this school. Elaborate a little bit there for us, and then talk to us what that was like, and why it made a lot of sense for a manufacturer and someone who's a plumber to partner together to help this school.

Josh: We did a trade school presentation at Humber College in Toronto. I posted some pictures about it on Instagram and this plumbing instructor Ryan Coop at the plumbing academy in Windsor had reached out and said, "Hey, we have this program. It's great. Saw what you did here. We'd love to have you out if you're ever in Windsor." I mentioned that I'm in Windsor fairly regularly, have a close friend in Alex who's a residential service plumber there.

He's like, "I've talked to Alex too, I follow Alex." We started talking about how can we tag team this and show the students that there's some real collaboration and bring things full circle or close the circle rather between manufacturer-distributor and contractor. We started talking to Ryan over there at St. Joseph's to line something up. We got some time scheduled. It was really cool to bounce things around between the two of us. As I said, we tend to let the instructor pick up sometimes and carry the ball, but it was really cool to have an additional guest there that actually lives the other side.

Alex: It was really cool because as nerdy as I am in getting into a product when you're sitting in front of a group of students that you're talking about solvents and chemical makeup and what this could be used for, what that could be used for, it was really great because Josh was tied up and he'd talk about a product, and I'd just intervene and be like, "This is a great application for this. Or this is often when you'd see a licensed plumber use that." Josh and I did the CMPX show in Toronto, which is our huge national show. Oatey and Masters was nice enough to get me up there and put me up, and I sat in the booth with them.

That bridging the manufacturer to end user application, it's so beneficial because it just seems to validate what we're talking about or what Josh may be talking about. Between Masters and Oatey, you guys have a pretty substantial line of dope. You guys have a dope for everything. Some guys, they'll only use one dope for their whole life and they won't use something else because that's what they're shown and that's what they use. When we go, they're like, "Hey, check out this." They're like, "Oh wow that's cool." It bridges that relationship.

Katherine: I think it has a ton of value. We've seen that as well. We also had some of our ambassadors that were at the [unintelligible 00:18:56] here in the US, and it's one thing when a manufacturer has something to say, but it's a different story when the end user is saying, "No, this is how I really use this product, and this is the application it can bring," which is pretty powerful.

Alex: Yes, absolutely. It gets the message across, but getting back to the St. Joe's thing, that whole thing happened so naturally. It was such a humbling day to be able

to go up there and speak on my behalf as a student that was at that age where you don't know what you want to do at that age. You may have a good idea. The program that they have there is pretty elite. The students, they go to high school, but you have to apply to the St. Joe's Plumbing Academy where 150 students will apply, 25 will get selected.

Katherine: Wow.

Alex: Just like you care about what goes out of your manufacturing facility, and we care about what we put in people's homes, these students all have an opportunity to go work for a contractor. He'll set them up with a job as a co-op student, he'll search on a Contractor, find the right fit for the student and he'll send them out. He was like, "These are a direct reflection of what we do at our academy, so we don't want to send out the wrong student."

They're very rigorous.

It almost intensified, like [unintelligible 00:20:21] works, but he's like, "We really want to make sure that the people that want to do this for the right reasons. They're not joining the plumbing academy so they get out of math class. They're joining it so they can continue a career." That was really cool. A lot of these students, they're grade 11, 17-year-old kids.

They get in the field and they start doing things. You're talking about licensed plumbers at the age of 23. 23-year-old students with no debt and where Josh and I reside, licensed plumber's salary is about \$100,000 a year. Think about that. You're going to be 23, no debt, making it 100K a year, helping your family, be able to afford to buy a home, and have something that no one could ever take away from you, which is great.

Josh: Alex, you actually knew some of the kids that were in there too. You crossed paths with them at wholesalers or?

Doug: Yes, some of them been working for contractors already. Some of them are some plumber's sons and daughters that I know. That was really cool.

Katherine: It's cool.

Alex: It was really interesting, little shameless product plug here, but we did demonstration with the Master and the Master Pro X. The Master Pro, Master Pro X, which is the Oatey Master's line of our ab solvent, and showing them the difference between the two because the Pro X is ready for a colder temperature, it sets faster. That's what we deal with up here in Canada, we get a lot of cold temps, so showcasing that aspect too was really neat.

Katherine: Saying how you would utilize it too I'm sure had some of an impact as well.

Alex: Absolutely.

Katherine: One of the things that I always ask at the end of our conversations is as we step back and we look at the future of where the trades are going to be, and what

would you both say that your hopes and dreams are for the trades once it's, as Doug would say, [chuckles] rounding third and heading home? What do you hope that it'll be someday?

Alex: I'll go first. I hope to see an abundance of contractors, of skilled tradesmen and women. There's clearly a shortage and being in the business side of things, now I quickly realize that. Obviously, we go, we do the work and we referral stuff, but the day I quit my job and the day out of my business, I had no work for two days, and I've been working Saturdays ever since I started nine months ago. There's clearly a shortage. We like to see those numbers up so that more people have opportunity. I think that things like this podcast, things like what Josh is doing down here with his department and better educating the trades, we're seeing that growth.

When I was in high school, the plumber was the guy, his dad's a plumber and then he became a plumber, and then everyone else was like, "Plumbing's gross." Now, there's different aspects. It's become more technological, it's becoming more about heating, it's becoming more about all these different aspects of not going out there and playing with poop. There's construction, there's service, there's heating. Yes, I just want to see the trade grow, get better, more education. I want everyone to go home safe at the end of the day, how to use products properly, more training. That's where I would like to see it.

Katherine: That's awesome. How about you, Josh?

Josh: I can't argue any of that. I think there's a lot of work to be done to dispel a lot of the preconceived notions. I know going out to some schools, you still get the questions about, it's like, "Is this dealing with toilets, dealing with plungers?" To Alex's point that the technology and the sophistication of some of this stuff that's out there, now there is some pretty rudimentary stuff that needs to be done.

Alex: Touching base on that, career-wise, seeing the side of things that Josh does and what you guys do over there are doing, what Doug does, yes, you can be a plumber, you can be a plumber for 20, 30 years and you can make a great living, and then guess what? You can go into sales. Because you know it, you can transfer into these different departments. Doug talks on the radio waves. He's a master plumber.

Katherine: [laughs] He's got a face for radio.

Alex: He's done it all, and now, he's over there collecting Oatey paychecks talking. I'll be there. When I can't walk, you know I can talk, you know that's where I'm going.

Doug: Alex, I'm going to be honest with you buddy, after this episode, I'm probably just going to turn the mic over to you because--

[laughter]

Alex: [unintelligible 00:24:57] Doug.

Doug: I've said the least amount in this episode, but we've had the most conversation ever.

[laughter]

Alex: You put two guys that like to chat in the same room, it can get real tight, quick. It runs **[inaudible 00:25:15]**

[laughter]

Katherine: Listen, I just wanted to say thank you to both of you for the work that you do, not only on behalf of Oatey the ambassadorship but also in your communities to help spread the word and by leading by example, getting out there and growing those partnerships. We really appreciate it, and we're looking forward to continuing to support both of you and just keep making all those funny videos together, guys. We just want to keep seeing that friendship and partnership grow. We appreciate it and thank you both for joining us today.

Alex: No, thank you. Thank you guys, Oatey, for everything that you guys have done for me. From being part of the ambassador program, and Josh as well, it's really awesome what you guys are doing over there and putting everyone together.

Doug: Yes. See Katherine and I told you they're Twix bars.

Katherine: Yes. [laughs]

Josh: Yes.

Katherine: Great.

Josh: We really appreciate it.

Katherine: Yes, for sure. Have a great day. Thanks so much. Appreciate it guys.

Josh: All right, love you.

Doug: Take care, guys.

Katherine: Bye.

[music]

Katherine: Thanks for joining us on this episode of *The Fix*. Be sure to follow us on your favorite podcast platform so you don't miss our next conversation dropping every Wednesday. If you have feedback about the show or a topic you'd like to see covered, send us an email at thefix@oatey.com or give us a shout-out on social media. We would love to connect with you. Don't forget, you can get your daily fix by visiting oatey.com, and we'll catch you next time.

[00:27:10] [END OF AUDIO]