

Willing and able

Handymen do small jobs without the cost of hiring specialists

By Christian Too
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Alex von Guggenberg says he does the small jobs people don't want to do. Head of Alexandria Home Improvement, he can fix a homeowner's problematic plumbing, smooth over drywall projects and throw a fresh coat of paint on any room.

He's a handyman, the unofficial and politically incorrect term for workers who fix the minor snafus nagging the average homeowner.

They work under guidelines that shift from state to state. In Virginia, for example, the workers can earn various



Maya Alleruzzo/The Washington Times

Mr. von Guggenberg installs Roman shades during one of his service calls. "I like to explain to people what's wrong rather than leave it a mystery," he says.

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Darren Rooney, owner and president of Superior Construction in Burke, says homeowners often set out to fix a small problem and end up making it much bigger. A simple plumbing leak, for example, might appear to be fixed, only to flood the house later. Mr. Rooney says

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calling on him to install it.

"People are always meaning to get to stuff. That's what I find the most," he says.

Mr. Giovinazzi suggests a few more preventive tips to avoid future problems.

Homeowners should vacuum out their dryer vent ducts regularly, he says. Clothes take longer to dry with a congested duct, and the dryer uses more electricity to operate.

Homeowners also should check outside the home to see if the vent is coming away from the house. Such openings can let critters inside and invite damage. Mr. Giovinazzi suggests buying a bird guard for about \$7 and installing it on the exposed area with caulk to keep animals at bay.

People would understand what handymen do better, he suggests, if they thought of the home as a collection of systems.

Like the human body, he says, a home is a variety of systems all working together. To install a ceiling fan, for example, the handyman also might

have to install a ceiling brace or tinker with the electrical wiring, particularly in the District, where many homes still have antiquated wiring systems.

Not every handyman can handle any job offered.

"A good handyman knows his limitations. We're not specialists, we're generalists. I have a list of contractors I refer people to," says Mr. Giovinazzi, who got into his line of work after friends began asking him to fix odds and ends around their homes.

Mike Moritz, a McLean-based handyman, says homeowners can avoid calling a specialist if they just plan out whatever home improvement projects they attempt.

"Most things in the home are simple enough [to fix] even by someone with no experience. It's a matter of being wise about that decision," he says.

Wisdom and a dollop of ego can prove beneficial to a qualified handyman. Glenn Haege, host of the syndicated "Master Handyman" radio show, says a good handyman will brag about the work he or she has done in the past.

"Your best defense is bragging rights," says Mr. Haege, whose show can be heard on 165 stations nationwide and in the District via XM Satellite

Radio Buzz Channel 166 at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Saturdays and at 4 a.m. Sundays.

"Some people call them references. If he's not bragging about the work he's done, what makes you think he'll brag about your work?"

One way to find a qualified handyman is to go right to the source. Homeowners with plumbing woes should visit the local plumbing-supply wholesaler and ask the owner or manager whom he or she would recommend, he says. Make sure to get at least two names, he says, and when you contact them, drop the name of the manager.

That says to the prospective handyman, "I know where you get your supplies. You don't want to disappoint the owner of the supply shop, do you?" he says.

Mr. Rooney advises homeowners not only to ask for a handyman's references, but to make sure they apply specifically to the skill needed.

Mr. Moritz says the best way to find a reputable handyman is to ask friends whom they recommend.

"The best business comes by word of mouth," Mr. Moritz says.

Just don't be surprised if the schedule of the worker in question is a little busy.

"A good handyman is never unemployed," he says.