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How to become a locksmith

by John Kilroy

Qualifications & training

A Master Locksmith is certified by the Master Locksmith Association (MLA), the accreditation process involves a four-part exam covering written and practical aspects. However, before you become a Master, young Paduan, you must learn the ropes. For a locksmith the "ropes" consist of four exams and qualifications offered by the British Locksmiths Institute (BLI), which is a part of the MLA.

The MLA is the Locksmiths' trade body and though they have no regulatory role, they are recognised by the police, the Home Office, the British Standards Institute and the Association of British Insurers. Their qualifications are also recognised throughout the industry, so if you want to become a Locksmith then you will encounter the MLA at some point.

To get on one of the BLI courses you must enrol as a Student Member. You will need to supply references and (for hopefully obvious reasons) pass a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. Courses are run at the MLA's headquarters in Daventry, Northamptonshire. See the MLA website for details.

You might be able to start as a trainee with a local company. there are no longer any formal apprenticeships in locksmithing, so you will need to contact a locksmith to see if he is prepared to take you on. Check the 'Find a Locksmith' database on the MLA website for details of locksmiths near you.

Salary

Trainees can start at around £13,000 a year. With experience earnings can be between £14,000 and £25,000 or more. A Master Locksmith may earn much more than that.

Hours and conditions

A locksmith ordinarily works around 40 hours a week, which could include evenings and weekends. When we say 'evenings' this can (if your company offers a 24-hour emergency call-out service) actually mean 'the middle of the night' if you are working the late-callout shift.

Your work may be based in a shop: perhaps cutting keys and selling locks and other security devices, but most locksmiths also, or even exclusively, visit customers on site, for example to fit or replace a lock, or help someone who is locked out.

Overview of BLI exams

These four courses, offered by the MLA, show the route to becoming a fully qualified Master Locksmith.

1. General Locksmithing Course – where you learn general aspects of the trade.
2. Opening Course – where you learn how to pick and open locks.
3. MLA entry exam – City & Guilds.
4. Full-member's exam – after which you are a Master Locksmith (this is soon to become a City & Guilds qualification)

Bear in mind that though some of your work will be inside, you will also have to work outside in all sorts of weather.

Skills and knowledge

A locksmith deals with materials other than locks and keys, therefore carpentry skills (in particular) will be useful. He might also find engineering and electrical skills beneficial.

He also needs some or all of the following:

- good practical skills
- good communication and customer-care skills
- a patient approach, with the ability to pay attention to detail
- carpentry and metalwork skills
- problem-solving skills
- an interest in electronic and mechanical equipment

Opportunities

Your best chance of getting started in the trade is to work for an existing firm. This could be for a locksmith's company, but could equally be for a shop or security equipment manufacturer. You could also consider DIY and hardware stores, shoe repairers and even some large department stores who provide key-cutting services.

Most locksmith companies are quite small but there are some large national companies operating franchises, these mainly provide 24-hour mobile and emergency services.

You could, eventually, become self-employed. However, the sector is competitive and you would need to do careful market research to see if there is a need for a locksmithing service in your area. You can get advice on starting a business from your local Business Link.

Further training and development

Working within a company, a trainee locksmith can expect to receive on-the-job training from a Master Locksmith and any other 'journeymen' locksmiths who the Master employs.

As a trainee, and even once you've qualified, you should keep up to date with new products and developments. You can also do further MLA courses (see the MLA website for details), or one of the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) levels 2 and 3 in Providing Security, Emergency and Alarm Systems.

Further information

You can discuss your career options with a learning adviser at the Careers Advice Service, call 0800 100 900 or visit their website: <http://careersadvice.direct.gov.uk>

Alternatively, you can talk to the MLA.

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