Energy Auditor Interview

"I like having the role of being an investigator and of helping people solve their problems."

Find out more about what Mike Childs has to say about being an energy auditor in the "Day in the Life" interview below.

Mike Childs, Residential Energy Auditor:
Neighborhood Energy Connection

What is a typical day like at your job?

My hours often vary. For instance, sometimes I might start work at 7 a.m. at a client's house and go until 7 p.m. one day. Other days work regular hours. In our office, we work one Saturday a month. When I'm in the office, I usually come in and check my messages and get things ready for the appointments. A lot of times the schedule depends on the appointments and when and where they are scheduled. Working for a non-profit organization gives me more flexibility with my schedule. You can often set your own hours and use your vacation time easily.

During an audit appointment, I first sit down with the homeowners and talk with them about what they want to get out of the audit and ask if they have any specific concerns. I usually start with the top of the house, look at attic and wall insulation and work my way down to the basement. I check out the refrigerator and other appliances and check their general condition. In the basement, I check the foundation, water heater, boiler, and furnace. It usually takes about two hours, and I produce a four-page report. At the end of the audit, I sit down with the homeowners again and go over the report and then walk them through the home and explain what types of repairs or work they could do to make their home more efficient to save money on their energy bills.

People volunteer to have an audit completed on their home, and sometimes they receive discounts or rebates for making the changes we suggest. There isn't a "typical" customer for us. We work with all types of people and all types of homes. The basic audit costs homeowners $35.
How did you get started working in this field?

I went to high school and college and got a degree in economics. I wasn't too excited about economics, but became really interested in conservation and recycling during college. I had a friend that worked at the Neighborhood Energy Connection, and he contacted me when the organization was looking for an infrared inspector. In that job, I mostly inspected insulation work done in buildings. I thought the job would last just for the winter season, but I've been with the organization for 20 years now. At first, I thought I would stay for maybe five years, but I ended up liking it and wanted to stay.

What sort of training or education do you have?

When I started in this field, the state required a two-week course to be certified as an energy auditor. I took my course and exam through a state technical college. Now I have the opportunity for ongoing training, conferences, and events. I recently had to retest as an energy auditor to get recertified. I passed the test. I'm also certified in RESNet (Residential Energy Services Network), which allows me to work with people constructing new buildings and with the Energy Star rating system.

What is your work environment like?

In the office, I work out of a cubical and spend time on the phone and computer. I answer calls from the community, connect with other auditors from around the state, follow-up on work orders, and fill out paperwork. When I'm out in the field, I usually have about three appointments back-to-back in different neighborhoods or cities. I work out of my car and carry my equipment in the trunk. I usually do the audits alone unless someone is shadowing me.

What sort of tools, machines, or equipment do you use regularly?

I'd say the three main tools I use are a screwdriver, flashlight, and tape measure: the basic stuff. The more fun equipment is the blower door, infrared camera, and other gadgets. A blower door is a device used to measure the air tightness of a house and to check for energy leaks. The infrared camera is also used to measure energy leaks. Other tools help us measure for carbon monoxide or dioxide and other specific things. I also use a computer and the Microsoft Excel program to track my work and invoices.

What skills or personal qualities are good for this job?

Someone who wants to work in this position has to like working with people. It's the fun part of the job. When you go perform audits, you work with a variety of people and homes and have to be able to communicate with them and talk with them about their home. We get good feedback on how friendly and helpful our energy auditors are.

Construction knowledge is also important and helpful because you can understand how homes are built and where the heat loss might be. Being willing to have a flexible schedule and work flexible hours is also important, because you can't predict when your appointments will be made.
A background in math is also helpful because you do things like calculate orders for insulation, calculate cost savings, measure heat loss, and other calculations.

**Does your job involve working on energy efficiency or conservation?**

We obviously work on helping people conserve and save energy, but what is most important about our job is our ability to measure those savings to show people how their energy bills will go down, and how they are actually saving energy, avoiding putting carbon into the air, and other benefits.

**What do you like most about your job?**

I like the mix of working in the office and out in the field. It's a good mix, and I wouldn't make it if I were in my cubical all week long. Maybe that's why I've lasted 20 years. I like interacting with different people and being in different situations — even if they are frustrating. It's nice to be able to change my approach to a situation to best meet the needs of the client. I like having the role of being an investigator and of helping people solve their problems. It is cool to get into unique pieces of people's homes and nooks and crannies. I like saving costs to homeowners and energy.

**What changes in this field do you expect to see in the future?**

As we are working with the energy companies, we are seeing a shift to more paperless audits using a handheld device. We're trying to make this educational, but also a helpful resource for people. People are more concerned with the actual savings, so we're trying to measure more precisely. In the future, people who can speak other languages might be needed as we are serving more diverse populations throughout the state.

**Are there any common misconceptions about this type of work?**

Some people think we might run into rodents or other animals while we are working in peoples' homes, but I've only had a close encounter with one bat and one rat in all my work. A dog has only bitten me once in my 20 years on the job, and it was due to a complicated situation. Besides that, I don't think there are many misconceptions.

**What is your advice to someone interested in this field?**

The biggest thing is to remember to be flexible, with your hours and even when you approach the field. Nothing is guaranteed, and we often have to renegotiate our contracts with the energy providers. Many of our contract auditors do energy audits on a part-time basis and maintain another part-time job as well. Be a people person, and make sure you have your certification in the energy auditing field. To do this job, you also need to have a vehicle to get to and from the audit appointments. Find a mentor in the field, so you can get out and see what someone does on daily basis.