

**Identifying and Positively Addressing Real and Perceived
Barriers to Inclusion in Construction**

Lisa Breitenfield

2020 James L. Allhands Essay Competition

November 15th, 2019

Abstract

The construction industry is facing difficulties in recruiting and training new skilled workers. My essay will identify some methods companies and the AGC can use to attract new employees. Some potential solutions involve encouraging schools to expose students to the construction industry, recognizing and assisting working parents with childcare issues, companies offering employees personalized career advancement schedules, and recruiting students focused on the arts and history for detail oriented roles in the industry. The Associated General Contractors can help by advising individual companies on attracting employees and facilitate greater mentorship programs between companies and educational institutions.

For thousands of years, construction has been an obvious career path. It has a low barrier for entry and can be done in any area of the world. In the past, the trades were passed down from generation to generation. As our economy and culture have changed, so has our workforce in the construction industry. Unfortunately, several factors have impacted the construction workforce. Between the push for all high school graduates to attend college, rising costs of childcare, and lasting effects of the 2008 recession, the industry has lost out on valuable members of the workforce. Construction is seen as back-breaking work, is sometimes looked down upon in society, and can be intimidating to newcomers. In order to address an issue that will drastically impact the success of the construction industry, we must make dramatic changes to the way we recruit employees and empower young people.

The industry has had to employ new techniques and technologies to meet customers' schedule expectations, while managing a limited skilled workforce. To recruit a qualified workforce, scholarships have been established, skilled labor is offered sign-on bonuses, day one benefits, relocation allowances, student loan repayment assistance, and transparent wage and career advancement schedules. Entire companies exist now to help companies attract and recruit skilled workers. While entering the construction industry is increasingly attractive, people are not pursuing careers in the industry or lack opportunities to gain the skills they need to succeed.

Some physical barriers to construction are growing as technical and management-focused programs are removed from educational institutions. Many young people have simply never used a hammer or saw. Many educational programs are focusing on exposing students to the rich educational opportunities in STEM, offering courses that

explore computer science, three-dimensional modeling, forensic investigation, and robotics. While these courses are valuable to society and the construction industry, it has detracted students from coursework that may encourage them to pursue a trade or management role in the construction industry. When schools shifted their electives to focus on STEM courses, many students lost out on the opportunity to take electives like woodworking, automotive sciences, and industrial arts. As a result, the issues facing the construction industry are paralleled by the automotive industry (Rogers).

While it is probable that today's students are genuinely interested in electives that explore STEM careers, schools should strive to offer electives that give students the opportunity to explore a wide variety of careers and working environments. Many students, particularly at-risk students, would benefit from exposure to a career that allows them to be active and work within a team, and offers a lot of variety in day to day working responsibilities and environments. It is important that students feel they are working towards a future goal and their school is supporting them in that journey (Panzer). Construction is a unique working environment, and there are many great career paths for employees beyond entry level labor or skilled trades. Exposure to a wide variety of industries is vital for young students to understand that there is a career out there that can provide them personal satisfaction and a good quality of life (How).

Another physical barrier to the industry is the rising cost of childcare. When a family is making decisions related to daycare, they often conclude that it is more affordable to have one parent leave the workforce than pay for daycare. In 2016, almost two million working adults across the United States left their jobs because of a lack of affordable or adequate childcare (Schochet). The construction industry could attract and

utilize these parents, helping them provide a good quality of life for their family and build a satisfying career for themselves. Economist Mike Madowitz explains the financial ramifications of taking time off work to care for a child:

“A 26-year-old woman who’s making \$50,000 when she takes three years off of work to attend to a child would leave not just \$150,000 in lost wages on the table, but an additional \$200,000 in lost wage growth — the cumulative effect of time off on future earnings — and some \$165,000 in lost retirement assets and benefits. (The \$165,000 includes missed 401K contributions and their assumed growth as well as reduced Social Security benefits.) That’s a potential life income loss of \$514,073” (Doerer).

Many parents are faced with difficult choices surrounding work and childcare. Providing affordable childcare benefits for employees would attract young professionals that are struggling with the cost of raising children. Providing the benefit of a reliable, affordable and trustworthy source of care for employee’s children will attract people to the industry and help the public see the benefits of working in the construction industry. When employees have their needs met, they are able give their best to their employers. Top technology companies, such as Microsoft and Google, utilize these notable benefits programs to attract top talent: predictable start and end times, flexible schedules, childcare FSA, backup care options, and on-site care. Depending on the type of construction and size of the company, some of these benefits may be out of reach, but the construction industry should strive to support families in order to attract workers.

A perceived issue with the industry is that construction is back breaking work and it’s just a manual job. Many people are not aware of the opportunities that exist for

skilled workers to move up to higher pay or management level responsibilities. Many people remember the massive layoffs during the 2008 recession. Many skilled workers were laid off and never returned to the industry. It is important that people know about the opportunities for advancement and how the construction industry has recovered and learned from leaner times. When talking with Generation Z members about what they are looking for in their future careers, surprisingly, a common theme is the idea of stability. Anna Blue, co-director of an organization focused on young women's' career development, shared her thoughts:

“Gen Z was most directly affected as children by the economic crash that started in 2008,” explains Blue. “They are the generation who watched people around them lose jobs, lose homes, lose their 401(k)s and retirement accounts. They want something that feels safe because of what they witnessed. So, they’re more interested in salary and benefits and things like that.... They want in-person relationships with their managers; they want to see their colleagues and have face-to-face collaboration because they’ve been missing so much of that being on their phones” (DeFelice).

Generation Z is looking for stability and human connection in work. A method the industry could employ would be sharing personalized career plans and pay schedules. Showing potential employees that there are opportunities for advancement could help encourage industry participation, as it would provide employees some of the personal connection and stability they are looking for in the workforce.

Personalized career paths will help employees understand employer's expectations, and the potential opportunities for their career with the company. Sharing a plan for progression and listening to employees' professional goals can help improve moral and loyalty to the company. Generation Z has a high drive for success: "The most important factor Gen Z looks for is opportunity for advancement" (Kessler). Providing Generation Z employees with clear and realistic projections of opportunities for advancement would help motivate them to join the industry and feel rewarded by their careers. They may be discouraged from entering the industry as a mason, but as they're promoted to a foreman, field engineer, and superintendent, they will appreciate and utilize their cumulative experiences in every role to achieve success.

From my perspective, as a woman in the construction industry, the environment has been very welcoming and positive. When I talk with people about my major or my job, the response is unflinchingly positive and encouraging. There are many individuals, both in the industry and the general public, that enjoy hearing my experiences as a woman in a male dominated field. While the response from others has always been positive, internally I was very nervous about my career path and felt embarrassed to tell my family or closest friends about my interest in the construction industry. When I moved from Chicago to Fargo to finish my bachelor's degree in Construction Management, I didn't even tell my closest friends because I felt strangely embarrassed and like the career didn't fit with the lifestyle and culture in which I was raised. I have since realized how well the industry fits with my life and what it means to be a construction professional. I have been welcomed in every job interview, career fair,

competition, group project, and class discussion. My worries about being a woman in the industry were far worse than the actual experience.

A main factor to my success in the industry has to do with the unique mentorship opportunity I had while working part-time and attending school. I joined the industry with zero understanding or experience with construction. I remember entering my first purchase order and Googling: “What is rebar?”. I started working for a general contractor while I was working towards earning my associate degree at my local community college. I started as an office assistant helping with filing, expense reports, and organizing meetings. I was promoted to a purchasing agent, then became an assistant to the project management team. I was able to see a very comprehensive view of the construction process while working.

Meanwhile in school, I was trying out different classes to see which piqued my interest: architecture, interior design, engineering, drafting, project management, and construction management. I enjoyed different parts of each field but decided to pursue construction management because of the experience I gained at work. I learned about pay applications in class, and then went to work and really grasped the importance of my duties and the process more easily. In class, I learned about long lead items and payment terms and was able to understand my role as a purchasing agent better. My classes at community college were helping me explore different fields in a low-cost environment, in comparison to traditional university tuition rates. Concurrently, I was seeing firsthand how the concepts applied in the real world.

I reasonably enjoyed my job, but I wasn’t sold on the career field until I attended my first client meetings. Being able to get out of the office, even just to take

measurements or meeting minutes, helped me see how construction efforts impact our clients' success. It was rewarding to meet customers, hear about their business and guide them through the construction process. One of my favorite things about the industry is physically seeing how a construction company's efforts can make vast improvements to a space and help customers achieve success in any line of business.

Increased mentorship and career exposure for students would help them prepare for the industry. Even just hearing an experienced project manager speak on the phone to a customer, a supplier and a subcontractor can help students understand how important communication is and gain the confidence to do it themselves. If companies allow students to work or shadow once a week, while attending vocational or professional management programs, it would greatly benefit students and help increase career readiness. Spending time in the work environment would benefit students and help them learn to build relationships and contacts in the industry. Experienced tradesmen and managers are reaching retirement age, so the next generation needs the opportunity to learn from their experiences and example in the workplace. Attending school and spending time in the industry concurrently could help escalate learning and career readiness outcomes.

Another opportunity for increasing participation in the industry involves targeting the idea of craftsmanship. Many young people aren't aware of the opportunities in construction for detail oriented or artistically inclined people. There are many existing structures in the United States that need preservation or improvements, but few are qualified or skilled in the art of preserving or restoring these structures. The American College of the Building Arts is an educational institution with a unique mission:

“The American College of the Building Arts educates and trains artisans in the traditional building arts to foster exceptional craftsmanship and encourage the preservation, enrichment, and understanding of the world’s architectural heritage through a liberal arts education” (Urban). This program has recognized the need for individuals educated on the historical significance and mechanics of preserving and restoring structures. The American College of the Building Arts offers a Bachelor of Applied Sciences in Architectural Carpentry, Architectural Stone, Classical Architecture, Blacksmithing, Masonry, Plasterwork, and Timber Framing. Many students today are following their passion and working on degrees in graphic design, anthropology, history and art, but struggle to find a job where they can apply that knowledge without further education. There can be a lot of detail and craftsmanship required for workers in fields like masonry, casework, electric, HVAC, surveying and computer drafting. A creative problem solver who is sensitive to details could greatly benefit the industry, as they can identify and resolve problems that may be overlooked by people with different inclinations. Many students could follow their passion for the arts, while finding a rewarding career in the construction industry. Trade schools and construction companies should actively work with schools on recruiting and training artistically inclined individuals for a successful and rewarding career in the construction industry.

The Associated General Contractors can play a vital role in helping the industry address current issues in the labor market. AGC has always served as a cornerstone for bettering the construction community and allows construction companies to collaborate and communicate on broad issues and initiatives in the industry. AGC could help companies expand this mentorship/apprenticeship program and facilitate the relationship

between companies and schools. Currently at my school, companies come to recruit for Summer internships and full-time jobs, but few offer opportunities for students to shadow their project managers and build relationships during school. AGC could help encourage schools to offer more vocational and trade focused electives and expose students to the unique environment of a construction trade or management job. AGC could also help advise companies on how to attract new employees through unique benefits such as: flexible hours, childcare assistance, personalized career pathways, student loan repayment assistance, and increased awareness of current employment trends. The industry has not adapted enough to meet the needs of the millennial generation, and needs to innovate to meet the expectations and needs of Generation Z.

Construction is a widespread and diverse industry. The industry has faced major challenges, but has continued to innovate and adjust to changing markets and economic situations. While change is difficult, it is necessary for the continued success and longevity of every construction company. A significant cultural shift is coming as the baby boomer generation retires and the Generation X, Millennial and Generation Z employees begin taking on new roles in the economy. Companies must adapt to employee needs and culture in order to attract new parties to the industry. While the manual nature of the industry can have a negative stigma, there are significant advantages to a career in construction. It is our duty as construction professionals to promote the industry and potentially help others find rewarding and meaningful careers in the industry. We must foster the growth and development of our employees and encourage people to explore the unique benefits the construction industry can offer.

Bibliography

- Beck, Julia. "How Some Companies Are Making Child Care Less Stressful for Their Employees." *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard Business Publishing, 19 July 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/04/how-some-companies-are-making-child-care-less-stressful-for-their-employees>.
- DeFelice, Manon. "What Gen Z Wants At Work Will Blow Your Mind." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 1 Nov. 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/manondefelice/2019/10/31/what-gen-z-wants-at-work-will-blow-your-mind/#60303744b8e7>.
- DeFelice, Manon. "What Gen Z Wants At Work Will Blow Your Mind." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 1 Nov. 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/manondefelice/2019/10/31/what-gen-z-wants-at-work-will-blow-your-mind/#60303744b8e7>.
- Doerer, Kristen. "How Much Does It Cost to Leave the Workforce to Care for a Child? A Lot More than You Think." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 21 June 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/how-much-does-it-cost-to-leave-the-workforce-to-care-for-a-child-a-lot-more-than-you-think>.
- "How Career and Technical Education Can Help Students Be College and Career Ready" *College & Career Readiness & Success Center*, American Institutes for Research, <https://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CCRS-CTE-Primer-2013.pdf>.
- Kessler, Sarah. "Exactly What Gen Z Wants, According to All of the Surveys." *Quartz at Work*, Quartz, 30 Oct. 2018, <https://qz.com/work/1410722/here-is-exactly-what-gen-z-wants-according-to-all-of-the-surveys/>.
- Panzer, Craig. "The Importance of Career Exploration to at-Risk Middle School Students : a Thesis." *Digital Commons @ CSUMB*, California State University, Monterey Bay , May 2006, https://digitalcommons.csUMB.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1466&context=caps_thes.
- Rogers, Kate. "Blue Collar No More: Skilled Auto Technicians Are in High Demand." *CNBC*, CNBC, 8 Mar. 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/08/skilled-auto-technicians-are-in-high-demand.html>.
- Schochet, Leila, and Rasheed Malik. "2 Million Parents Forced to Make Career Sacrifices Due to Problems with Child Care." *Center for American Progress*, 13 Sept. 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2017/09/13/438838/2-million-parents-forced-make-career-sacrifices-due-problems-child-care/>.
- Urban, Chad. "Mission & Vision." *The American College of the Building Arts*, <http://www.acba.edu/history#Mission>.