

Addressing Shortages of Skilled Trades Workers

COVID-19 has greatly impacted the construction industry and caused many businesses to reevaluate the way they approach projects and manage their staff. Coupling this with an already depleted skilled workforce has left our industry in an unprecedented situation.



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Businesses are constantly adapting to keep people healthy, projects moving forward, and effectively filling the need for skilled labor.

Shortages of skilled trades workers in the United States, has created a genuine concern for the industry and country. Without a strong workforce, companies are unable to complete projects in a timely fashion.

- The country has experienced a skilled-trades talent gap caused by retirement and a reduced focus on trade education in high school.
- Repairs to the country's infrastructure are behind schedule and increasing.
- Companies that employ skilled tradespeople are failing to meet customer demands.
- Companies are finding it challenging to maintain quality and productivity.
- Many companies are forced to take a more conservative approach to project selection or simply turn down projects.

Are workforce shortages reaching a critical point?

The pandemic has clearly shown us just how valuable the construction industry is to the future of our country. Infrastructure will take a prominent role, within our political landscape, over the next several years and addressing the need for skilled labor shortfalls will take center stage within that discussion. Workforce shortages remain one of the single greatest threats to its success and will determine how we move forward in the industry. Unfortunately, an overwhelming majority of contractors have trouble finding talent to fill the craft positions that represent the industry's workforce.

Why the shortage of skilled labor?

By now, most everyone can name several factors that have led to the short fall in skilled labor within the United States. A lack of emphasis on skilled trades within our school systems, coupled with an

aging workforce, has left the industry weakened and unable to fill manpower requirements across the country.

- Baby Boomers are retiring from the workforce in significant numbers.
- The introduction of new technologies / robotics
- Vocational classes have been eliminated in many schools.
- Emphasis on "college as the only option" promoted for years.
- Funding cuts forced schools to eliminate shop classes.

How is the industry dealing with the lack of skilled labor?

Many of us have been addressing the shortfalls in skilled labor in various ways – sometimes without realizing your company has shifted its identity, business model, and/or geographic presence within the marketplace.

- Taking on fewer projects
- Specializing in a smaller range / scope of projects
- Limiting risks and taking on higher paying projects
- Value engineering projects
- Narrow the geography within the business model
- Adding internal training/apprenticeship program (hiring direct)
- Diversification within service offerings

While there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to running a company short-staffed; remaining flexible, local, and specialized can assist in navigating workforce shortages.

What else can we do?

Think outside the box. New recruitment strategies will help fill the gap.

- Spend time during CBA negotiations to openly discuss both workforce shortfalls and jointly

continued pg.36

(continued from pg 35)



addressing short- and long-term market requirements.

- Encourage recruitment efforts to draw women to enter the field. Women make up more than half of the workforce but represent a small percent of the skilled trades workforce.
- Evaluate your company's work culture – take steps to create a positive atmosphere.
- Provide opportunities for continued on-the-job training.
- Recruit in schools. Debunk the theory that a college education is the only way to high paying positions.
- Reach out to local school districts and board trustees to bring back shop and skilled trades classes.
- Encourage your regional Building Trades to develop a recruitment plan with local school districts / shop teachers.
- Invest time and finances toward skilled trades education within high schools.
- Educate students about available scholarships and grants through the government and other agencies.
- Sponsor scholarships to help promote trade schools.
- Lobby governmental education agencies and other resources.

Much like any challenge in business, acknowledging the shortage of skilled workers is only the first step. We must look for new ways to encourage our youth to join the industry. It is through working together and taking the initiative to address these shortages that will allow our industry to remain healthy, prosperous, and fruitful for years to come.