

Keeping Workers On Site And In The Industry

Written by: Zachary Phillips, Editor, Construction Dive

CLIMBING OUT OF THE LABOR SHORTAGE REQUIRES TRAINING NEW LEADERSHIP, CHANGING JOBSITE CULTURE, AND INVESTING IN TECHNOLOGY AND SAFETY, EXPERTS SAY.

Quite simply, many people aren't aware of the career they could have in construction.

That's a large reason experts say construction is struggling to find and keep workers who build careers, rather than just work jobs. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, larger numbers of the older workforce have retired than was expected, as some waited within the safety of their homes before evaluating their next career step.

At the same time, high schools seem to make college the only option for students, and it's harder for some young people to see a future in construction.

"From a trade school side, this goes back to our industry, and that we have to do a better job at raising awareness. You don't have to go to college to be successful," Chad Goodfellow, CEO of Goodfellow Bros., a Hawaii-based contractor, told Construction Dive. "Our employees in the trades often enter at [a] higher salary than our college graduates, with much less student debt."

RETENTION BEGINS WITH RECRUITING

A key to the skilled labor crisis, experts said, is ensuring that workers know they can have a long and successful career in



construction, and not merely view it as a job or a one-time gig.

In order to do that, it's vital the trades let workers know that they can learn and become an expert in a skillset that will be marketable anywhere in the world, said Greg Sizemore, vice president of health, safety, environment, and workforce development at Associated Builders and Contractors.

Sizemore, who is based in Washington, D.C., joked that, despite it being the capital of the country, "the smartest person in the city during a heat wave is the one who knows how to fix the air conditioning." That's a skill that will always be needed.

But it must also be clear to construction workers that their path through the industry may not be a vertical ladder; many times workers walk on the jobsite with one job, and have three or four very different ones by the time the project is complete, Sizemore said. When a worker understands how they can

advance, even if it's not a vertical ladder, they're more likely to commit to their job and appreciate leadership.

TRAINING LEADERSHIP

The skills required to help construct a building and those required to manage a jobsite are not the same. Nevertheless, often the managers running billion dollar jobsites were, at one point, just holding a shovel, said Brian Turmail, vice president of public affairs and strategic initiatives for the Associated General Contractors of America.

As a result, it's vital to train emerging leaders in the skills required to be a boss. As much as employers need to invest in training their workforce, they need to invest in training leaders as well, Turmail said.

That can create a beneficial cycle, said Goodfellow, whose business boasts a high employee retention rate.

"To me, a key piece of what makes this work is that you have to have your skilled superintendents and other longtime staff committed to bringing up less experienced employees who are entering the workforce," he said. "When you have that, then you are able to build that next generation of leaders."

AS SIMPLE AS SALARY?

For union workers, salary is negotiated before construction can even begin, which can make it easier for some workers to build careers, said Sean McGarvey, president of the North American Building Trades Union.

When workers, union or not, see the salaries of the higher-ups in corporate America, they can be left with a sour attitude, McGarvey said. They're the ones on site doing the hard work, and they often know the value they create.

But according to Anirban Basu, chief economist for Associated Builders and Contractors, that's not always the case.

Increasingly, Basu said, contractors value other aspects of their workplace than just the salary, and, especially in a pandemic, are willing to settle for less money if it means more comfortable and safe working conditions.

COMMUNICATING SAFETY, CREATING COMFORT

It's largely Generation Z, the youngest generation in the

workforce, that cares more about work conditions than pay, Basu said. As a result, if they have the option for a slightly lower paying job, but with more predictability, both in the physical location of their workspace and dangers of their work, they're likely to choose that one. In many cases, this leads workers away from construction.

Construction's safety practices as a whole have increased in the past few years, said Sizemore. Nevertheless, construction is an industry that can be dangerous and requires constant vigilance on the jobsite.

It's up to the contractor and the jobsite managers to continue to make safety not just a high priority, but a recruiting tool. A simple step is for a contractor to prove that its injury rate is below the national average, Sizemore said. By indicating the company is a safety leader, it can create an air of trust before a worker steps foot onto the jobsite.

Beyond safety, there can be uncertainty in the workplace, as it is constantly changing. Workers can have different tasks day to day, or find themselves going to several different jobsites frequently. Either way, it's a challenge to staff some jobsites that are far away, or inconsistent.

Goodfellow Bros. has had success, Goodfellow said, by assigning workers to jobsites close to their homes. That could be easier for regional contractors, like Goodfellow, which does work in Hawaii and the Pacific Northwest.

But workers aren't just after feeling safe and comfortable in their routine, Basu said, there is also an important element of respect that the emerging workforce expects at their jobs.

CHANGING THE CULTURE

Some sociologists have suggested that younger workers, both Gen Z – those born between 1997 and 2012 – and millennials – those born between 1981 and 1996 – are more sensitive to criticism, Basu said. While not wanting to stereotype across generations, Basu said it's vital that workers know they are respected and valued at work in order to keep them.

The culture of change isn't just as simple as being nicer, and it's not just for the younger workforce. If the industry is to attract women and minorities, typically underrepresented groups in the workforce, there needs to be a change in every

jobsite culture to create a more welcoming environment.

“If you’re going to start attracting people who’ve typically been underrepresented in the industry, it’s time to drop the pinup calendar in the jobsite trailer,” said Turmail. “It’s time to think twice before you make a joke.”

To the superintendents or managers who may resist the cultural change, Turmail suggested it may be an easier decision for them when they must deliver a project on a tight schedule, and need all the help they can get to complete it.

Tied in with that example is the need to remove the “macho ethos” around construction, Turmail said. Equipping workers with the tools to say when they’re struggling with mental or physical health can make it easier for them to heal, recover, and return to work, while being more productive.

The best jobsites have an inclusive culture, spearheaded by leadership that encourages workers to challenge each other and themselves to be the best they can be every day, according to Ralph Esposito, president of Suffolk’s Northeast and Mid-Atlantic division.

“Suffolk Chairman and CEO John Fish often says, ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’ and I think he’s right,” Esposito said. “Companies in any industry that offer their people a strong culture that gives them the peace of mind and tools to be their absolute best will attract and retain the very best talent at the end of the day.”

Alison Tripp, national recruiting leader for DPR, echoed that sentiment, saying that contractors should strive to have workforces that represent the communities in which they build, and can therefore work to build a safer, more advanced jobsite.

TECHNOLOGY AND SAFETY

The human aspect of construction makes it less feasible to turn to a completely automated industry, and no matter what, there will have to be someone on the jobsite to keep things running smoothly.

The kind of technology that will aid construction is the one that benefits worker health and productivity, said Turmail. He imagines more tools like exoskeletons designed to reduce injuries or stress on a worker repeatedly lifting heavy objects, or a rebar-tying robot, which can complete a task that often

creates extreme strain on workers.

Even something like a drywall robot or machine that can complete a task allows a worker to step back and get a few feet away from the action on a jobsite, creating a safer environment.

For Basu, technology returns to the issue of a worker’s desire to have a safer jobsite and more predictable environment. Some workers leave construction for manufacturing, but were the industry to continue to turn to modular prefabrication, perhaps that could attract more workers to stay and enjoy the predictability of working in a factory.

Sizemore, however, said tech’s biggest payoff is in recruiting. Showing off high-tech GPS-guided cranes or software used on site can show that jobsites are modernizing quickly, and there is a place to apply the skillset many young workers have with their experience wielding technology.


BUILDING A SENSE OF PRIDE

According to both Turmail and Sizemore, there is one simple recruitment tool that can show young people what they can get from construction: pickup trucks.

Showing high schoolers someone just a few years older than them who can say they put their head down, worked hard, and have now bought their own pickup truck could be an effective way to show people the accomplishments someone can make quickly in the industry.

Turmail suggested showing a jobsite parking lot full of new pickup trucks as a potential recruiting tool to workers, perhaps in comparison to another lot with less exciting vehicles.

But beyond a shiny new vehicle is something construction offers that so many other jobs don’t, Turmail said: the ability to build something out of nothing and to show that to friends or family. There is an inherent sense of pride to construct something that will last decades.

“Construction workers, if they’ve ever driven someone they know around town and pointed out their buildings or their bridges or their power plants; telling those stories is very impactful,” he said. 



About the Author

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