The Hardest Construction Jobs to Fill

Written by: Zachary Phillips, Editor, Construction Dive

SOME OF THE TOUGHEST POSITIONS TO STAFF IN 2023 ARE THE MOST VITAL

Construction needs to find more workers, and there are no easy-to-fill jobs in the industry.

In fact, according to an Associated General Contractors of America survey of its members, 91% of contractors had trouble filling positions last year, and experts say the labor crunch for these positions isn't going to let up anytime soon.

The number of workers in construction has failed to meet the high demand. Fewer new workers have joined the industry, and retention has remained low as experienced workers retire.

Among hourly craft positions, AGC respondents had the most trouble with staffing pipelayers; 89% of contractors had trouble filling those spots. Glaziers were the least difficult job to staff, but even so, 70% of respondents had trouble finding workers in those positions.

Salaried positions, such as architects, engineers and estimating personnel, are easier to fill, but 81% of firms still struggled to find project managers/supervisors and 77% estimating personnel. Half had trouble with vital jobs like safety personnel.

"We continue to be faced with the challenge of hiring superintendents and skilled craft labor," said Alison Tripp, national recruiting lead for Redwood City, California-based DPR Construction. "As our more seasoned superintendents are getting closer to retirement, we must double our efforts to make careers in the field attractive to younger talent."

The toughest positions to fill are some of the most vital: ones that require leadership or experience in the trades.

Job	% contractors having trouble staffing	Mean hourly wage	Mean annual salary	Employment (2021)
Mechanics/Millwrights	87%	$28.55	$59,380	483,200
Carpenters	85%	$26.53	$55,190	668,060
Plumbers	82%	$28.79	$59,880	469,000
Construction managers	81%	$47.55	$98,890	478,500
Electricians	79%	$30.44	$63,310	650,580

SOURCE: BLS and AGC data.

"There was a point in time where he who had the people hoped he got the work," said Greg Sizemore, vice president of

workforce development, safety, health, and environmental for Associated Builders and Contractors. "Now it's he who has the work hopes he can find the people."

Sizemore said having a secure workforce plays an important role in knowing if a contractor can deliver a project. The work is out there, he said, but contractors may not have the confidence to chase it and win it if they don't think they can find the staff.

Tripp said DPR has focused on training craft laborers in an effort to highlight longer-lasting career paths in the field.

THE TOUGHEST ROLES TO FILL

When asked about which craft positions' shortages would have the biggest impact on construction in 2023, AGC Chief Economist Ken Simonson found it tough to select just a few.

"Every craft is important at some stage of a project," Simonson said.

A lack of workers on any one task can slow a project to a crawl, Sizemore noted. Waiting for a concrete pour or electric wiring can prevent the next step from happening.

Sizemore said from his vantage point, the toughest jobs to fill are ones like carpenter, electrician, plumber, mechanic or millwright, and project manager.

Tripp said she doesn't see the labor shortage getting better any time soon, and as the experienced workforce ages out, the industry will face a crisis with trying to find, recruit, train, and retain workers and potential superintendents.

The industry will soon need even more workers. Increased spending, largely resulting from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, will mean more projects with open spots to fill. At the same time, the industry has grown dependent on foreign labor, but immigration is down, Tripp said.

Tripp said she anticipates DPR and its competitors will continue to have to raise pay and benefits for workers. Additionally the number of women in construction has jumped, which Tripp attributed to efforts to open the door wider and recruit from a broader pool.

Even still, the end is not in sight.

"Currently, there are over 25% more construction opportunities available than qualified people to fill them throughout the industry," Tripp said. "The trends for 2023 and beyond are showing that this gap will be there for several years to come.

COMBATING THE PROBLEM

The reasons for worker hesitation around the construction industry are many. For one, construction doesn't provide year-round employment, said Anita Grantham, head of HR at software company BambooHR, which consults with thousands of construction clients. Most construction work is done when the weather is warmest.

"Employees who seek year-round employment may change industries or move to another location where the winter weather won't impact their ability to work," Grantham said, adding that the talent pipeline hasn't been built to support the trades long-term.

In the competitive workforce of 2023, Grantham provided three tips to employers:

- **Create a formal onboarding process:** Workers are more likely to stick around for three years or longer when there is a formal onboarding process, Grantham said. Buddy programs and check-ins for example, are investments that can pay off in the long run.
- **Offer competitive compensation:** "Employees expect to be paid what they're worth," Grantham said. It's time to revisit rates, benefits, and perks contractor's offer workers, she added, suggesting that employers survey crews on which benefits they need and which they don't use.
- **Develop a strong culture:** Keep employees happy. Jobsites aren't conventional workplaces, so contractors need to be creative about how they engage with workers about company goals and values. This can start with training managers as part of the onboarding process.

About the Author

Zachary Phillips joined Construction Dive in September 2019. Prior to that, he worked as an editorial intern for the Baltimore Business Journal and the Hill.com. He is a graduate of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, where he covered several beats across numerous school publications, including the Diamondback, Testudo Times and Capital News Service. Zachary can be reached at zphillips@industrydive.com.

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