



# Developing a Workforce:

## Contractors Find Ways to Improve the Industry's Skilled Labor Shortage

By Peter Eisenhauer

There are many factors contributing to concerns about a looming skilled labor shortage in construction: Baby Boomers hitting retirement age, the recession that led to an exodus of many workers from the industry (what some call a “lost generation” of mid-career workers), competition with other industries for what looks like a smaller pool of incoming younger workers, and a need for more skills training to prepare new workers and update the competencies of the existing workforce.

In the discussion of the construction industry's need to develop an adequate workforce, the role of training emerges as one of the keys. How do you get skilled workers? You make sure your workers get skills. This approach also addresses the issues of recruiting and retaining workers by providing a path for advancement, which makes the employer more attractive, both for the prospective and the existing employee.

There are many resources available for training craft workers in the construction industry. Since the emergence of the NCCER's National Craft Assessment and Certification Program (NCACP) in 2000, many contractors and organizations use these assessments to verify the qualifications of their workers. These industry-recognized and portable certifications include the Knowledge Verified credential based on a written assessment and Performance Verifications that determine hands-on skills. Candidates who successfully complete both, obtain the Certified Plus credential, the highest credential in most crafts.

A “targeted” task specific training prescription is provided to all craft workers who take an assessment so that they can upgrade their skills. Contractors and training organizations use the prescriptions to offer task-specific training. A wide variety of organizations provide the training, including trade associations, labor unions, schools, colleges, in-house contractor and owner programs. Government organizations also offer

training, such as Job Corps, Youth Build, corrections facilities and branches of the military.

“We are seeing delivery methods changing in the labs with more uses of simulators for preliminary training prior to students being placed on equipment, or using complex tools, or in welding booths for additional hands-on training,” said Jane Hanna, President and Executive Director of the Construction Education Foundation in Dallas, Texas. “Distance learning for classroom delivery and online classes are gaining popularity and utilization when factual content is being delivered. The key we have found is that in craft/apprenticeship, the hands-on component must still be present if distance learning or online classes are utilized. In craft/apprenticeship training, a constant through the years that remains today is the importance of hands-on training with tools and equipment. This is normally delivered through a lab/shop setting and reinforced on the job site through on-the-job training.”

Greg Sizemore, Senior Manager for Craft and Supervisor Development at Zachry Industrial in San Antonio, Texas, describes a training model that includes both skill competence and knowledge.

“It's one thing to know how to hook up a 110 volt wall receptacle,” said Sizemore, “It's another to understand everything that connects to it. People in construction tend to be tactile learners, people who are interested in doing things, so we need to emphasize the knowledge aspect. Everything we do has to be hardwired back to the NCCER curriculum”

There are four major components to the training strategy at Zachry:

1. Verification and validation of individual skill. This is done using a system based on NCCER certification standards plus specific knowledge based on particular tools and products that Zachry uses in their projects.

2. Advancement opportunities for incoming and existing employees. There

is a clear path to advancement, which is briefed to workers in their initial orientation, so that all new workers know how to become a journeyman in a craft if they have the desire. Each project has a training manager who partners with local institutions such as local ABC chapters, high schools or career technical schools to provide after-hours training for the knowledge learning. Hands-on learning takes place on the job under the guidance of trained mentoring supervisors. The Zachry human resources information system keeps a transcript of the employee's demonstrated skills to document their progress.

3. Supervisor training receives a lot of attention. One reason for this is that inept supervision is frequently a major cause of worker dissatisfaction, leading to higher turnover. Making sure supervisors have the training to deal effectively with employees is another investment in workforce retention. This training is vital because supervision entails a new set of skills beyond the mastery of craft and industry experience that initially qualify employees to become supervisors.

4. Community outreach. When setting up a new project, Zachry will bring in previous hires and expect to find some qualified, experienced construction workers in the locality. They will also market to potential employees who would be coming into the industry for the first time. The pitch will emphasize that they will be learning new skills and gaining an entry point into a vital and rewarding career. The company also offers training partners in conjunction with the recruitment. One example was a free 32 hour baseline construction maintenance readiness program in partnership with a high school. Over a number of weeks, the course combined video learning with in-class practice and hands-on learning with the tools of the trade. Successful completion guaranteed participants a chance to work with Zachry. The advantage to Zachry is that from day one on the job, those pre-trained employees are adding value to project.

Sizemore likes to give prospects a realistic picture of the industry. “I don't want to sugarcoat our industry,” he said. “What we do is hard work. When it's cold out, you're going to be working in the cold. When it's hot, you're working in the heat. You will be working 300 feet above the ground. You will be safe, but you will be 300 feet above the ground.” Providing a dose of reality to those that might only be excited about the paycheck improves the odds of bringing in people who will stick around.

Although the looming skills shortage concerns him, Sizemore says he is not seeing a lot of panic in the industry. “If we do the right things and look in the right places, we'll find them,” he said. There is the challenge of developing a new image for the industry that will resonate with young people and their parents.

The recent San Antonio livestock show, where 400 students brought in their projects demonstrating their skills and handiwork, was a good opportunity for outreach to just the kind of enterprising, hard-working young people the industry needs to find. Sizemore made a point of bringing along a contingent of younger, successful craft workers to talk about what they do.

Finding new skilled workers may take looking in new places. While the rancher's son might seem like the ideal prospect, the next generation of craft workers might also be waiting in the nation's inner cities, waiting for someone to connect them with the opportunity. Sizemore believes there is much untapped potential in the underemployed.

Another group to be considered is older workers. The New York Times recently reported that the percentage of older workers in the labor market has increased, while the percentage of younger workers has fallen. One factor in this was the recession and the hit taken on retirement savings.

A Gallup poll last month found that in just the last four years the average retirement age has jumped from 59 to 62. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 32.2 percent of Americans age 65 to 69 are working or looking for work, up from 21.3 percent 20 years ago. Finding ways to keep good, experienced workers on the job would have the added benefit of providing more mentors who are capable of training their younger colleagues.

Providing the skilled workforce that will be needed for the future is a serious challenge. “We're not going to solve this problem in this generation,” said Sizemore. “But that doesn't mean gloom and doom, it means there is work to be done. It's opportunity 101.” ❖

