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Oregon's Building Connections

OP-ED: Bridging the construction workforce gap via training

By: [Paige Spratt](#) in [Construction Zone](#) October 25, 2016

Ask any contractor in the Portland-metro area: “What is the number one problem plaguing the construction industry?” Answer: People. There are not enough people available to perform the work – this includes all work, from running a crew to installing utility pipes. And most people in the industry agree that it will only get worse as baby boomers continue to retire. Studies predict that by 2020, the construction market will exceed the growth that we saw in 2007. The construction industry needs people and it needs them now.

Construction provides some of the highest-paying jobs in the area. Did you know that the national average salary of a plumber is \$54,620? So why is it so hard to find people to fill these high-paying jobs? One answer: Skills. Prospective employees lack the necessary skills to fill these jobs. And they lack not only technical skills, like how to use a screwdriver, saw or tape measure, but also those “soft skills” inherent in every job, such as showing up to work on time, following directions and communicating effectively.

Thus, we know that there is a skilled labor shortage, and we also know that it is only going to get worse. But what can be done to bridge this apparent workforce gap? Training. Employers and educational institutions need to provide training to current and prospective workers to enable them to become skilled in the trades.

Some educational institutions are taking that leap. For example, starting this fall, Clark College in Vancouver, Washington, implemented an 11-week “pre-apprentice” program that allows adults age 18 and older to explore the trades. The program provides certifications in first aid, flagging and OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) 10-hour training. The program is intended to introduce students to three potential career pathways: 1, entering the job market; 2, pursuing an apprentice program; or 3, enrolling in one of Clark College’s Career Technical Education (CTE) programs, such as welding.

The program focuses on not only technical skills, but also “career readiness.” Its instructor, Justin Allen, says that he builds his lesson plans by listening to the needs of industry leaders and planning around “big soft skills.” For example, in the second week of classes, the students learned about the masonry industry and its specific expectations – not just what masons do. Students are given opportunities to meet with masonry companies and union members to learn about the culture of that industry.

The program is also targeting women and minorities, who are significantly underrepresented in the construction trades. Allen says that industry leaders have expressed a “special need in increasing the number of women and minorities” in skilled trades. And while the program is in its pilot stage, more than half of Allen’s students are women looking to pursue careers in construction.



While Clark College is helping develop and train a sustainable construction workforce, what else can the industry do to bridge the workforce gap? Invest in our community – not just with dollars, but time and resources. In fact, in 2015, five Clark County community partners teamed up to do just that by introducing YouthBuild, a program developed to train Clark County at-risk youths between the ages of 17 and 24 to obtain job (and life) skills in the construction industry. Through the program, students learn about the trades in the classroom, by performing community service projects and by constructing homes for Evergreen Habitat for Humanity. In the process, students also earn their high school diplomas or GEDs. YouthBuild students can then take the skills they learned during the program and pursue careers in the construction industry. Currently, students are helping construct two Habitat for Humanity homes for local families; the projects are scheduled to finish in December.

There are many opportunities to help build a skilled and diverse construction workforce. As leaders in the construction industry, we need to make the investment into our community by blazing our own trails to solve these workforce woes.

We need to work together to talk to parents, teachers and kids about the benefits of learning a trade skill. As employers, we should be investing in our employees by providing on-the-job-training so we can promote and grow from within. We need to hire interns so that teens and young adults can learn the values of employment. As parents, we should communicate with our children about career opportunities in addition to college – the trades offer high-paying, respectable careers (and young adults are not left with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt). In sum, we need to get people excited about pursuing – and their kids pursuing – careers in construction.

Paige Spratt is a construction lawyer for Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt. She serves on the Workforce Southwest Washington board of directors. She has a bachelor's degree in construction management, and professional experience as a construction manager. Contact her at 360-905-1433 or pspratt@schwabe.com.