

## Q&A With Sonny Maken – On Workforce Development, Apprenticeship and the Future of the Commercial Construction Industry

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Sonny Maken, Chief Operating Officer of Associated Builders and Contractors Florida East Coast

**Sonny Maken** serves as Chief Operating Officer of **Associated Builders and Contractors Florida East Coast** (ABC-FEC), where he oversees chapter operations and workforce development initiatives including **ABC Institute Apprenticeship College**, the single largest apprenticeship education provider in Florida. We spoke with Sonny about Florida’s construction workforce challenges, the role of apprenticeship in meeting commercial demand and how strategic partnerships are shaping the future of skilled labor across the state.

***In five years, the winners will be the regions that treat workforce development as critical infrastructure***

**The construction industry is facing a significant talent gap, with national data suggesting hundreds of thousands of new workers are needed annually to keep pace. How is this shortage specifically manifesting in Florida's commercial sector, and how is ABC-FEC uniquely positioned to be the solution?**

National forecasts show the construction industry must attract roughly 349,000 new workers in 2026 and 456,000 in 2027 to meet demand. Florida's commercial construction market is feeling that strain through schedule risk, bid volatility and projects being decided by who can staff core trades like electrical, HVAC, plumbing, concrete and equipment operators. A national workforce survey found most firms are struggling to fill positions with shortages tied directly to delays and cost pressure. ABC Florida East Coast is uniquely positioned to respond because we do not just advocate for the industry, we produce talent at scale through our educational arm, ABC Institute Apprenticeship College (ABCI). ABCI is Florida's largest apprenticeship provider, accounting for nearly 20 percent of Florida's freshman apprentice enrollment. ABCI invests over \$3.5 million annually in construction education and training, equipping students with the skills and certifications needed for lifelong careers in construction.

**ABC-FEC recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Space Florida. Can you tell us about this collaboration and how it helps Florida's economic development and supports the state's aerospace economy?**

Our partnership with [Space Florida](#) connects two major engines of Florida's economy, space and construction, by building the workforce bridge between them. Aerospace growth depends on both vertical facilities and horizontal infrastructure, and the speed of that development rises or falls on trade capacity. By aligning workforce training and skilled trades education with Space Florida's initiatives, we are creating predictable, local pipelines which will reduce bottlenecks, ensure projects are delivered on time and support continued investment statewide.

**Florida is experiencing rapid growth in commercial development. How is ABC-FEC's apprenticeship model helping to meet the demand for skilled labor?**

ABC Institute Apprenticeship College is employer-led and built around real time contractor demand, which allows us to adjust cohorts' schedules and competencies based on what employers need today rather than outdated market assumptions. Our "earn while you learn" model also lowers the barriers to entry by allowing people to work while building skills, which ultimately expands the workforce by moving today's helpers into journey-level professionals and future field leaders.

**Earlier this year, ABC-FEC opened a new flagship apprenticeship hub in Miami. What does this facility mean for workforce development in Florida and how will it expand ABC Institute's capacity?**

In August 2025, ABC Florida East Coast closed on a nearly 23,000-square-foot facility in Miami-Dade County that will serve as Florida's flagship apprenticeship hub and enable the next phase of our program growth. The facility creates a high

capacity, high visibility anchor for training in the state's largest commercial construction market, supporting more classrooms, stronger employer engagement and enabling regional workforce scaling.

**Workforce development often involves partnerships. Can you share how ABC-FEC collaborates with industry stakeholders to build stronger pipelines into the skilled trades?**

In our model, employers are the “customer.” ABCI aligns our curriculum and the on-the-job training requirements with what employers actually need on active projects. This demand-driven approach ensures our graduates are day-one ready.

We also work with our education partners to create clear pathways from high school to pre-apprenticeship and registered apprenticeship programs. At the state and federal level, our programs are designed to meet apprenticeship requirements, and we connect training to nationally recognized credentials. Our commitment to innovation, specifically our proprietary virtual reality training, has earned ABCI national recognition as a leader in apprenticeship education design.

**What are the most significant barriers young people or career changers face when entering construction apprenticeships in Florida and how is ABC-FEC working to lower those barriers?**

Many people lack awareness of the wages, advancement and speed-to-earning in the trades. At ABC-FEC and ABCI, we focus on career exposure, modern messaging and clear career ladders while also addressing practical barriers like transportation, scheduling and family responsibilities through expanded locations, flexible schedules and hybrid options. We reduce cost and confidence gaps with

pre-apprenticeship on-ramps, structured mentoring and learn-by-doing progression, and we front-load safety training using simulation, so learners are job-ready before stepping onto a live site.

**With technology evolving, how is ABC-FEC integrating innovation into apprenticeship training from safety tech to digital tools on job sites?**

ABC Florida East Coast recently launched ABC Labs, a virtual reality training platform that expands hands-on learning when physical lab space is limited, all while improving safety by allowing apprentices to practice critical tasks in controlled environments. This approach mirrors today's digital jobsite and reinforces our belief that the future workforce must be more capable, more safety focused and more tech literate.

**Looking ahead five years, how do you see the construction workforce landscape evolving in Florida and what role will ABC-FEC play in shaping that future?**

In five years, the "winners" in Florida's economy will be the regions that treat workforce development as critical infrastructure. As retirements and evolving skill requirements tighten the labor market, ABC-FEC is positioning itself as the state's talent operating system. We are scaling training throughput through the ABC Institute, modernizing education with VR and aligning with priority industries through partnerships like Space Florida to ensure our workforce evolves as fast as our skyline.