

## Gen Z Revitalizes the Skilled Trades Amid Construction Labor Shortages

November 30, 2025 | [Chase Manning](#), from [Dowdle Construction Group](#)

*As Baby Boomer retirements create a skilled labor gap, Gen Z is emerging as the “Toolbelt Generation.” Construction employers can attract and retain young workers through mentorship, training and exposure to modern trade careers.*



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As Baby Boomers retire, they take with them decades of accumulated skill, leadership and institutional knowledge, and presently, there are not enough new workers to replace them. The [National Association of Home Builders](#) (NAHB) [reports](#) that the median age of a construction worker has reached 42, about a year older than the national labor force average. Boomers now make up only 14% of the workforce, down from more than 20% in 2019. While Gen X and Millennials together account for about 71% of those employed in the field, Gen Z matches Boomers at only 14%. This data illustrates a critical imbalance: as experienced workers exit faster than younger ones arrive, the industry faces a growing shortage of skilled labor in the building industry.



## A Generation Steered Away from the Trades

The roots of the current labor shortage can be traced back several decades. In the 1990s and 2000s, a push to make college the default pathway for students, known as the “college for all” movement, resulted in high schools pulling back on Career Technical Education (CTE) credits. In time, college aspirations became more common among high school students, resulting in technical and vocational programs losing funding and visibility in secondary education. Data provided by the National [Center](#) for Education Statistics (NCES) show that between 1990 and 2009, the average number of CTE credits earned by U.S. graduates [fell about 14%](#).

Even for students who did participate in CTE programs, decades of “college for all” messaging, reinforced by parents and counselors, often steered them away from the trades at graduation. An [analysis](#) conducted by Advance CTE found that three out of four CTE students enrolled in college right after high school, believing that success meant earning a bachelor’s degree, even if their technical skills were market-ready. The outcome is a limited supply of skilled workers, just as retirements among seasoned tradespeople are accelerating.

## Gen Z Shifts the Narrative

After decades of decline in vocational participation, the emergence of Gen Z in the workforce has created a surprising and welcome turning point for the skilled trades. In 2024, The Wall Street Journal labeled Gen Z the [“Toolbelt Generation.”](#) noting a 23% increase in enrollment in trade programs and a 16% rise in enrollment at vocational-focused community colleges. Increasingly, young people are drawn to work that offers immediate earnings without having to assume the insurmountable debt resulting from tuition.

The “college for all” movement is waning, not just for young people, but their parents as well: a recent Wakefield Research [survey](#) found that nearly nine in ten parents believe young people should consider pursuing a career in the skilled trades. The federal government has also renewed its commitment to bolstering the skilled labor population through the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, or [Perkins V](#), signed into law in 2018. The legislation expanded career and technical education to meet the needs of today’s labor market. As a result, states and local communities revitalized CTE, positioning it as a viable and worthwhile pathway for students.

For Gen Z, the default sequence of high school, college and office career no longer guarantees success, let alone security. When many apprenticeships and certification programs allow young adults to earn while they learn, with potential for advancement in a stable industry, a career in the trades becomes a much more appealing choice.



## Inspiring a New Generation to Build

With Gen Z showing interest in the trades, the construction industry is in a strong position to turn curiosity into commitment. Winning over this generation, however, will require more than promoting good pay or job security. To inspire Gen Z, construction employers, educators and industry leaders have to demonstrate that the trades offer dynamic, hands-on work where no two days are the same.

Decades of underinvestment in technical education has left many students unaware of what a modern career in the trades looks like. While interest is growing, many still don't know where to start. College, for Gen Z, is straightforward: apply to a school, choose a major and proceed from there. The trades offer an equally direct path, but too few students are not cognizant of how accessible it really is. Without exposure to apprenticeships or training programs, they will remain in the dark. Contractors, industry leaders and trade associations can help bridge that gap by connecting with young people and shining a light on its potential.

One effective method of bridging the gap is social media. Tik Tok, Instagram and other platforms are a window into a tradesperson's experience, showing them what a day on the job really looks like. Gen Z are more likely to engage with short, filmed content over a text-heavy ad. Through social media, students can watch a welder hooking up automated equipment, a crane operator surveying a high-rise from the cab or a journeyman walking viewers step-by-step through a complex installation. That authenticity matters to Gen Z. Making relatable content with real tradespeople is a very effective tool for recruitment.

Another approach is building partnerships with schools, hosting tours and mentorship programs. Programs such as pre-apprenticeships, dual-credit CTE courses or internship pipelines give students the opportunity to test their skills and envision a career path before graduation. For example, a non-profit called [Construction Ready](#) has achieved placement rates exceeding 90% by partnering with high schools, according to [Philanthropy Roundtable](#). Pairing classroom learning with guaranteed employer connections offers young people a trusted pathway to a viable career.

Finally, casting a wide net taps into the full spectrum of young talent. That means reaching into communities that have been historically underrepresented or disenfranchised. Women, students of color and those from low-income or rural areas are demographics most in need of career guidance or exposure to technical training opportunities. Recruitment efforts that prioritize inclusion will fill critical roles and reflect the diverse communities that construction serves.

## Keeping Gen Z on the Job

Expanding recruitment efforts is only half the battle in tackling the labor shortage. While recruitment attracts new workers, it does little to prevent employee turnover. Research conducted by [Randstad](#) reports the average job tenure for Gen Z in the first five years of their career is only 1.1 years. Additionally, one in three Gen Z workers expect to leave their current jobs within the next year. Frequent turnover impacts productivity and profits by increasing hiring expenses, extending project timelines and loss of valuable institutional knowledge. What does Gen Z need to inspire loyalty in their employment?

Gen Z holds their employers to a higher standard than their predecessors. Young people prioritize communication, respect and inclusion; they prefer environments where ideas and questions are welcome. Technology is at the center of their everyday experience and they expect their workplace to embrace it. More importantly, Gen Z wants to belong to organizations that value their humanity as much as their productivity, with the ability to achieve work-life balance.

Builders can focus on upskilling in leadership to strengthen connection with workers. Training supervisors to communicate clearly and provide constructive feedback helps young workers feel heard and respected. Acknowledging hard work, particularly by recognizing contributions or achievements publicly, reinforces that effort and quality matter.

As mentioned earlier, mentorship is an effective strategy for recruitment, but it is equally valuable for retention. Pairing Gen Z employees with experienced tradespeople accelerates skills development helps new workers gain confidence in their trade. Under the patient guidance of seasoned professionals, young employees will feel supported and more connected to their craft and team. All of these strategies nurture a positive work environment, building trust from young workers, which often results in loyalty.

## The Road Ahead

As Gen Z enters the workforce, they are redefining the future of skilled labor. Their digital fluency and desire for meaningful work create an opportunity for growth within the industry, both in its labor force and in the way it cultivates connection and belonging among workers. If industry leaders embrace it through outreach, mentorship and education, the next decade could see a generational renewal of the skilled workforce that fully leaves the “college-for-all” era behind.