

A shortage of construction workers is posing challenges for the industry, raising costs and stressing workers

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A nationwide shortage of construction workers is posing challenges for the industry, including making it harder to meet deadlines, raising costs to complete projects, and forcing firms to ask their skilled laborers to do more work.

A recent survey from USG Corp. and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce showed the U.S. construction worker shortage caused 81 percent of firms to ask skilled workers to do more; while 70

percent struggle to meet deadlines; 63 percent report increased costs for new work; and 40 percent said it caused them to reject new projects.

The industry is caught between two trends — aging baby boomers taking their retirement, and a lack of younger workers coming in behind them.

It's a challenge that's faced locally as well, and firms and organizations are striving to do something about it.

"I think there's definitely a shortage and what we are seeing is getting manpower to the job sites is difficult," said Kevin Serfass, vice president of Serfass Construction of North Whitehall Township.

"You are understaffed from a subcontractor's standpoint, so we are finding it harder to meet deadlines," he said.

Getting enough workers to the site has been a challenge because subcontractors are spread too thin.

As a result, Serfass said, the firm has to be a more vigilant about monitoring quality because, in some cases, subcontractors have workers getting into positions they may not be qualified to fill. Over the past couple of years, it's been harder to control quality on a project, he said.

"The trade schools do a good job of getting people interested in the trades, but it's a challenge because the majority of kids now are going to a four-year school and don't think about going into a trade," Serfass said.

Economy suffers

The labor shortage is a national issue, said Joseph Biondo, principal at Spillman Farmer Architects in Bethlehem.

The industry needs skilled tradespeople to help build and repair buildings and infrastructure and young workers need to prepare to replace retiring baby boomers, Biondo said.

"This is a crucial component of limiting the effects of the construction worker shortage on the American economy," Biondo said. "Senior workers need to pass along their knowledge to the younger working generation before they retire. I'm seeing a huge age gap on the jobsites. Contractors can't find enough good workers."

Over the next 12 months, he anticipated either hiring will continue to be difficult, or become worse. Costs of construction projects have risen for both project owners, as they are forced to pay more to get a project completed on time, as well as for contractors who have had to increase compensation and benefits to attract new workers, he said.

"We are seeing some competitive bidding affected as contractors simply don't have the time to pour through drawings to submit a number," Biondo said.

No perfect solution

While there is no perfect solution to the challenge, Serfass said the state or federal government could help by providing more support for trade schools.

Firms have also had to pay their workers more, which drives up the cost of construction, Serfass said.

"To attract enough workers, it's going to drive the cost up because you are competing with a four-year school," Serfass said.



The construction worker shortage has become a national issue that's affecting deadlines, projects and stress levels at construction firms. (Getty images) –

Trade schools have noticed the worker shortage as well. It is hard to keep up with the demand for construction workers on both the residential and commercial side, said Connie Muschko, school to career coordinator at Bethlehem Area Vocational Technical School in Bethlehem Township.

“One of the sad points I see at the high school level is, I see students lack transportation opportunities,” she said.

If transportation were available to get students to job sites that would make a definite improvement, she said.

“We have kids that want to work but don’t have an ability to get there,” Muschko said.

However, one bright spot is the high number of students who were able to get work at local employers this summer.

Thirty-five students were out at jobs this summer, the most since the Great Recession, she said.

In addition, last year, the school two recent female graduates found employment at Klover Contracting and West Side Hammer Electric, two local companies.

To attract more women to the field, the school hosted its Let’s Build Girls Construction Camp in July for the third consecutive year. The free program offers high school girls opportunities to learn about construction and practice skills they would need for a career in the trades.

Overall, Muschko said the school has more graduates permanently placed with local employers in the school’s cooperative education program than ever before.

Enrollment at the school has been growing she added.

However, the Great Recession forced the closure of many small businesses in the industry.

“There were a lot of employers that retired and closed up...there were many companies that went out of business,” Muschko said.

Right now, she has about 12 construction-related employers looking for workers but they cannot find skilled ones.

The school has made other attempts to address the challenge, even reaching out to elementary schools.

“I think more parents are starting to realize the shortage,” she said. “Hopefully, they will realize there’s a lot of great opportunities for their children.”

Muschko encourages students to enter the trades and has seen a lot of success over the years with the ones who have done so.

“It takes a lot of time and dedication,” she said. “A lot of people have this mindset that you are always going to be dirty.”

However, she’s seen some students come out of the school and become leaders in their own company.

“We are part of a stepping stone,” Muschko said. “A lot of people think it’s either this or the other. If you are not exposed to it, you may not know that you have an interest in it.”

Seeking advice

One way that a local technical school stays on top of what the construction industry wants is by working closely with employers.

These people serve on an occupation advisory committee, said Eric Kahler, supervisor of career and technical education at Career Institute of Technology in Forks Township.

“There are opportunities to talk with them twice a year,” Kahler said. “It also helps with machinery and equipment.”

If an employer is using a new piece of equipment, the school wants to make sure it’s using it.

The occupation advisory committee has employers from both large and small companies.

“They are seeing the importance of the meetings because they establish relationships,” Kahler said.

In this way, it helps address the construction worker shortage.

The school also puts an emphasis on cooperative education with an employer, which can set up employment in the student’s senior year, he said.

“That provides tremendous support,” Kahler said. “It helps them see if this is something they want to do.”

The school has seen about a 15-percent increase in enrollment over the past three years.

Biondo, the principal at Spillman Farmer, said many young people are simply not aware of their options or how to access skilled trade jobs, he said. Shop class and vocational training has been replaced by technology and computer science programs.

“High schools need to start promoting trades and communicate the benefit in partnership with construction industry,” Biondo said. “Clear up the negative perceptions about skilled trades. Young adults often see vocational jobs as a grueling line of work offering no career advancement or financial and job security. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

The reality is many workers in the skilled trades earn above average wages and will enter the workforce debt free, he said. The smart worker with excellent work ethics will always be in high demand.

Joe Perpiglia, president and CEO of Associated Builders & Contractors of Eastern Pennsylvania Chapter, agreed.

“I think there is an overall aversion to the trades,” he said.

However, Perpiglia said the construction industry offers a highly lucrative career with very secure income.

While ABC promotes construction careers to students with its programs, what appears to be missing is the idea of getting the parents involved.

“Once you got the skill, no one can take it,” Perpiglia said.

That in turn, can lead to the development of an entrepreneurial mindset, where a person realizes he or she could go anywhere to start a company and build it up.

Often, the construction companies that are in the \$10 million to \$20 million revenue range have similar stories to how they started, he said. Typically, they begin with two people and become a big company.

“That entrepreneurial side is really ingrained in what we do,” Perpiglia said. “That’s what we promote. That kind of message is missing.”



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