

Attracting Students to the Benefits of a Career in Construction

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Abstract:

At a time when availability of labor is at an all-time low, it's more important than ever to explain to young people the benefits of job security, development of lifelong skills, and the overall positive impact on the world that comes with a career in construction. The AGC and companies in the industry have the resources to present this information to students through classroom visits, field trips, student chapters, and more. With the correct approach, students will be drawn to a career in construction, thus having a positive impact on the success of the industry for years to come.

The current labor market is at an all-time low, and nearly every single industry is beginning to feel the effects from the lack of labor. Although resilient, the construction industry is no different. These effects will continue to have an impact years in the future if they are not addressed as soon as possible. One of the best ways to solve this issue would be to convince the next generation that they have the opportunity for a long and fruitful career in construction regardless of background. Young people have the potential to change the industry, and it is important to not only recognize, but find ways to support and appeal to them, showing that the opportunities in construction are endless.

Benefits of a Career in the Construction Industry

The first step in attracting young people to the steady and unique industry that is construction is understanding what specifically would be appealing to a young person looking to start a career. Perhaps the most appealing aspect of the industry right off the bat is the inherent job security. Construction has been a necessity since the beginning of time, and this will continue to be true in the future. Someone is always looking to build something, and they need the people and the experts to do so. Additionally, these projects can be for anything from healthcare, to residential and commercial, to waste-water treatment, and much more. The constant variety and demand for a construction project, large or small, public or private, is something unique to construction that creates job security unlike any other industry. One reason for this stability that would also attract young people to construction is the ability to grow and improve the industry by implementing new technologies. There have already been many new advancements, such as augmented reality and robotics, that have been utilized to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the construction process. This implementation of new technologies will

not only attract young people to the industry but convince them to stay. The opportunities are endless when it comes to integrating technology into the construction process, and this alone is a selling point for young people who are proficient in, or interested in expanding upon, some of the more advanced technologies.

Another unique aspect of the construction industry is the diversity of cultures, education levels, and personalities that are required to help move the industry along. Walsh Construction and Archer Western are examples of those who have recognized the importance of developing employees at every level of the company. Walsh has also recognized that a career path is almost never linear, and especially in the construction industry, there are many career paths an individual can explore. Walsh supports and encourages their employees to explore what they are interested in, even if that means jumping from estimating to business development to project management.

The most important thing Walsh does to support their employees along their career progressions is provide training and development opportunities. For example, they have developed a class labeled the “Emerging Superintendent Program” that teaches a foreman how to become an effective superintendent, helping them transition into that role full time. In a similar vein, they have developed a culture of support and training that allows an entry level laborer, responsible for picking up trash, to work their way up to a foreman or even further. Dennis Haring, who has been with Walsh and Archer Western for 16 years, mentioned in a video created by these companies that he has enjoyed his time with Walsh and Archer Western because they treat people like a family regardless of the level of their position. Additionally, he emphasized that upper level education is not required to have a role in the industry, “you don’t have to go to college, you can jump

right into this with both feet.” (The Walsh Group, 2023). Although maybe not to the same magnitude, the overarching mindset of career growth opportunities at every level is not unique to Walsh. Another company that stands out in their training mindset is Kiewit. Something unique to Kiewit’s training mentality is their development of Kiewit University. They have built and dedicated a separate building that is used to house training programs for their employees at every level, which even includes a full time staff dedicated to training employees (Kiewit Corporation, 2022). It should be noted that the appeal of training and developing employees is not limited to large companies like the ones mentioned, as smaller companies have dedicated funds and teams working towards developing their employees as well. The ability to move along a personalized career path with constant opportunities for growth, regardless of education level, is a major benefit to exploring a career in the construction industry.

Although the career perspective is important, something else that would be attractive to young people is the team environment, and the comradery not only built, but required, in the diverse industry that is construction. According to the National Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of foreign-born construction workers (25.3%) is nearly 10 percent higher than the percentage of foreign-born workers in all other industries (16.8%) (Gallagher, 2022). As mentioned previously, another layer of diversity present in the construction industry is the varying levels of education. Construction is one of the most inclusive industries in this regard because of the various job opportunities available. Those with less formal education can complete jobs such as a journeyman or foreman, and individuals with higher level education can be project engineers, project managers, or superintendents. Nearly 40 percent of those employed in the construction industry don’t

have education past a high school diploma, whereas this is only true for 24.2 percent of those employed in all other industries (Gallagher, 2022). Furthermore, the financial compensation for those without an upper-level education is higher in construction than the national average when compared across all industries. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average salary of someone with a high school degree was \$39,700 in 2021 whereas the average in construction was \$47,965 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This can be a major selling point for individuals who cannot afford to pursue an upper-level education. A comparison of the level of education between industries, race, and ethnicity produced by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics can be seen below.

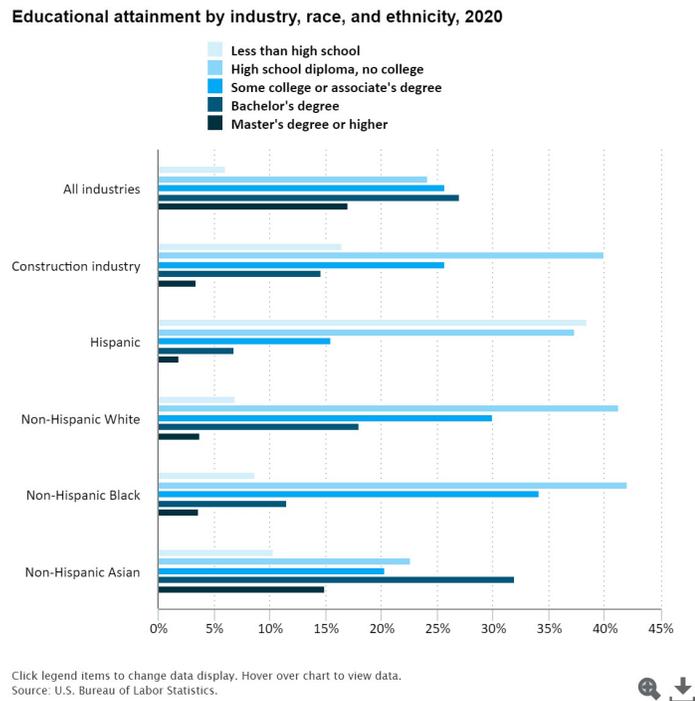


Figure 1 - Educational attainment by industry, race, and ethnicity, 2020

Due to the extensive diversity present, the ability to communicate effectively with anyone is more valuable than ever. In one of the longest running studies on

happiness conducted by Harvard University, it was discovered that people are happiest at their jobs when they have human interactions, and when their job provides the ability to create meaningful relationships with their coworkers (Smith, 2023). At every level and throughout every phase, there is constant interaction and teamwork between each person on a project. There is something to be said about the satisfaction that comes from a group of people all coming together to work towards a common goal. Not only will the opportunity to work in a team produce happier employees, but it will also teach soft skills that can be used for the rest of their lives. Although the ability to communicate with a variety of different people is important in a professional setting, it is just as important in one's personal life. In construction, every day at work these skills are tested and developed, which will lead to a happier personal and professional life.

The construction industry is always providing opportunities for growth, which can stick out to a prospective young person seeking a career path best fit for them. However, maybe the most important trait of the construction industry that could convince young people to pursue a career in construction, are the tangible results and the overall impact their work would have on the world around them. In a study done by the National Association of Home Builders, they analyzed the impacts that residential construction could have on a state. They found that if 100 single-family homes and 100 rental apartments were built in the typical state, the new homes and apartments would generate \$44.4 million in revenue and only \$33.5 million in costs after 15 years (NAHB, 2015). This operating surplus of \$10 million can have an enormous impact on the development of a city or state, and that surplus wouldn't exist without the construction industry. Additionally, in another study done by the National Association of Home Builders, they

found that the construction of 100 single-family homes in a typical state would result in over \$30 million of income for state residents, and the support of nearly 420 jobs in the state in the first year (NAHB, 2015). These impacts are within one year, and the new homes would only continue to have a positive impact every year thereafter.

Total One-Year Impact: Sum of Phase I and Phase II:

Total Income for State Residents	Business Owners' Income	Wages and Salaries	State and Local Taxes ³	Jobs Supported in the State
\$30,364,600	\$8,776,400	\$21,588,600	\$6,104,300	419

Phase I: Direct and Indirect Impact of Construction Activity:

Total Income for State Residents	Business Owners' Income	Wages and Salaries	State and Local Taxes ³	Jobs Supported in the State
\$19,205,200	\$6,526,600	\$12,678,700	\$3,638,900	237

Phase II: Induced (Ripple) Effect of Spending the Income and Taxes from Phase I:

Total Income for State Residents	Business Owners' Income	Wages and Salaries	State and Local Taxes ³	Jobs Supported in the State
\$11,159,400	\$2,249,800	\$8,909,900	\$2,465,400	182

Phase III: Ongoing, Annual Effect that Occurs When New Homes are Occupied:

Total Income for State Residents	Business Owners' Income	Wages and Salaries	State and Local Taxes ³	Jobs Supported in the State
\$4,693,300	\$982,500	\$3,710,700	\$1,572,500	78

³ The term local taxes is used as a shorthand for local government revenue from all sources: taxes, fees, fines, revenue from government-owned enterprises, etc.

Figure 2 - NAHB Study Impact of 100 Single-Family Homes in a Typical State

The ability to have an immediate and direct influence on the surrounding area is unique to the construction industry. Knowing that their work is meaningful and can be the source of a lot of good would attract even more individuals to join the construction industry.

Attracting Young People to the Construction Industry

Now, with an understanding of what aspects of the construction industry would attract young people, the solution of *how* to attract them must be addressed. With labor

shortages apparent across nearly every industry, it is important to know who to recruit, and how to best recruit them.

In terms of the question of who, there are two main categories of young people that should be targeted: with the first group being high school students. Although there is still a lot of uncertainty surrounding what high school students may want in the future, the presentation of the potential in the construction industry could influence their future decisions if they are made aware of the opportunities. High school students range from those certain they will go to college to those who are not sure they will even graduate high school. Early involvement is important, as it can help put construction on the radar of these students on the cusp of making some of their first important life decisions.

A good first step in presenting this information would be classroom visits. Although a single lesson will not be able to convey all there is to offer in the industry, it is a near free first step in displaying some of the benefits that come from pursuing a career in construction. Another way high school students could be captivated is through field trips. High schoolers are typically sitting in classes for six hours a day, the opportunity to get outside would be enticing, increasing the likelihood of wanting to learn more about potential careers in construction. Additionally, technology drives many decisions that young people make, and there is an opportunity to use these technologies to attract individuals to construction. Although it may seem backwards, construction related video games such as Minecraft can attract students to the industry. This is just one example of a game where students will spend hours building a world with complex structures and features. The skills used in construction related video games can translate directly into a career in construction due to the emergence of 3D modeling in the

industry. The use of 3D modeling can help sell a design to an owner, or prevent trade clashes in the field, and many companies have poured investments into this aspect of their business because of the immediate impact it can have on their success. Showing potential career opportunities involving skills many young people have already begun to develop and master in a game setting would appeal to much of this generation that is more influenced and involved with technology than ever before.

Lastly, there is the ability to appeal to students at schools that may not have as many resources to support their students. If companies, or industry organizations like the AGC, were able to support these schools, the students' eyes could be opened to the benefits a career in construction could bring. Many students don't have the resources, or even interest, to continue their education in the traditional sense; trade school is a great option for these students, but they may not be aware of that option. It is important to note that companies of all sizes can partake in this recruitment. These visits would be little to no cost, but the return could be substantial. The early presentation of information, and personal guidance, could help tap into a demographic of high school students that has potential to have a major positive impact on the future of the construction industry.

The next group of young people to target is college age students. These students have decided to continue their education, but still must decide how they want to use their continued education for a certain career path. Construction is often not at the forefront of young college students' minds. And the ample opportunities for a variety of majors, besides just engineering or construction management, is not always well known.

One way to combat this from the industry side would be to get involved at career fairs besides those just for engineers or construction focused students. If companies

provided internship opportunities outside of the operations side, such as marketing or supply chain, it would help attract college students early on and show them the potential career opportunities present in construction. Some students' hesitation might be due to preconceived notions surrounding construction, but if provided information and the opportunity to see what a career in the industry is like, many students could be swayed.

In addition to specific employers, various industry organizations, such as the AGC, can also attract young people and convince them to pursue a career in construction. One of the best ways to do this is to support a student chapter at universities. This support means more than just the creation of a student chapter, but continuous involvement as well. One way to keep students interested would be to provide training and networking opportunities that could help a student jumpstart their career. Similar to companies at the career fairs, the AGC student chapters should look to include a wider variety of majors, encouraging the spread of knowledge about what a career in construction would look like and why it is a great opportunity.

The labor shortage issue will continue to trouble many industries for years to come if steps are not taken to attract young people to these jobs. If the construction industry hopes to prevent this issue from compounding on itself and creating further impact down the line, students and young professionals need to be made aware of all the benefits and potential that come with a career in construction. This industry has the people and resources to do so, and the mentioned suggestions would be at little to no additional cost, as they could be included within an annual recruiting or advertising budget. With the right approach, young people can be drawn in, creating a lasting impact on the overall success of the construction industry in the future.

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