

US BUILDERS REVIEW

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YOUTHBUILD

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TO SOLVE THE LABOR SHORTAGE, TRAIN WORKERS
AND OFFER CAREERS MILLENNIALS NEED TO SEE
CONSTRUCTION IS MORE THAN HARD LABOR



At US Builders Review we often hear two complaints. First, those in the construction industry lament that there is a shortage of good, skilled workers. Second, many have a “kids these days” attitude toward millennial workers, who, they say, just don’t want to work hard.

One organization, YouthBuild USA, has a unique perspective on these issues, and as a result, it has advice for construction companies looking to hire. The key, it says, is providing meaningful careers and offering continued training to young workers.

Started in 1978, the YouthBuild program offers low-income young people, many of whom have dropped out of high school, a chance to earn their high school diploma while working to build affordable housing or other community assets.

Since 2006, the federal YouthBuild program has been administered by the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, and it is currently authorized through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, which aims to connect job seekers with employment, education, training and support and to match employers with skilled workers. Today there are 250 local YouthBuild programs in 45 states, serving 9,000 young people annually.

“We recognize that there’s a labor shortage, and we have a reservoir of talent that’s available to work, but not just for jobs, for careers,” says Daryl Wright, YouthBuild USA’s vice president for employer partnerships.

Written by Christine Fisher



More than hard labor

It's not that young people don't want to work, Wright says. It's that they want to see pathways for meaningful careers.

By the time students graduate YouthBuild, they have their high school diploma or its equivalent, hands-on construction training and experience, OSHA 10 safety certification, as well as leadership training. Some, but not all, graduates opt for construction-related jobs.

"Construction has just got a bad image," say Lanier Spriggs, who after graduating from YouthBuild Chattanooga received scholarship funding from the Associated General Contractors (AGC) of America to complete a construction management degree at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

"You think of construction as just hard labor. You don't really think about all that goes in to the backend or before the construction even hits, and then there are so many avenues ... you can go down," Spriggs says.

Today he's a project manager for a minority-run general contractor, O'Neill Construction Group in Portland, Oregon, that is currently building, among other things, an apartment complex for homeless veterans.

"To a certain extent, we're focusing as a society on sending our kids to college," says Boudewijn van Lent, CEO and president of Bilfinger Industrial Services, which upgrades and maintains manufacturing facilities. "Some kids are actually much better in [construction] work. They love to do it, but instead we put them behind a desk, so we have to, as a nation, somehow get our kids to see these are great jobs."

Young talent needs more training

One way to introduce young workers to construction is to provide training.

"In our experience, with some preparation and with some exposure to the industry, young people are really on fire," Wright says. "They really want to do this work."

Forward-thinking companies are starting to catch on. Fernandes Masonry, for instance, has been sending workers through a state-run apprenticeship program in Massachusetts. It's been doing that for 10 years, and it finds that most apprentices continue to work for the company long after. Another company, HB McClure, has launched HB University to provide all of its employees with 24 hours of training each year. And in Canada, Atlantic Roofers launched a mentorship program to bridge the generational divide between young and old crew members.

"Unfortunately, everywhere I've been it's been just sink or swim, trial by fire, you can do it or you can't," Spriggs says. "There's never been any formal training."

The response from construction companies, he says, is that the field is so fast paced there's no time for training. But, as Spriggs says, "If you want to create a great employee and a long-term employee, training is necessary."

Two California-based companies—West Coast Framing Inc., a framing contractor that specializes in large-scale and multi-family construction projects, and Hathaway Dwindle, a general contracting and project management firm—are among the most recent companies to hire YouthBuild graduates. West Coast Framing hired two as interns, and Hathaway Dwindle helped connect YouthBuild graduates with sub-contractors in need of skilled labor.

Want to alleviate the labor shortage? Train young workers and promote construction as a promising career path.

Mentoring a diverse workforce

In addition to the labor shortage, contractors face pressure to diversify their labor pool. Training and, more specifically, mentorship can help there, too.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the construction industry is 63 percent white, 29 percent Hispanic or Latino, just six percent black and two percent Asian. Only nine percent of construction industry employees are women.

In many states, construction projects receiving state funding must employ a minimum number of minority workers or contractors. Infrastructure projects that receive federal funding through the U.S. Department of Transportation must meet certain disadvantaged business enterprise (DBE) requirements. Still, Wright says, some contractors hire young workers from underrepresented groups and DBEs just to “check the box.”

“I actually think that is a missed opportunity for contractors because while it meets the short term goals on a particular project, you’re losing sight of a long-term goal of building a skilled workforce in the industry,” he says.

Twenty or 30 years ago mentoring was a natural part of the industry, mainly because it was provided informally through kinship networks of family and friends, Wright says. Those structures are inherently biased, though. In December 2016, a report by the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Minority Business Development Agency found that 86 percent of minority-owned business enterprises (MBEs) struggle with networking barriers.

“Bringing in a diverse workforce also means being very intentional about the type of mentoring younger workers [receive],” Wright says.



Investing in infrastructure and those who build it

Addressing the labor shortage and training young workers of all backgrounds is going to become increasingly important in the coming years, especially if President Trump is able to fulfill his campaign promises to vastly increase investment in the nation’s infrastructure.

“We in the U.S. have a shortage of people who can do things,” van Lent says. “And, so, [Bilfinger has] some programs to develop our craft, so we’re certainly trying to do our part, but it is a nationwide problem, and if some of the ideas of our new president come about and we invest in infrastructure and some other industries, then that problem is only going to get bigger.”

At the same time, the budget President Trump proposed in March 2017 would cut as much as \$2.5 billion from the U.S. Department of Labor, which administers programs like YouthBuild. While YouthBuild’s funding hasn’t been cut to date, Wright says those larger budget cuts will likely have a downstream effect on the organization.

The cuts would also drastically reduce funding for AmeriCorps, a partner organization that funds 3,200 YouthBuild students annually.

The future is always unclear, but as Wright says, “It’s in all our interest to begin providing these longer-term career pathways for younger workers.” •



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