is difficult and too physically demanding. And, more than 40% of those who are undecided on a career also would not consider construction regardless of the compensation.

If good pay, learning practical skills, and opportunities for advancement in the field are not appealing enough to young job seekers, how can we compete against other industries in recruiting more workers from Generation Z?

Connecting with Generation Z, or those born after 1996, is imperative in order to meet the 2.76 million challenge. The task is to shift the perception of construction careers to attract this generation as they begin to enter the workforce.

Is College-for-All the Answer?

For many years, the K-12 education system has been focused on college for all. Yet, according to Harvard University, the majority of jobs in the future will require skilled training or certification, not a college degree.

While the industry could benefit from more college-educated individuals, a large percentage of construction careers also require advanced training through apprenticeship, technical training, and certificate programs.

Meanwhile, studies like the Pathways for Prosperity by the Harvard Graduate School for Education question whether the only successful outcome of a high school education is enrollment in a four-year college or university. The study emphasizes the need for more post-secondary education or training to equip
young people with the skills and credentials to make successful transitions into the labor market.

Career exploration and preparation is now taking center stage in education and at just the right time for the construction industry, as 47% of Generation Z would consider entering the workforce straight from high school, and 60% welcome employers offering education in their field in lieu of a college degree.4

There are many ways that our industry can capture the attention of young people – a population that will make up a third of our workforce in the next 10 years.

Here are a few practical examples that contractors can employ in their own communities to improve the perception of construction careers.

**Educate the Educators**

As the K-12 system changes philosophies and shifts focus to include “career preparation,” many educators are limited by their lack of knowledge about the construction industry. Companies can engage educators and students by providing jobsite tours, math exercises focused on construction application (i.e., bid day simulation or crane loads), and classroom visits. Stepping forward to serve as a resource to educators helps inform students about construction careers.

Most school districts offer teacher in-service days that are focused on professional development, which can be a perfect opportunity to engage educators in the industry. Having them visit an office or jobsite, learn about the wide range of careers available, and see the technology utilized in construction will allow them to put a real face to a career in the industry.

Many schools are also using online tools to help with career exploration in an effort to align education with career preparation. Such programs link educators and students with local industry professionals to provide them with real world experience and direct access to information and career opportunities.

**Provide Real-Life Experience for Students**

It is crucial for young people to gain work experience – and opportunities in construction can teach students employability skills while educating them about the industry. While there are many aspects of construction work that cannot be performed by those under the age of 18, there are still many ways that students can get involved within the guidelines of child labor law.

Pre-apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship, for example, are two options that provide students with work experience.

A pre-apprenticeship is a partnership with at least one employer sponsor that is designed to prepare an individual to enter and succeed in apprenticeship and expands the career pathway opportunity by coupling industry-based training with classroom instruction. Benefits of pre-apprenticeships include:

- exploring career options,
- preparing for apprenticeship,
- developing work-readiness skills, and
- promoting viable career path opportunities.

In an effort to further promote paid work experience for young people, President Trump’s June 2017 Executive Order, *Expanding Apprenticeships in America*, stressed the need for pre-apprenticeships as a means to prepare young workers for jobs of the future.

The recently formed Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion also includes many prominent construction organizations and will identify strategies and proposals to promote apprenticeships and leverage federal funds dedicated to addressing the nation’s skills gap.

Some states have formal youth apprenticeship programs that allow students to begin preparation for apprenticeship in high school. Some state and federal workforce programs dedicate funding to youth outreach that may be available to help fund student wages.

Providing work experience through an internship or summer employment is a long-term investment in building the workforce. Contacting a local workforce board is the first step in connecting with these funding opportunities.

**Meeting the Needs of Future Generations**

Generation Z is characterized as technology-focused, innovative, collaborative, future-oriented, and willing to work hard for success. These traits are all great fits for the construction industry, and we must demonstrate to candidates from this generation why they should consider becoming part of our workforce.

**Technology**

The recent announcement of NASA's 3D Printed Habitat Challenge: A NASA Centennial Challenge to design innovative options to shelter explorers and house material is proof
that the construction industry is changing at an incredible rate. The use of such technologies as BIM, 3D-printing, and modularization is changing the way contractors design, build, and manage projects. Many trades also now rely on computer-based technology such as drones, GPS, lasers, and equipment operated by joysticks.

The young adults of Generation Z are often characterized as technology savants, so today’s construction industry can offer them unlimited opportunities to improve the design and building process.

People Power
Construction requires the input of many different entities in order to design and build a project to meet user needs. It also requires daily collaboration with architects, engineers, subcontractors, users, and owners. The industry can engage future generations through critical innovation and collaboration.

Regardless of trade or discipline, the key message is that construction is part of a bigger picture: creating environments with other professionals to meet user needs, protecting natural resources, and employing the most efficient technologies. This is the type of collaboration many young adults seek in their future career.

Building for the Future
Connecting jobs to social impact is a priority for this emerging workforce. Whether it is a highway bypass, community hospital, or sports arena, construction professionals are very proud of their contributions, which appeals to today’s young people who want to make a difference in the world. An important part of redefining the construction image is to promote the impact of projects on communities and their residents. This approach can help young people relate to the opportunity to make an impact through construction.

Working for Success
Generation Z is predicted to be the most entrepreneurial generation ever, with 72% of high school students interested in entrepreneurship and owning businesses. The entrepreneurial spirit of the construction industry can be attractive to newcomers, offering a multitude of opportunities for success.

For instance, there are many contractors with leaders who started their career path in the skilled trades. It is imperative to engage students with employees who continue to advance within the company – like a carpenter who is now Vice President of Field Operations, or a CAD detailer who now leads the Virtual Design department.

Engaging the Future Workforce
The current labor market is extremely competitive, and meeting the construction industry’s needs is not easy. For these reasons, contractors should focus on telling the future workforce a compelling story that focuses on technology, collaboration, and opportunity.

If your organization is not sure where to start on this journey to engage tomorrow’s employees, try reaching out to construction trade associations – many of which are collaborating with their members on workforce strategies and resources.

State and federal government agencies are also focused on workforce development because of the relationship to economic development, resulting in local resources and initiatives through labor and education departments.

Engage in addressing the workforce shortage today – 2.76 million new hires are waiting.

Endnotes

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Her more than 25 years of working with construction contractors, labor organizations, and trade associations provides a unique perspective on the challenges of today’s industry and future trends.

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