THE FIGHT AGAINST INVISIBILITY

Placing electrical contracting on a job seeker's path

WHILE EMPLOYMENT in the construction sector has generally enjoyed steady growth over the last 20 months, one element has remained stubbornly weak: the number of skilled workers. The problem is not new, and it persists. One solution may be found in communicating the value of an electrical contracting career to the millennial generation and the potential workers coming up after them. On a larger scale, a cultural recommitment to trade education is also needed. Only then, and together, can a workforce made for the 21st century truly grow.

"We're not lining up that needed next workforce, and we're coming up short as work returns," said Brian Turmail, senior executive director of public affairs, Associated General Contractors of America (AGC). "Construction was the last to add jobs in the economic recovery. It lost 2 million [jobs] between 2006–2010 with displaced workers finding employment in trucking, the energy sector, and some returning to school looking at fields in technology or healthcare. Others simply retired. Right now, there's no robust industry effort to recruit and train new workers. Vocational tech programs targeting construction are few and far between."

Turmail's organization tracks construction employment and studies trends behind the stats. The AGC, the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA) and others are working to present trade careers as worthwhile prospects to a young workforce and those left behind during the Great Recession.

"The notion that everyone should go to a four-year college and assume great debt to enter the workforce is now being questioned as the only pathway to a career," Turmail said. "But there is hope. Attitudes are slowly changing."

Though degrees in construction careers at the college level are viable, the elevated skill sets of such graduates mainly filter into engineering and project-management roles.

"I think there is a much greater challenge attracting millennials to the trades, since we've put so much emphasis on college education," said Rebecca Mirsky, associate professor, construction management at Boise State University. "The change in attitude has to be the way we value vocational and community college education as respected pathways for high school students. I think there is a basic lack of understanding among people in general about the various skill levels involved in construction, which can be anything from a relatively unskilled beginning laborer to highly skilled (and well-paid) electricians, equipment operators and carpenters. Construction really has a PR problem, and this needs to be addressed with junior high and high school counselors."

Understanding the available workforce

Millennials are an estimated 82 million people born between 1982–2002. Sometimes called "Generation Y," they are more plugged into technology than their predecessors and are inter-

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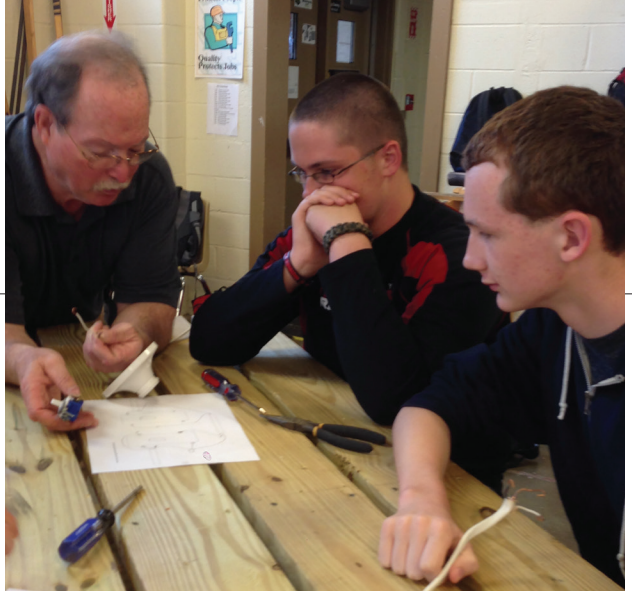

Go Build Georgia promotes skilled trades as a career option for high school students, recent graduates and other job seekers.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ATLANTA ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION (AECA) AND THE ELECTRICAL TRAINING CENTER / GO BUILD GEORGIA

ested in companies committed to innovation, collaboration and altruism. The generation after millennials has yet to be named, but their adroitness with technology is even greater.

Mirsky said the industry's embrace of technology bodes well for attracting and building a future workforce.

"Especially now that so many contractors are adopting mobile technology, I see students very excited and eager to be part of a new way of doing construction," she said.

Mirsky cited examples including the use of tablets, smartphones, virtual gang boxes and even drones to facilitate construction project management in the field.

"For some, it's a second career or a shift after earning a four-year degree that didn't take them where they hoped," said David Nott, apprentice coordinator for NECA Los Angeles County chapter (LA/NECA). Nott added that the median age for students going through his apprentice training is 26–28. "I get a lot of applicants with one to two years of college, too. Many tell me they need to be challenged, work with their hands. None are looking at electrical contracting as some sort of backup career."

When Nott interviews millennials, he said they are keenly interested in projects demanding energy efficiency, alternative power and green construction.

"Reducing energy demand as a response to climate change, net-zero goals, are all attractive to them," he said. "They really get it when they are exposed to wind turbines, solar panel arrays, energy and lighting management systems, occupancy sensors, and daylight harvesting. It's then that they see an important role for themselves as electrical contractors."

Chuck Little serves as the human resources director for the Atlanta Electrical Contractors Association (AECA). He also sees cultural attitudes as the biggest hurdle to trade education.

There's a whole workforce to tap, but we are fighting a perception that the world of construction doesn't represent a viable, professional career.

—Chuck Little, AECA

"It's interesting because workers with bachelor's degrees represent only 18 percent of the workforce, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS]," he said.

Measured in 2012, the BLS further found that 66 percent of job earners either stopped at or before the high school diploma.

"There's a whole workforce to tap, but we are fighting a perception that the world of construction doesn't represent a viable, professional career," Little said.

The AECA is on a mission to sell the value of electrical contracting. It has expended much of its recruitment efforts on those looking for first jobs and a possible career.

"We plant the seeds with kids in high school and recent graduates so they might consider this profession," Little said. "Our annual career day targets students in grades 12–15, capturing those three years after high school. They even have the

Communicating the value of a career in electrical contracting is essential for staffing sustainability.

Attracting millennials to the trades remains a challenge.

Apprentices are interested in projects demanding energy efficiency, alternative power and green construction.

chance to fill out an application and have a job interview with one of our contractor members. Additionally, we visit and stay in contact with some 50 area high schools throughout the year. Those that offer classes in engineering, architecture and construction are ideal."

Little said the idea of a trade apprenticeship is new to high school students. He said the trigger that attracts their interest is hearing electrical contracting described as a career in technology.

"It's the message I've been sharing since 2000," Little said. "It opens their eyes when I point out electrical contractors are helping construct the new Atlanta football stadium, designing the operation of the latest skyscrapers, and solving heavy energy-usage issues for data centers that support the cloud and the Internet. We do a lot of recruiting with colleges as well and work with the Georgia Department of Education. It's the technology message that resonates."

"Our [past] career days were traditionally drawing maybe 40–75 students," Little said. "This year, we attracted 150."

"Go Build Georgia" is a trade skills promotional and resource effort sponsored by the Georgia Department of Economic Development and supported by the AECA, AGC and others. It's one of a handful of such endeavors in the country.

"It will soon be highlighting apprentice programs like ours, something we 'lobbied' for in past months," Little said.

"New efforts like Go Build Georgia, Go Build Alabama and Building Wisconsin harness the web and social media favored by a younger demographic, including YouTube, Twitter and Google+, to make the compelling arguments for a career in the construction trades," Turmail said. "These programs could serve as models across the country."

The sell

L. Joe Shorter, NECA's director of workforce development, helps contractors identify solutions to their labor shortages.

"I do feel we need to repackage, retool in order to sell our profession as a viable career, especially to a millennial and younger generation," he said. "Today's [electrical contractor] is helping build the future in energy use. That's compelling. If my sons are any indication, they may be pursuing different careers but they are all driven by the same motivator—be part of the future. Skilled labor in today's building trades fits that prerequisite. Our Electrical Training ALLIANCE [formerly NJATC] is making sure its curriculum and facilities reflect the challenge before today's electricians."

Shorter feels the industry could better advance its message through smart use of social media.

"Promoting our engagement with technology, green build and alternative energy are all potentially 'trendable' if done right," he said. "Open houses at a training facility [and] trade fairs are other good tactics. It's also important to engage parents, educators and politicians to show them the need of a vigorous trade industry to support the economy."

LA/NECA and IBEW Local No. 11 have engaged a full-time outreach director for the past eight years through its Electrical Training Institute (ETI).

"Jane Templin puts us at the table," Nott said. "She sits on school boards and serves on a committee for Los Angeles high schools to facilitate programs targeting construction trade disciplines. She also handles career outreach at the college level."

Career mobility and pay are two important topics.

"It's a profession that really allows you to climb the ranks quickly," Nott said. "Business ownership is not out of reach. [We offer] a two-week business class in how to become a contractor, covering such subjects as starting a business, cash flow, meeting payroll, employment law and others. Earning your journeyman could double your pay."

"Maybe 40–50 percent of our contractor-owners came up through the ranks as electricians," Little said. "One time, I brought a third-year apprentice back to the high school he attended to share with students how in three short years he started a side business of his own."

Another sell is the soft skills education workers receive in the field while witnessing project management and planning, including problem solving, leadership and communication.

For Nott, there is a wow factor to the LA/NECA and IBEW Local No. 11 Net Zero Plus Electrical Training Institute. He finds it opens the eyes to those who hadn't considered a trade career. The 150,000-square-foot facility now generates more energy than the 1 megawatt it uses on an annual basis. With four classrooms and eight labs, featured technology extends beyond alternative power to include a microgrid, smart meter lab, grid-scale energy storage, and data management systems.

"We want the center to show what's possible and what's being done today," Nott said.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF NECA LOS ANGELES COUNTY CHAPTER AND IBEW LOCAL NO.11