



You Cannot Choose a Career You Have Never Seen

Why Exposure May Be Construction's Most Important Workforce Strategy

by Angie Simon, Maxim Consulting Group

"You cannot choose a career you have never seen."

That simple reality may be one of the biggest reasons the construction industry is facing a workforce crisis today.

Across the country, subcontractors are struggling to find skilled workers. Experienced tradespeople are retiring faster than they can be replaced, project demand continues to grow, and competition for talent has never been greater. According to Associated Builders and Contractors, the construction industry will need to attract an estimated 349,000 net new workers in 2026 just to meet demand for construction services. In 2027, that number is projected to grow to 456,000 new workers as construction spending is expected to increase.

But while the workforce shortage is real, so is the opportunity.

After spending more than three decades in the construction industry, I have become convinced that this challenge is not simply about hiring. It is about exposure. It is about perception. And it is about whether young people ever get the chance to see what a career in construction can truly offer.

For years, our industry has faced a growing disconnect with the next generation. Many students graduate from high school without ever stepping onto a jobsite, using tools, meeting a tradesperson, or learning about apprenticeship opportunities. Shop classes disappeared from many schools. Four-year college degrees became the default expectation.

Meanwhile, careers in construction became largely invisible to many students, parents, and educators.

The result should not surprise us.

Young people cannot pursue opportunities they have never been exposed to.

The good news is that I have also seen firsthand what happens when that exposure does occur.

Over the last several years, I have had the opportunity to work directly with high school students through hands-on construction programs and summer camp experiences. Many of these students arrive with little or no understanding of the skilled trades. Some have never used a tape measure. Some have never held a drill or welding torch. Many assume construction careers are dirty, low-skilled jobs with little opportunity for growth.

Then something changes.

The moment they begin building something with their own hands, you can see their perspective shift. Confidence grows. Curiosity grows. Pride grows.

I have watched students who were initially hesitant become fully engaged after completing their first project. I have seen young people discover talents they did not know they had. I have seen students who never considered construction begin asking how to join apprenticeship programs and pursue careers in the trades.

Hands-on experiences change lives.

That is why exposure matters

so much. A brochure may provide information. A presentation may create awareness. But when a student actually builds something, solves a problem, works alongside a craft professional, or sees a fabrication shop in action, the opportunity becomes real.

Construction is a hands-on industry. It should not surprise us that hands-on experiences are often the most powerful way to introduce young people to it.

This is also why workforce development cannot start when companies are desperate to hire. It must become a long-term investment strategy for our industry.

The subcontractors who will thrive in the next decade are not simply the ones offering the highest wages. They will be the companies investing in mentorship, training, culture, and early workforce exposure today.

This does not require every contractor to create a massive workforce program. There are many ways companies of all sizes can help build the future pipeline. Contractors can partner with local schools, host jobsite tours, support internships and summer programs, participate in apprenticeship outreach, encourage employees to mentor young people, and invite students and parents into training centers and fabrication shops.

Sometimes a single experience can completely change the direction of a young person's life.

But exposure is only the first step. If we want young people to enter our industry and stay, we also have to pay

attention to what happens after they walk through the door.

Retention is workforce development, too.

A young person's first experience in construction matters. Their first foreperson matters. Their first crew matters. The way they are welcomed, trained, corrected, encouraged, and included can determine whether they see construction as a lifelong career or just a short-term job.

We cannot afford to bring young people into the industry and then lose them because they do not feel supported. The next generation wants to learn, contribute, and understand how their work connects to something bigger. They want feedback. They want opportunity. They want to know there is a path forward.

That does not mean we need to lower standards. In fact, it means the opposite. We need to teach the standards clearly, model professionalism, and create environments where young workers can ask questions, learn from mistakes, and develop pride in their craft.

For subcontractors, this is both a cultural issue and a business issue. When companies invest in mentorship and training, they build stronger crews. When they help young employees understand the "why" behind the work, they improve safety, productivity, and quality. When they show people a future, they increase the likelihood those people will stay.

The construction industry also has a powerful story to tell — but we have not always done a good job telling it.

Today's construction careers offer technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, teamwork, financial stability, and meaningful work. Young

people are often surprised to learn about the opportunities available in BIM, advanced manufacturing, robotics, prefabrication, project management, service, estimating, safety, and skilled trades leadership.

These are not dead-end jobs. They are careers that can support families, create business owners, and provide lifelong opportunities.

We also need to do a better job speaking to parents and educators. Many of them care deeply about helping young people succeed, but they may not understand what modern construction careers look like. They may not know about apprenticeship programs, earning while learning, career advancement, or the many leadership paths available in our industry.

If parents and educators only see construction through an outdated lens, students will too. Changing perception requires us to invite them in, share real stories, and show the professionalism, skill, technology, and opportunity that exist in today's construction industry.

At the same time, our industry must continue broadening who feels welcome in construction. The future workforce already exists in our schools and communities. We simply need to create more pathways for students from all backgrounds to see themselves in these careers.

That includes young women, underserved communities, and students who may not see traditional college pathways as their best option. Too often, talented young people are overlooked simply because nobody introduced them to the opportunities available in the trades.

Workforce development is no longer someone else's responsibility.

It belongs to all of us — contractors, associations, educators, unions, industry leaders, and business owners alike.

The workforce crisis will not be solved overnight. But it can be solved.

I believe the future of our industry is incredibly bright if we are willing to invest in it. Every time a student discovers confidence through hands-on learning, every time a contractor opens their doors to young people, and every time we help someone see a future in construction, we strengthen the future of our industry.

The next generation is out there.

Our responsibility is to help them see the opportunity, welcome them into the industry, and give them a reason to stay.

Because you cannot choose a career you have never seen.

About the Author

Angie Simon, P.E. is a Director with Maxim Consulting Group, where she facilitates peer groups and works with construction industry leaders to share best practices, solve business challenges, and strengthen company performance. Angie spent 35 years with Western Allied Mechanical, including serving as President and CEO, and is a former SMACNA National President. She is also the Co-Founder and President of Heavy Metal Summer Experience, a workforce development program that introduces high school students to careers in the skilled trades through hands-on learning and industry mentorship. More information about Heavy Metal Summer Experience can be found at www.hmse.org