



## Rethinking MEP: Prefab, Pipelines, and a Better Deal for Women in the Trades

by Thomas Santos, Maxim Consulting Group

Let's face it: walk onto almost any construction site, and you won't see many women—especially not in hands-on MEP jobs. But things don't have to stay this way. If MEP companies put real effort into building a strong talent pipeline and lean into prefab, they can actually become some of the best places for women in the trades.

### Rethinking MEP: From Dusty Jobsites to High-Tech Shops

Right now, women make up maybe 11 to 14% of the construction workforce in the U.S. Drop into the trades, and those numbers sink even lower. In some skilled jobs, like electrical, you're lucky to hit 3%. And when women do show up at MEP firms, they're usually behind a desk, not out in the field—even though more women are graduating from construction management programs every year. So what's the real story? It's not just about not enough women in the pipeline. It's also about how the work is sold and who these companies are built to support.

Prefab changes everything. Instead of picturing MEP work as just a grind of heavy lifting and dirty boots, prefab turns it into something that looks a lot more like advanced manufacturing. Move the work into a clean, organized shop, and suddenly you're talking about jobs in production, logistics, and coordination—the kinds of roles where you actually see diversity.

### Prefab: The Doorway to Fresh Careers

Try calling your prefab shop an "advanced manufacturing lab" and watch what happens. You start attracting people with totally different career goals. These shops run on jigs, fixtures, digital plans, and repeatable processes. Now you've got openings for BIM/VDC techs, production planners, quality leads, shop

supervisors. These are roles that line up with what a lot of women actually want: jobs that are technical, challenging, and offer a real future.

And when women see others like them working in prefab, QA, layout, or leading teams, it shifts the whole idea of who belongs in MEP. There's real research backing this up: visible role models and direct invitations to skilled jobs drive interest and applications. Share stories of women who started out on the prefab floor and worked their way up. That's not just wishful thinking—it's proof that there's a real way forward.

### Building a Real Talent Pipeline for Women

If you want to actually move the needle, you need more than slick marketing. You have to build pathways that truly include women, from the ground up. Start by teaming up with community colleges, high schools, and workforce programs that already focus on women in trades. Bring them in for shop tours, job shadowing, or internships in prefab—let them see for themselves, minus the pressure of a rough jobsite.

Set up pre-apprenticeship or "MEP Foundations" programs with local training centers. Teach the basics—tools, safety, reading drawings, prefab processes. And make sure there's more than one way in. Some women will start as field helpers and work into prefab assembly, then into tech roles. Others jump from assembler to quality lead to supervisor. Flexibility keeps more people in the room—especially women who'd walk away if you force them into a one-size-fits-all track.

### Prefab Knocks Down the Old Barriers

Let's talk about what really keeps women out of MEP and construction: safety issues, heavy lifting, crazy hours, and a jobsite culture that's tough to

break into. This is where prefab really makes a difference. Working in a climate-controlled shop, with ergonomic setups and proper lifting gear, takes a lot of the physical grind out of it. Most of the job happens in the shop now—less time on ladders, in tight spaces, or out in the rain.

And here's something else: prefab runs on a set schedule. No more frantic last-minute calls or endless overtime. For women balancing work and family, that kind of predictability can be the deciding factor. Plus, when your crew shows up at the same place every day, you can actually build a culture—train your leaders on inclusion, set standards, and offer real mentoring.

### Beyond the Founder: Ditching the Lone Hero Routine

A lot of MEP firms start small, built around one founder who does everything—estimating, project managing, field calls, you name it. But as these companies grow, that "hero" culture falls apart. Quality starts slipping, schedules get weird, and new hires are left guessing about how things work. People love to blame operations, but honestly, culture is what decides who sticks around and who feels like they belong.

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