



**Issue: Northeast Edition • Newspaper Publication Date:
3/19/2008**

ABC Attempts to Trump Apprentice Shortage

By Mary Reed

Construction is an attractive career choice for a number of reasons.

For the independent individual, construction offers numerous opportunities for self-employment and company ownership. Many craftspeople move into management. Workers enjoy a higher remuneration per hour than that paid in other industries. According to a Wall Street Journal report published in 2004 the American worker's average hourly wage was \$18.09 while construction paid \$27.50 on average.

There are of course footprints in the concrete. Against these pluses must be set the minuses: the strenuous physical labor needed in some crafts; the seasonal nature of employment; the necessity of working long hours, often in inclement weather and the additional tax paid by the self-employed.

Even so, many high school students work construction jobs during the summer vacation. However, few enter the industry once they graduate, and this has led to a national shortage of young workers to take the place of the increasing number of older workers reaching retirement age. In addition, the current lack of properly trained entry-level workers is affecting construction nationwide, causing delays and additional costs in completing projects.

Addressing the Problem

To help meet the demand for new workers, the Southeast Pennsylvania (SEPA) Chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors (ABC) opened its new Apprenticeship and Craft Training Facility in Kulpsville, Pa., last November. The facility will instruct more than 300 students in carpentry, electrical, electronic systems, masonry, plumbing, HVAC, sheet metal, roofing and concrete finishing each year.

According to Vince Console, instructor in carpentry, roofing and the introductory core course taken by all first year students in all trades, the reason for the decline in high school graduates seeking a career in construction is the current unique intersection of cultural and statistical factors in the industry.

“While there may have been normal cyclical movements in the past, the shortage we are looking at today will need to be addressed in a multi-layered approach,” Console said. “That is, by creating a system that helps us find the right employees — but also encourages them to find us. In order to accomplish this goal it will be necessary to change commonly held views of the industry.”

Citing a shift in the national educational mindset beginning in the 1970s, Console observed that this was the time when high schools had become almost exclusively college preparatory institutions in both curriculum and culture.

“Technical or vocational schools were seen as repositories for students with academic and/or discipline issues. Problem students were threatened with having to go to ‘vocie’ [vocational school],” he stated. “Also, as college education, especially at the community college level, became much more accessible, parents increasingly saw a college degree as the only successful career path for their children. The shift from vocational training to college left a void in the workforce entering the construction industry as a whole.”

As the construction industry expanded, this trend inevitably increased.

“Having to fill the staffing requirements with entry-level workers who may have no experience or training whatsoever always proves to be costly and inefficient,” Console said, “but workers at that level are usually not motivated or financially able to pay for training at their own expense and to work full time while taking night classes.”

The result was construction companies could either implement on-the-job training programs, which were often difficult to run while still maintaining operations, or accept the long and costly learning curve by which new hires became profitable assets, a problem exacerbated by employee turnover and swift advances in technology, materials and safety methods.

Increasing Apprentice Intake

What can be done to increase the number of high school graduates interested in entering the construction industry?

“First, the misconception that construction work is for those who might not have the aptitude to attend college should be addressed. Construction involves math such as geometry and trigonometric functions and workers need to understand blueprints and have the ability to see a completed structure in individual components,” Console said. “If more people were aware of what construction entails, maybe the mindset would start to shift. High school counselors would be one good place to start that change. There is no reason why a counselor should not suggest employment with a progressive construction company offering training at a facility such as ours as a viable career choice.”

“More companies need to realize the long-term productivity possibilities in creating a workplace where employees are committed and take ownership in their jobs. This would not only reduce employee turnover, but by word-of-mouth help bring quality people into the industry, while advances in technology and

equipment sparked by unfulfilled staffing requirements also would make some construction methods less labor intensive,” he added.

To illustrate his comments, Console described a hypothetical scenario.

“XYZ Construction Company is in a growth mode and has hired six employees, two entry-level carpenters, two minimally experienced concrete workers and two carpenters with two years’ experience. The latter two will need to become finish carpenters as soon as possible,” he said. “By entering each new hire in ABC’s apprenticeship program at the appropriate level, each employee will receive both theory and hands-on training in their respective fields from a curriculum and instructors accredited by the National Center for Construction Education and Research.”

Under this arrangement XYZ employees would work on the job site four days a week and attend the training center on the fifth day. XYZ would benefit from using ABC’s program, as opposed to running its own training program, because its employees would receive the best available training in the most efficient time period. This would lead to a reduced learning curve, lower worker turnover costs, safer job sites and positive morale because employees would see a career path with XYZ. Some might become managers at various levels via a seamless transition within XYZ, which also would reduce company costs by removing the need to hire from outside.

An Apprentice’s Eye View

Jesse Savaria has reached Carpentry Level 4 at the SEPA facility and will graduate at the end of the current course. Although his father rehabilitated houses for later sale, Savaria is the first of his family to enter construction as a profession. He is an employee of Gorski Engineering Inc. in Collegeville, Pa.

In high school Savaria knew he wanted to attend tech school his junior and senior years.

“Most people from the high school portrayed the tech school as an alternative for ‘dumb’ kids,” he said. “I don’t think it’s overlooked but looked down upon. I didn’t care either way because I knew my career, no matter what it was, was not going to be revolving around a desk.”

Savaria had enrolled in ABC while working for another contractor but wanted to become an apprentice.

“I have always wanted to be involved in construction ever since I was young because my dad was always working on our house. I always wanted to help and be a part of it, so I knew it was something I liked,” he said, “I chose to do carpentry because I like to work with my hands and see progress in things that I build. I notice that the most in carpentry.”

“All I had to do was mention something to my teacher and in a couple weeks I had two or three contractors call me looking to hire. I chose Gorski. It all took off from there, and I am very glad to have been sponsored by Gorski for this apprenticeship program,” he concluded.

According to a training needs assessment by Dr. Pamela Loughner of Penn State University, prepared for the Philadelphia Regional Construction Industry Educational Partnership in December 2006, projected construction jobs in the greater Philadelphia area by 2012 will be:

Bucks County 17,710

Chester County 12,000

Delaware County 11,050

Montgomery County 27,030

Philadelphia County 12,470

Among the conclusions of the report, which can be viewed online at www.paconstruction-ed.org/Publications/Partnership_TNA_123006.pdf, desirable and effective attributes of training programs will include support from management, including feedback to apprenticeships on their work and strategies to aid them in transferring their new knowledge to their job.

Proposed New Regulations for Apprenticeships

Proposed new regulations intended to update the U.S. apprenticeship system were published by the Department of Labor in December 2007. If adopted, apprentices will have three training choices:

* Completing a set number of hours of on-the-job training (OJT) and related technical instruction (RTI),

* Demonstrating competency in relevant areas with no requirement for a set number of hours of OJT or RTI,

or

* A mixture of the foregoing approaches, involving demonstrating competency in relevant areas and a minimum number of hours of OJT and RTI.

Related Technical Instruction would include usage of electronic media, allowing the apprentice to use distance learning as part of their instruction. Interim credential certificates would be issued so apprentices can show proficiency in specific skills to employers.

The public comment period ended on Feb. 11, 2008, and the proposed rules can be accessed at www.dol.gov/eta/regs/fedreg/proposed/2007024178.pdf. CEG

Display On: 3/18/2008