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Executive Search Viewpoint:

New Year, New Solutions to the Construction Talent Shortage

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One of the ongoing issues we face in the construction industry is that Baby Boomers are retiring in large numbers. Add that to the fact that we have more job openings than we do unemployed people, and we have a real problem. Construction firms themselves can't be the only ones working through this shift: everyone involved in the industry, even us as consultants, play a part. I recently sat down to talk with one of our Senior Managing Consultants, Tom Dunn, to discuss the issue and where we go from here. Real change begins with ourselves, and the reality is, as Tom states, "The talent shortage in the industry is a cultural and generational issue." The construction industry is full of opportunity and upside, so the answer is to cast a wider net in recruitment and deliver the upside in a more appealing way.

Generationally speaking, we know that to be the case. The onus has been on us to appeal to younger generations in new, creative ways. "There are more than 75 million Millennials in the U.S. so the human capital is there, but they were guided by Baby-Boomer or Gen-X parents toward four-year colleges and white-collar careers as the path to success," Tom explains. This, to us, indicates they can be guided elsewhere – it just means we have to reach them sooner. Tom states, "Given the demographics, the existing talent pool is not something the industry can rely on much longer to fill the vacancies. The future talent pool is between the ages of 5 and 15, and as they move forward into high school, they need to be appealed to, cultivated, and mentored." Because the amount of trade schools and apprenticeships has been in steady decline, a new way to get students engaged at a younger age is needed.

Extending the student-to-workforce pipeline means speaking to junior high, even middle school, students about the benefits of being in a stable industry. Make the opportunity appealing by explaining how they have the opportunity to help shape the construction industry for decades to come; if they get involved now, they can be at the forefront of change. Appeal to them visually, using demonstrations or virtual reality. Also, ensure that your firm invests in paid internships and apprenticeships, and vocalize that. Making these tools accessible to young people creates a good first impression as they are figuring out the path that's right for them.

But it's not just generational diversity that needs to be spruced up. Gender diversity is still a large issue especially because, as Tom says, "In 2008-2009 during the Great Recession, many people left the construction industry to find work and never came back. With women making up only about 10% of the construction workforce, the industry is not leveraging more than half of the population." With a need for more women in construction, and in executive leadership roles within the industry, I asked Tom, **"What can we collectively do to position more women in these roles?"** Tom stated, "Whether you are a hiring manager or recruiter, it all starts with awareness. Be aware of your own biases to avoid them from seeping into the evaluation process and skewing an outcome. Also, if I am recruiting a woman for a position, I always try to ask her about her experiences, successes, and challenges working in a male-dominated industry. It hits the issue head-on and builds trust, but it also provides a lot of insight into what has made that



individual woman successful and the type of organizational culture, team, and environment they are seeking.”

Once the recruitment process is underway, what can a construction firm do to strengthen that effort? Well, for one, you can introduce the women you are recruiting to other women within your organization. Tom explains, “It is important for prospective candidates to see a path and track record of developing and promoting talented women executives so they can envision themselves with your company long term. These types of one-on-one meetings with other women end up elevating their interest in the opportunity, instilling confidence, and providing them a candid platform to discuss a company’s culture and challenges, and to ask open questions with other women.”

None of us can make real change alone. Reach out to your industry colleagues and join together to find creative solutions to problems such as this. Tom says, “It is going to

take a collective effort sparked from within the industry over decades to shift this paradigm. Construction leaders need to buy into the adoption of new technologies, support local trade schools, and sponsor early education programs, all to build trust and opportunity with the next generation of labor.”

As we gear up for another successful year, we must all keep in our minds our role in shaping the industry. The culture we create and the people we bring into that culture shift the perspective and ultimately produce a more diverse workplace with better results. Staring into the eye of the talent shortage, both within the trades and leadership ranks, we must ensure that our approach to potential recruits is creative and consistent. We must work together to create that message, and we at Helbling look forward to being a part of that with all of you.

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