
Help Wanted — Finding and Hiring Today's Top College Graduates

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IN BRIEF

Contractors seeking to hire the highest-quality talent graduating from college would be wise to develop an integrated recruitment and internship program. An understanding of the needs of Generation X and Y is necessary to design a program that will attract the best and brightest.

For years, the construction industry has lamented the lack of skilled, talented people entering the construction profession — and the problem is worsening. Contracting firms seeking to hire talented college graduates for positions such as project manager, project engineer, and administrative, accounting, and sales personnel are finding the going more difficult each year. This problem is even more acute for small and midsize firms that do not have the national reach of the top 75 or so largest contractors.

Talented young professionals are not entering the construction workforce for a variety of reasons:

Industry Perception

In an annual poll, high school juniors and seniors rank 250 profes-

sions based on those professions' likelihood of providing a fulfilling and long-lasting career. Of those 250 possibilities, construction typically ranks no better than 245 and often as poorly as 249. Today's young people, and many guidance counselors who advise them, perceive the industry as a dangerous and unrewarding profession rife with discrimination and "old school" thinking.

Gen X/Gen Y

Due to the societal dynamics in which the so-called "Generation X" and "Generation Y" have grown up, their perception of the ideal workplace is dramatically different than that of previous generations. These employees seek a workplace that is less traditional and more inclusive than their predeces-

sors' typical workplace. However, the construction industry traditionally has not had management philosophies — such as open and collaborative management and an understanding that work is part of life not an employee's entire life — that support the ideals of Gen X and Gen Y in the workplace

A Dearth of Local Recruiting

Often many small to midsize construction firms do not have full-time human resources personnel, and the recruitment of potential hires is left to operations or administrative personnel who are too involved in their day-to-day responsibilities to devote an adequate amount of time to recruiting. This lack of focus can significantly hinder a company's ability to attract quality applicants.

Travel/Relocation

Today, contractors that do all their work within a small geographic radius of their home office are the exception not the norm. The result of the

industry's geographic diversification is that many new project managers and engineers are asked to relocate every 18 to 24 months as projects are ramped up, built, and concluded. This model, similar to the United States military, is not well-suited for people looking for a quality of life that includes "putting down roots" outside of work — such as people with young children or a spouse with a career. Even people in the industry who don't have to move frequently may have significant travel away from home, damaging their quality of home life — and research has proven that employees with better home lives are better employees.

All these issues add up to a poor view of the construction industry as a long-term career option. So how do firms overcome these challenges and find the best available talent to supplement their teams?

THE CANDIDATES

First, let's explore the types of candidates who are completing college today and entering the workforce — the last of the Gen Xers and the first of the Gen Yers.

Generation X

Gen Xers (born 1964–1980) have been pushing the limit on acceptable workplace environments for more than 15 years. The attitudes of this generation are a direct reflection of the lives of their parents — the Baby Boomers (1945-1963). The majority of Xers grew up with single parents or double-income parents who either had to work long hours or chose to devote their life to work. Indeed, many Baby Boomer parents were workaholics. Naturally, Xers are looking for the opposite in an employer. Work is a part of Xers' lives but not a way of life. Xers work to live; they don't live to work. This generation

also lived through major periods of downsizing. Xers witnessed parents and friends devote their lives to a company and then lose everything they had worked so hard for. This experience caused Xers not to place their loyalties with organizations. Instead, Xers' loyalties lie with their skills, teammates, and self. Xers crave development and will leave a company if they don't get it. They are not afraid to have multiple jobs or even multiple careers. Money is simply a means to an end.

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this type of workplace may be beneficial in retaining this workforce — although a campus environment is obviously difficult to create in the construction industry. However, even with the constraints of travel and work at sites, construction organizations can seek to embrace some of the features of a campus community by doing things such as pursuing community activities in which employees can participate, holding regular lunches or barbecues, and creating job-site softball teams to compete in local leagues. Companies should seek to blend the boundaries of work and life, giving crew leaders the flexibility to manage their workforce as proactively as possible. For example, a company could offer all site employees local fitness-center memberships or add a site trailer that is a workout room.

X-Factors

- *Learning Environment* — prefer an environment that is self-directed; may prefer to learn in nontraditional work hours; may resist sitting all day in a classroom
- *Personality Type* — self-reliant and independent; less loyal to organizations than previous generations; situationally ethical; competitive; distrust hierarchy; work to live, not live to work
- *Working Environment* — prefer informal structure, focus on getting

job done, not where or when it happens; believe they are free agents; need work to be fun

- *Learning Style* — highly motivated; learn by doing; attracted to visual stimulation; thrive on feedback

Tips for training

- Xers prefer coaching and mentoring to formal training programs.
- Provide constant feedback. Xers thrive on information for self improvement.
- Tech-savvy Xers enjoy learning through multimedia.

Generation Y

As companies get comfortable with Gen X, they must prepare for the

entrance of Gen Y (born after 1980) into the workforce. This young group will challenge employers even further. Gen Nexters, as they are also called, share similar ideals to the “Veterans” generation (born 1922-1944). Gen Yers are generally more optimistic than Gen Xers, as well as more respectful of authority. Born in 1981 or later, this group has just recently begun entering the workforce, presenting a new challenge for employers. They have high expectations in terms of salary and responsibility. They expect to quickly become wealthy. Forget the mentality of “working your way to the top.” Gen Nexters want it all, and they want it now.

Y-Factors

- *Learning environment* — combine teamwork and technology
- *Personality Type* — reject the skeptical attitudes of Gen X; ambitious; optimistic; have a positive value set
- *Working Environment* — motivated to learn skills and information that will help make their working lives less stressful and that will increase their marketability; place a high priority on making money
- *Learning Style* — prefer training materials that are lively and varied; respond to printed materials; like to read

Tips for training

- Nexters prefer to interact with their colleagues
- Be sensitive to conflict between Nexters and Xers.
- Establish mentor programs. Nexters admire the Veteran generation. Try pairing these generations.

FINDING THE NEXT GENERATION WORKFORCE

The construction industry is one of many having difficulty attracting and retaining talented employees. During the dot.com boom of the 1990s, many industries struggled to compete with the emerging high-flying, high-tech corporations that were over-compensating young inexperienced employees with six-figure salaries, lucrative bonus packages, and amenities such as on-staff massage therapists, in-office recreation facilities, and other perks. While such luxuries may have contributed to the downfall of some of these organizations, their compensation packages and perks shed important light on the work habits and preferences of the current generation of employees. This information can be helpful to other industries in planning fair and balanced recruitment strategies that are still lucrative enough

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to pique the interest of the best and brightest job seekers.

One of the keys to recruiting potential employees is knowing where to find them and how to attract them. Most industries have lists of preferred colleges and universities from which they recruit. Sometimes the list is driven by practical needs, such as an analysis that determines the institutions with the most desirable graduates based on needs-specific criteria. Many industry-specific associations have developed preferred lists, so trying the

national association office is a beginning. Other times, the decision is driven by more-“anecdotal” needs, such as the fact that the CEO of an organization is a graduate of a certain school and prefers graduates from the old alma mater. But just knowing where the students are isn’t always enough. Accessing and enticing the right talent is the issue at stake.

The logical starting place is the institution itself. Even though budget cuts are causing some universities and colleges to cut back on their career placement services, virtually every university or college operates some placement office or career planning center, even in the most rudimentary sense. The professionals in these offices are experienced in providing career counseling, preparing students for the job search process, and coordinating the recruiting functions of employers on campus. Traditional on-campus recruiting includes both on-campus interviewing and “cattle call” job fairs in which employers answer questions and collect resumes from large numbers of students.

To successfully scout talent, contractors may wish to consider new tactics for identifying, evaluating, and developing employees. Working with campus placement professionals and possibly professional recruiting consultants, contractors would be wise to consider a program of outreach recruitment. This program would consist of a coordinated effort combining informational programming, internships, mentoring, and sponsored student activities conducted and sponsored in conjunction with universities and colleges. Such a program involves visits to campuses and the development of relationships with institutions, faculty, and, of course, students. Much as companies now spend energy on

cultivating and keeping new clients, the new model of employment is that future employees also need to be cultivated and developed.

Once a corporation determines its staffing needs, the next step is to determine the type of people the company wishes to attract to fulfill the staffing requirements. Identifying which schools and academic programs will produce graduates most likely to fit that mold is the next step. Then begins the courtship. One way to attract and interest graduates is to hold company-sponsored information sessions — in the form of dinners, social events, and educational opportunities (for example, a lecture or discussion about construction management and environmental law by a company expert in the field). From this interaction with students and faculty, a company representative can gather the names of the most promising students. These students would be ideal candidates for internships, summer employment, and co-ops. Exposing a student to a carefully designed and implemented internship or summer job gives a company a low-cost, high-value opportunity to sample the work ethic, knowledge base, and ability of a prospective employee. At the same time, the internship allows the student a chance to gain experience in the field and knowledge about the organization that will most certainly be relayed to other students, all of whom are potential employees. Should the experience prove successful, the same intern could return for a semester-long co-op experience at a minimal salary while also earning college credit. In the new model, this same person could upon graduation be offered a job with the firm as an experienced new hire, earning a salary and benefits package commensurate with his or her time of service to the

company — certainly above traditional entry-level wages.

Companies should realize that today's college graduates are very web-savvy and technology-oriented. Online recruitment, which includes streaming-video company information files, is a rapidly growing and dynamic trend that demonstrates high-tech ability and opportunity to new employees (*see related article on page 7*). The construction industry historically has lagged behind others in adopting technology, and this reluctance to change is negatively impacting recruitment industry-wide.

BUILDING AN INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Internships are in ways formal mentoring programs for employees pursuing an academic degree. Internships allow interns to gain valuable experience while giving companies inexpensive labor and a way to get to know a person before making a long-

term financial commitment. However, without a clear plan for implementing an internship program, companies will not reap these benefits.

what type of person you are looking for. Create a job description by interviewing people who will be working closely with the intern. Decide what type of work will make best use of an intern's time. Clear roles and responsibilities will increase an intern's productivity level.

- *Choose length* — Organizations vary on length of internships. The standard, however, is usually one year. It typically takes three to five months for a new employee to get oriented with the company. An internship less than six months will typically not provide value for the organization.

- *Determine compensation* — The decision to compensate an intern is within the discretion of the employer. However, the decision to withhold compensation must be made in accordance with the Fair Labor Standards Act, which presents criteria for no-pay internships. The criteria include such stipulations as interns cannot be replacements for regular employees and

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Following are guidelines for setting up a successful internship program:

- *Clarify roles and responsibilities* — Before recruiting, you need to know

the employer cannot directly gain from the intern's work. Typical compensation is less than that of a regular employee in a similar position.

- *Establish a relationship with schools* — Most companies that decide to hire interns establish a relationship with a relevant program at a local university or

college. Professors can recommend students with particular strengths, and the school can also provide a steady applicant pool. Since requirements for graduation will differ among graduate programs, using students from the same program will help provide consistency in the internship. An example of this is Fresno, Calif.-based Mauldin-Dorfmeier Construction (MDC), which has developed a quality internship program with the local university, Fresno State.

“We have developed a great internship program with the construction management program here at Fresno State,” said owner Pat Mauldin. “Their students get a great learning experience and an opportunity to apply classroom skills in the field. MDC gets the opportunity to supplement our work force with talented personnel and then have the first crack at hiring the best and the brightest.” Mauldin also noted that the regular infusion of new ideas “really helps us improve and build our business.”

Interns should be treated as any new employee is treated, only even more gingerly. Unlike most new employees, interns are not likely to have any work experience. Therefore, they will require a little more transition time. Employers can do a few things to aid interns in this transition:

- *Integrate interns into the company* — New interns need to feel they belong to the organization. It is in your best interest as an employer to have organizational commitment from interns. Organizational commitment leads to increased productivity and the likelihood that an intern will go above and beyond the call of duty. It is also important that an intern feel comfortable enough with other employees to effectively communicate with them. Communication with other employees will reduce the time demands of the intern’s supervisor as the other employees provide additional guidance.
- *Increase responsibilities* — As an

intern becomes more comfortable with the work and the work environment, the employer should increase the level of responsibility placed on the intern. If interns are not continually challenged, they may become bored or restless. After all, interns are working for the learning opportunity. Of course, increasing an intern’s responsibility also reduces time pressures on other employees.

■ *Provide constant feedback* — Interns, as do all employees, need to know if their behavior is effective or ineffective so they can make developmental decisions.

■ *Hold a post-internship review* — Always seek to complete a post-internship review. First, from the company perspective, get quality feedback on the internship experience and how it can be improved for future participants. Second, create a letter of recommendation/reference for the intern as he or she moves into the working world.

An Intern’s Perspective: Developing Marketability

by Lee Schrimsher

I began my experience as an FMI intern at the end of my first year in graduate school. I took on this job as a requirement for graduation, but what I received was far more valuable. For a person moving smoothly along the academic track, I had little practical work experience, taking no time to work after receiving my undergraduate degree. I was quickly realizing that I would find myself in that “catch 22” that so many recent graduates often do. They are unable to find employment due to a lack of experience but are unable to gain experience without employment.

What is a person to do? Become an intern.

I joined the leader and organizational development group of FMI in June 2001. The timing was ideal, given that I had all summer to devote to acclimating to the new environment without the pressures of taking classes. The

adjustment to juggling both roles was a much smoother transition as a result.

My experience with FMI has allowed me to apply theoretical solutions to real-world problems. This type of experiential learning is invaluable. I was also able to develop client-relationship skills and gain general business knowledge.

What I believe to be the most beneficial part of my internship is the level of development I received. The internship was focused on feedback and development, which should be part of any job. I learned where my strengths lie and what areas need improvement. I was able to develop these skills in a safe and nurturing environment, always with a safety net underneath me. The development and experience I received as an intern will increase my marketability while pursuing future employment, which is valuable well beyond tuition.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGE

Finding the most talented hires is a difficult task, and you need to ask yourself, “Is my company geared up for that challenge?” After thinking through the suggestions noted above, do a quick review of your firm, asking yourself these five questions:

- What are our projected hiring needs in the next three to five years?
- Is our culture Gen X/Y friendly?
- How do we currently find our new hires?
- Do we have a relationship with local colleges and universities?
- Where are the gaps in our recruitment program?

Take the time to develop an action plan to fill the identified gaps and follow through. Additionally, if you do not have a professional human resources manager, you may want to consider whether adding a full-time HR manager would not only improve hiring, but also retention, training, workers compensation rates, and moral. If you elect not to add a full-time HR professional, outsourcing HR functions may be a solution.

Finding and hiring the most talented staff is a challenge that will only continue to grow in the future, but your firm doesn't need to fall behind the curve. Ultimately, it is a business decision to embark the path we've described. Every contractor can get the same wood, tools, equipment, and asphalt. It is the personnel that make the difference — not only in high quality and safe projects, but also in profitability.