

## Properly Preparing Your First-Year Employees for Success on the Jobsite

Written by: Randy Dombrowski, Safety Services Manager, Sentry Insurance

Having a problem finding qualified workers? Improve hiring and onboarding measures to ensure quality hires and double down on safety standards to attract them.

To keep pace with demand, contractors may need to hire 500,000 more workers this year above their normal pace of hiring, according to Associated Builders and Contractors. This at a time when many businesses still struggle to hire skilled workers.

The data shows there's a tight labor market. In 2023, industry employment continued its long, steady rise - aside from a pandemic dip - and is now at its highest level in more than a decade, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Current job openings - at just under 400,000 - remain higher than pre-pandemic levels. And demand for workers is expected to increase as more projects come online this year, fueled in part by federal infrastructure dollars and Build America, Buy America Act policies.

Here's what the current labor market means for jobsite safety and what you can do to keep your employees and business thriving.

### UNDERSTANDING THE SAFETY RISKS OF A SKILLS SHORTAGE

Hiring new workers can fill a much-needed gap as project demands ramp up. Still, the industry is currently seeing a shortage of available skilled workers. Meanwhile, the median



tenure of construction employees currently sits at 3.9 years, according to the BLS.

That leaves many businesses with two options. The first is to hire new, less experienced workers. The second is to hire workers with prior experience, who may not be familiar with your company's projects and tasks - which introduces a new set of risks.

Why does this matter? First-year employees account for more than 25% of all workplace injuries, according to the BLS. Now, more than ever, it's crucial that contractors commit to thorough, consistent onboarding and safety programming across jobsites to reduce injuries and lessen the risk of soaring injury costs that they and their employees face.

Contractors who understand emerging risks - and implement mitigation strategies - will be better positioned to meet schedules, manage costs, and improve their bottom lines.

## **BOLSTER YOUR HIRING AND ONBOARDING PRACTICES**

Safety begins with hiring the most competent employees possible. Even if job candidates don't have construction experience, good hiring practices can help determine who may be a more qualified candidate, especially in an industry that relies heavily on short-term, on-the-job training.

Begin by assessing your recruitment and hiring practices, which are a key element of success for any business. Cutting corners to fill job openings can create more financial risk and put people - including your experienced workers - in danger.

Here are some steps to improve your hiring practices:

- » Establish and follow written employment guidelines and job qualifications.
- » Perform background checks on applicants you aim to hire, including checking references.
- » Review Motor Vehicle Reports prior to hiring a worker who may drive a company vehicle. This is key, given nearly 31% of construction laborers are required to drive motorized vehicles or equipment, according to BLS data.

Once a new employee is hired, the onboarding and new hire orientation process should focus on safety procedures, company policies, and emergency protocols.

As newer workers acclimate to their roles, consider pairing them with an experienced mentor who has a strong record of safety. This allows for more onsite guidance and knowledge transfer.

## **IDENTIFY JOBSITE RISKS AND TAILORED TRAINING TOPICS**

With today's skilled labor challenges, it's no surprise that injuries increased 7.5% across all industries year-over-year, according to the latest BLS data. Safety shouldn't stop at initial onboarding. Ongoing safety trainings and toolbox talks can reinforce best practices.

The risks and related training topics will vary between projects, but common themes should include:

**Fall protection:** Working at heights, scaffolding requirements, ladder safety, and fall-arrest systems.

- » Fatalities from falls are the leading cause of death for construction employees, accounting for 395 of the 1,069 fatalities recorded in 2022, according to BLS data. OSHA partners with other safety organizations annually to encourage employers to host a Safety Stand-Down each spring with their employees to prevent falls. This additional focus on safety can be woven into day-to-day safety plans.

**Electrical hazards:** Lockout/tagout procedures, overhead powerline safety, wiring and extension cords, and grounding.

- » Used in conjunction with other protective methods, such as changing your engineering and administrative processes and controls, PPE can help prevent jobsite injuries. It's imperative, of course, to ensure your workers use the proper type of PPE and are trained on how to wear it.

**Hazard communication:** Understanding safety data sheets, labeling, and protocols.

- » OSHA requires employers that use hazardous chemicals to implement a hazard communication program. The organization offers this informational fact sheet.

**Materials handling:** Proper lifting techniques and preventing repetitive movement injuries.

- » According to OSHA, strains and sprains - also referred to as musculoskeletal disorders - are among the most frequently reported causes of lost or restricted work time. Helping your workers avoid these types of injuries begins with recognizing the actions that put them at risk. With your in-house safety trainer or an external safety advisor, you can prevent these injuries by implementing ergonomic safety tips and strategies on your jobsites.

**Heavy equipment:** Operator training, equipment inspections, spotter visibility, ground worker awareness.

- » Being struck by heavy equipment or falling materials and loads is one of OSHA's Focus Four Hazards, along with falls, caught-in or -between hazards and electrocution. Following best practices for using heavy equipment - which begins with awareness - can make your jobsites safer for everyone. It's best to prepare a unique safety plan for each project and share it with all employees and trade partners.

**Trenching and excavation:** Establishing safe entry and exit points, installing protective systems, understanding environmental hazards.

The primary hazard here is injury from a cave-in. Before any worker enters a trench, OSHA encourages contractors follow these five safety tips:

1. Ensure there's a safe way to enter and exit.
2. Ensure trenches have cave-in protection.
3. Look for standing water and test for atmospheric hazards.
4. Keep materials away from the edge of the trench.
5. Never enter a trench unless it's been properly inspected by a competent person.

**Traffic control:** On highway and street construction projects, develop and monitor a traffic-control plan that considers visibility and sight lines, traffic volume and speed limits, access to equipment, approach and advance warning areas, weather conditions, types and spacing of traffic control devices, etc.


Each year, more than 120 workers die at road construction sites, and thousands more are injured, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Keeping employees safe is motivation enough. But if companies show a history of low workplace injuries, they could also see a decrease in workers' compensation costs over time. It's a win-win for the health and safety of your employees and business.

## BE PROACTIVE: BUILD A SAFETY-FIRST CULTURE

Risk is inherent to the construction industry. By embracing safety and maintaining strong hiring standards, companies and their employees become more resilient.

The tips and trends shared here offer a good starting point. No two businesses or projects are alike, though, and neither are their risks. Before project deadlines pick up, talk with your team - including trade partners - and other experts to implement a robust safety plan. Your insurer may offer onsite safety consulting and training as well.

Once you have your plan and procedures in place, commit to helping your frontline workers execute them daily. Set a good example by following them yourself when you visit jobsites. This sends a clear message that everyone's accountable to help keep one another safe. 



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### About the Author

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Randy Dombrowski is a safety services manager for [Sentry Insurance](#). Sentry provides insurance and risk management solutions to construction businesses.

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### About the Article

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