

Construction's Biggest Staffing Struggles for 2024

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A LACK OF EXPERIENCED WORKERS, FAR-FLUNG JOBSITES, AND SOCIAL ISSUES WILL COMPOUND THE INDUSTRY'S LABOR SHORTAGE THIS YEAR, EXPERTS SAY.

Construction's labor struggles will continue in 2024, and it's not just due to the number of new jobs set to break ground. The reasons for a lack of skilled applicants this year are many.

For instance, even as the industry's workforce ages, it fails to draw in new workers to train. Hard-to-reach jobsites create challenges for workers in need of transportation or childcare, and some craftworkers fail drug tests, making them ineligible for work.

Here are some of the top hurdles to staffing in construction in 2024, and what experts say to do about them.

A Lack of Experience

One of the top issues facing hiring managers is that many candidates do not have the right skills or experience to work in the construction industry, according to a survey conducted by Associated General Contractors of America last year.

In addition, many of the industry's experienced, trained workers will soon age out. The median age of construction workers has risen, and nearly half of construction workers are older than 45, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.



To mitigate that in the long term, industry leaders have turned to advocating for construction as a career alternative to college for young students.

"We need to get construction as a very good career opportunity into the minds of elementary age children, junior high, high school," said George Pfeffer, CEO of Redwood City, California-based DPR Construction. Pfeffer said DPR has begun visiting third-grade classrooms, as studies indicate 9- and 10-year-olds make decisions on their future that early.

But in the meantime, getting workers up to speed may mean shortening training windows and focusing on technology.

"I see some changes too in the speed to training. That's where I see the shift happening," said Jacob Snyder, chief operating officer of Cincinnati-based industrial contractor Enerfab. "It takes time, but we'll develop that workforce. It's being able

to do it where we might have had a four-year apprenticeship before figuring out how to do it in two years.”

A way to get there, Snyder believes, is relying on digital tools for training, easier-to-read 3D models, and advanced tools that can curb human error.

Transportation Challenges

Over a quarter of respondents to the AGC survey said potential employees reported difficulty acquiring transportation to and from work. With the nature of construction work requiring physical presence on the job to deliver the final product, that poses a real problem.

Snyder said large infrastructure and manufacturing projects bolster the industry, but the location of them poses a great challenge.

“Those jobs require lots and lots of people and we’re finding that local markets typically can’t support that alone. We’re having to bring people from other places, and that’s not as easy as it used to be to get people that are willing to be away from home,” he said.

Some employers have tried incentivizing carpooling or providing shuttles, but even then, a long commute can be a roadblock to retaining workers – especially when jobsites change from project to project.

In the Bay Area, it’s not uncommon for workers to commute two hours each way, Pfeffer said. Nonetheless, DPR has offered fuel incentives and less stringent scheduling as a means of alleviating the pressure of getting to work.

Childcare Woes

Another major factor that limits workers is the need for flexible, quality childcare. Available services don’t always meet the needs of construction workers, who may need to arrive early or stay late. One in four respondents to the AGC survey reported workers needed flexibility with work schedules to help them with childcare or care of another family member.

Danielle Harshman, executive director of the Iron Worker Employers Association of Western Pennsylvania, said she had heard examples of major projects implementing onsite childcare, but they were often a one-off and not a one-size-fits-all solution.

For office workers, hybrid or remote options have grown more prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic – some employees see the option to work from home as more valuable than an 8% raise – but for tradesworkers, it simply isn’t an option.

Drug Use

As the industry continues to deal with the opioid epidemic and construction in particular faces a mental health crisis where workers often turn to both legal and illegal substances, finding workers that can pass drug tests can pose a challenge, too.

“Drug testing can be a hurdle sometimes,” Harshman said. “It’s a real thing.”

In fact, one-third of respondents to the AGC survey said their potential workers often can’t pass drug tests.

Regulations legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana use have put employers in a tricky position, Harshman said. Owners or contractors may mandate drug tests if they choose, but they are not required to do so. Even though federal government contractors performing work for \$100,000 or more must have a drug-free workplace policy, that doesn’t require drug testing.

And drug testing isn’t about monitoring workers’ activity in their free time, but rather maintaining workplace safety. Until there’s a solid measure of current impairment – how high a person is at a given moment – a drug test is the only metric, so it can be a deal breaker, Harshman said.

She said it’s a safety issue.

“It’s just no different than you can’t be drunk on a jobsite or using other opiates and things like that,” Harshman said. “So it’s hard when people say, ‘Well, I picked this over working.’ I’m not sure sometimes how that mindset goes, but it is a hurdle.”

Road Map to Success

Contractors can't change the location of jobsites, can't control what workers do in their private time, and can't instantly train new employees to bring them up to speed. So, in 2024, what can employers do?


The short answer is higher pay and attractive culture, said Aaron Faulk, construction practice leader at Seattle-based accounting firm Moss Adams.

"The baseline is you got to have a competitive fee pay structure," Faulk said. "First and foremost, if you're hiring in this market, you say, 'Look, I gotta be competitive on just the overall benefits package. And I have to be able to educate people as to what my package looks like in comparison to the rest of the industry.'"

From there, Faulk said, employers need to articulate the culture of the organization and opportunities for advancement. Every industry will have challenges to overcome when it comes to hiring, so building an organization that workers can believe in and will make an impact will make a big difference.

Pfeffer said DPR carried out a major cultural shift recently. After COVID-19 had altered so many aspects of its business, Pfeffer said he spent nearly four full months in 2022 on the road talking to office and craftworkers employed by DPR to better understand their needs, and beginning this year, the company revamped its benefits package.

"On [Jan. 1] we revamped our entire benefits program and gave paid PTO, paid holiday time, bereavement leave, so our benefits are extremely similar, whether you're admin or craft, or no matter where you are in the country," Pfeffer said.

Asked if the shift had worked, Pfeffer said, "I'm just embarrassed we didn't do it earlier." 



About the Author

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