

Labor Management Viewpoints: It's time to hire apprentices

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All visible signs lead one to believe that construction activity next year will be greater than this year's volume. Contractors are reporting larger backlogs going into 2005 than existed in 2004 as well as more bidding opportunities. The mild fall stretching into early winter has generated whispers of an impending shortage of skilled craft workers for next year.

It is not a surprise. More than one-third of our craft workers are over the age of 45. Seventeen percent of the journey workers who are working with a new apprentice today will be eligible to retire before that apprentice completes the program.

The situation is even more severe as the baby boomers look at retirement. More than 50 percent of our current craft workers will retire in the next 15 years. This does not include the people who leave the industry for other reasons or the considerable growth in construction employment forecasted by the feds in most construction crafts.

In addition, because of population demographics, there will be a shrinking pool of available young people and fierce competition from other employment sectors for those who are available.

Great craft workers are trained, not born. We cannot wait until there is no one to do the work before we react.

The union construction industry has a highly developed training system. Working in close conjunction with the state of Wisconsin, the Department of Workforce Development's Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards' Joint Apprenticeship Training committees have developed excellent programs to turn applicants into qualified journey workers.

Lack of commitment

While the training process for skilled journey workers never ends, the initial apprenticeship process takes three to five years depending on the craft. Few if any of the training facilities are running at capacity. The reason is the reluctance of contractors to make a commitment to the future work force. Too many leave it up to someone else to do.

There are construction companies that train large numbers of apprentices, year in and year out. It should be no surprise that these companies are among the area's fastest-growing and most competitive firms. This is because they have developed their work force through the apprenticeship program according to their specific needs and corporate cultures.

Unless all construction companies participate in the apprenticeship-training process, there will not be the numbers and quality of craft workers that our customers demand.

We should have started yesterday to deal with this problem. We have to start today because tomorrow is definitely too late.

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