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## Industry has solid future here

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Several conversations I've had recently about the state of the construction industry have quickly turned into a gloom and doom prediction for the market.

Without ignoring the problems in our nation, state, communities and workplaces, we might instead focus on the great things occurring in our communities and consider that they point to a solid future.

What are the positive stories? We are seeing strong signs of an increase in workloads. For the first time in years, we are seeing projections for full employment across the industry thanks to investments being made in construction. The investment is coming from our local leadership in all sectors of our community, both public and private, as well as investment from entities outside of our state.

With increased investment come jobs, jobs that are the lifeblood of our families, communities and industry.

We must make the most of this opportunity to expand our forces by providing guidance to those individuals seriously interested in a strong career path in the trades now. The success of the All-Construction Career Fair held March 1 at the Waukesha County Expo Center, which included kids as young as elementary school, was an example of how our industry can reach out to tomorrow's work force and shape their career options.

The changing market doesn't always supply a steady amount of work to be done, nor workers to do it. Challenges include:

- \* In a perfect world, each skilled craftworker who retires would be immediately replaced by a new recruit who is fully equipped with solid skills to fill that retiree's shoes – but that is not the case.
- \* In the construction process, a contractor does not need one craftworker for a specific skill until the one performing the prior task is ready.
- \* Only so much work can be effectively managed at one time, especially as one job winds down and another ramps up. That means there are lean times and busy times for all workers, most of the time.

## Action plan needed

Employers should take the present good times to initiate an action plan: Start first by taking a long look at your company's work force and then consider the longevity probability. Next, examine your work force and consider how many of your current team members are looking forward to retirement in the near future; you'll want to ensure you have a fully trained replacement for each craftworker who retires after serving your company and the industry so well for many years. In the future, you won't be able to count on replacements being trained by someone else. Each of us must help ensure tomorrow's work force is properly trained and ready to step into future positions.

Making a commitment to prepare tomorrow's work force is sound business judgment that will help ensure a successful future for your business and our industry. We cannot lose sight of the fact that successful businesses employ skilled workers, and skilled workers make for successful businesses.

Make Wisconsin's construction future brighter -- and your business stronger -- by making a firm commitment to hire and mentor apprentices.

*John Topp is the executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. and the Building Advantage initiative.*