The construction workforce is changing rapidly, and the impact it will have on our industry and country is a topic of frequent debate. For many of our construction clients, the shortage of skilled labor is a major concern for their organizations now and in the future.

At its peak in 2006, the construction labor force in the U.S. exceeded 7.7 million; today it is closer to 6 million workers. Recent increases in construction spending and new projects have heightened the demand for skilled workers. In fact, the industry is expected to face a workforce shortage of 1.6 million workers by 2022.

WHERE WILL THESE WORKERS COME FROM?

Much of the conversation about the construction workforce lately has focused on inexperienced workers and an aging workforce — and for good reason. Less experienced workers are more likely to be injured and older workers are likely to have fewer, but more severe injuries.

A recent analysis of The Hartford’s claims data revealed that workers’ compensation claims for construction workers with less than one year of experience on a job were nearly 3.5 times more frequent than those involving workers with at least one year of experience.

On the other end of the spectrum, a Colorado State University study found that workers aged 65 and older experience loss of work time that is nearly double that of a younger worker with a similar injury. According to a 2008 Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses, total expenses for a 65-year-old injured worker were nearly triple those for a 24-year-old with a similar injury.

With the recent push to rehire older workers who have been out of the industry for several years, a key concern is that many of these returning workers are not in the same physical condition as when they left the industry, increasing their potential for injury. Aging workers are also more likely to have muscle and back strains, arthritis and joint problems, or hearing and vision problems than their younger counterparts. These older, more experienced workers often bring a lot of knowledge to the job site, but their injuries can be more costly to their employers.

IMPACT OF SKILLED WORKER SHORTAGE

An important but less publicized issue is the potential long-term impact of the skilled worker shortage. We need qualified, skilled workers to repair our country’s aging infrastructure and build our schools, streets, roads, hospitals and bridges. If these skilled workers are not available, what is the cost to the U.S. economy and our country’s overall health and well-being?

While technological advances have made it possible to build more effectively and efficiently with fewer people, the technology has yet to replace the need for skilled labor.

NEED FOR SKILLS AND SAFETY TRAINING

The most recent recession put an end to many of the training and apprenticeship programs that had previously taught the construction industry’s next generation. High schools in the U.S. have increasingly focused their curriculum on preparing students for success at four year colleges rather than vocational schools. The industry needs more firms to sponsor training and apprenticeship programs. We also need to encourage construction companies to utilize the training that is available from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other sources. In the last few years, there have been an alarming number of deaths on sites that have not utilized available safety training. We should ask ourselves, how many of the 571 construction trades workers’ lives that were lost in 2013 could have been saved with better use of training and safety programs?

Those of us in construction know the rewards. The thrill of being part of the team to build and rebuild America can be intoxicating. Watching a new ballpark or skyscraper rise in our cities and knowing that we helped to build it is exciting. Being able to tell our children or grandchildren that we worked on a particular project is a source of pride.

Contractors who take the lead in training future workers will help ensure that promising candidates gain the skills and experience they need to be safe and successful in rebuilding America.

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