



San Antonio

# CONSTRUCTION™

## NEWS

The Industry's Newspaper

### FOCUS

### Women in Construction



Submitted by  
**Christie S. Wigginton**, CIT, national president  
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#### Why not construction?

**P**rograms to introduce construction to women and young people encourage the industry as a viable career choice.

Today's work force is on the move. Gone are the days when a worker stayed at one firm until retirement. The average worker changes jobs every five years. Employees are constantly on the lookout for stability and an outlet for their creativity. So, why not choose a career in construction?

The construction industry offers a variety of occupations, which encompass many different talents and educational backgrounds. The options are limitless — managers, clerical workers, engineers, truck drivers and trade workers, just to name a few. All are a part of the process to build the future. Each plays a vital role in the creative process of forming his or her community.

Construction is one of the largest industries in the world. According to the

Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2005, more than seven million people worked in construction. This is almost three times the number of the insurance or auto industries, and more than nine times the number working in the textile industry. Since our nation is growing and building at such a rapid pace, more people must choose construction as a career in order to stay ahead.

Think about it — what industry is more stable than construction? The need for new buildings, roads, bridges and other structures will always exist, not to mention the repairs and upgrades on our existing buildings and infrastructure. Over the next 10 years, an 11 percent growth in the industry is anticipated.

As the workforce slowly reaches the

age of retirement, it is important to increase awareness of the industry and present its viable career opportunities. Because of the looming labor shortage, construction industry associations, like the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), are encouraging women into the profession. Nation-wide, companies have taken the lead in supporting their female employees by sponsoring them to be a part of groups like NAWIC.

When it comes to educating young people about the industry, the key is to first focus on educating guidance counselors and teachers. Many skilled trades are providing programs at all education levels to help in the recruiting process. The Department of Transportation's Construction Career Days is a wonderful example of how the industry is being brought to the forefront and presented to those seeking alternatives to traditional employment.

New programs are in place to assist students in learning. The "If I had a hammer" program, created by Perry Wilson, was designed to help increase math skills in fifth-grade students by giving them hands-on experience. Working with schools and local organizations, students build an 8-ft by 11-ft. house. Projects like this build a strong foundation for the students and debunk the myth, "I won't

need math in the real world."

NAWIC's Education Foundation sponsors a Block-Kids competition at the Grade school level. Not only does the competition stimulate an awareness of the construction industry, but it also stimulates young minds without utilizing computers or television. The program allows children to be satisfied by using their own skills to envision a future world.

Volunteering in such programs has become a priority to many companies in the industry. Presently, the looming shortage is obviously nation-wide, and companies know they must participate in programs like these to ensure a strong future workforce. We must all be a part of the process to educate our youth. A career in construction offers employees a vast range of opportunities while working to shape the architecture of our communities. What could be better than that?

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Submitted by  
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#### Women in construction: The bigger question regarding construction's labor shortage

**W**omen and construction. To the average person, the two words might be as dissimilar as oil and water. Yet two compelling facts might force the nation's construction industry to start thinking otherwise.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports that the American construction industry will need to find one million new workers in the next six years, and 2.4 million by 2014. BLS research also states that women account for just 9.6 percent of the entire construction industry. So why is it that, in an industry that is frantically trying to solve its much-publicized workforce

shortage, there are so few women?

"The biggest barrier to women entering and succeeding in construction is the overall industry attitude toward women," says Anne Bigane Wilson, PE, CPC. "While I think this has changed over the last 20 years, I still believe that many people don't think we can do the job. This is particularly true for women in the trades."

Wilson, a former president of the American Subcontractors Association (ASA) and president of the 100-year-old, Chicago-based Bigane Paving Company, has proven that she can do the job — as have many other women such as Doris Efrid, Norma Mann and Lillian A. Baumbach. Their efforts have not been made in vain, but is Rosie the Riveter's now iconic slogan of "We Can Do It!" falling on deaf ears in the new millennium?

Industry reports commonly note the shortage of workers in both trades and management positions and the need for immediate attention to the problem. At the same time, their short- and long-term goals fail to specifically cite women as a group to be targeted for recruitment, despite their under representation. This omission also means the question of why the 9-to-1 ratio of men to women exists is never raised.

Recruitment and retention of women is a serious issue that needs to be raised in order for the industry to address its workforce problem, says Darlene Aitken, president of Houston-based Holes Incorporated, one of the largest concrete cutting companies in the Gulf Coast area. According to Aitken, women not only

need to be part of the eventual solution, but instrumental in executing it.

"The lack of role models for women is a direct factor when addressing any issue," notes Aitken. "Women look for and respond to role models when deciding on their careers; they look to where other women have been successful."

Wilson stresses that the best place to improve recruitment efforts among women is at the high school and college levels, "so that advocates for the industry can talk to young women about the opportunities in construction." Serving on the Industry Advisory Committee at Purdue University's Construction and Engineering Management (CEM) Program has enabled Wilson to see how successful such initiatives can become, noting that through the council's efforts, Purdue has been able to recruit more women and minorities for the CEM program.

While her family's business was a factor in her decision to enter the profession, Wilson says that her skills in specific subjects fostered her eventual interest, and success, within construction — and that similar connections should be conveyed to more young women today.

"Yes, I joined the construction industry through a family legacy, but I am also an engineer. So while my family's business led me to construction, my aptitude in math and science led me to engineering," notes Wilson.

Aitken, who, like Wilson, now runs her family's business, suggests that the lack of flexible working hours in construction can be a major deterrent for women.

"Being and becoming a construction manager or an engineer demands a certain schedule," says Aitken. "Many people, especially women who want to have and be involved with their families, aren't crazy about working those hours."

The construction industry is in dire need of workers. Women are able and ready as leaders like Aitken and Wilson have demonstrated. What a great day it will be when the industry makes the connection once and for all.

*E. Colette Nelson is executive vice president of the American Subcontractors Association Inc., Alexandria, Va. —mdo*

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