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As Baby Boomers retire, the construction industry faces higher costs and longer timelines

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How demand for labor affects construction timelines

By LUX BUTLER

Have you ever wondered why the apartment building at the end of your block seems to be taking forever to complete, or why a new home is taking years longer than expected? The answer isn't just COVID or an economic downturn — it's actually the opposite: booming demand with too few workers.

The construction sector is grappling with a severe labor shortage, leading to project delays and skyrocketing costs for new buildings. In Phoenix, the demand for more construction is high as the city's population and industry grows.

"When you look at the Arizona construction market, you see a lot of large-scale construction projects. Those large-scale projects have a demand for workers that are required to execute the construction. The overall growth within the Arizona market is driving the demand for trade professionals required to execute the jobs," says Eric Fields, senior vice president of operations for McCarthy Building Companies.

The training gap

Recently, major semiconductor manufacturers like TSMC and Intel

have brought a wave of new job opportunities to the Valley. However, the demand for skilled tradespeople to construct these multi-billion-dollar facilities has far outpaced the available workforce.

"When you have the kind of explosive growth that we have, we are not just building homes and warehouses, like we did in the early 2000s, we're building very sophisticated manufacturing facilities," says Chris Camacho, president and CEO of the Greater Phoenix Economic Council.



It is easy to forget the sheer number of hands that work on any construction site, let alone something as sophisticated as a TSMC facility. To name a few, there are construction equipment operators, carpenters, masons, electricians, plumbers and pipefitters, and a long list of others.

All of these positions on a construction site are essential, no matter if it's a residential home being built or a billion-dollar manufacturing plant.

Each of these positions, however, require years of training and expertise and currently there is a staggering gap in the

number of people entering the workforce and the number retiring from it.

The National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) states that the U.S. currently lacks around 430,000 construction workers. In the three years they studied, from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to early 2023, the construction workforce had only recovered 67% of the jobs lost at the beginning of the pandemic, NCCER also reports.

"Construction is one of those industries that if you ask any general contractor, they'll tell you, we can't

find enough employees," says Dr. Chad Wilson, superintendent of the East Valley Institute of Technology (EVIT).

EVIT, Mesa Public Schools and a number of other organizations in Phoenix have recognized the lack of growth in the construction industry and have created their own programs to help find a solution.

At EVIT and Mesa High School, students can participate in construction programs that set them up with the certifications and experience required to land a job in the field, sometimes even before they've graduated from high school.

"The outcomes for our students are if they're interested in entering that industry, we can get them placed on the job before they're done completing our program because there's such need within business and industry," Wilson says.

"The biggest thing that we're trying to do is then for their senior year, get them into those internship programs... Even if they're 17, and we do have employers that are hiring kids at 17, so that they have that on-the-job kind of work experience and training, which gets them directly into that workforce, that job, that trade," adds Marlo Loria, director of career and technical education for Mesa Public Schools.

While programs like EVIT and Mesa Public Schools are helping young adults enter the workforce, the challenge remains: fewer people are entering the industry than are retiring, and the gap is only set to widen.

Baby Boomers, the division of the individuals ages 57 to 75, have been making their exit from the workforce for years now. According to the National Center for Construction Education & Research 41% of the current

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Chris Camacho



Eric Fields



Chad Wilson



Marlo Loria

“Construction is one of those industries that if you ask any general contractor, they’ll tell you, we can’t find enough employees.”

— Chad Wilson

construction workforce, including many people in management roles, will retire by the year 2031.

As Baby Boomers retire, they leave behind a gap that is difficult to fill, particularly as fewer young workers enter the construction field. This shrinking workforce has forced contractors to compete for skilled labor, resulting in escalating wages and longer project durations.

Rising costs

As skilled labor becomes more scarce, contractors are forced to offer

higher wages to attract workers. This, combined with extended project timelines, pushes up the overall cost of construction. Projects that were initially estimated to cost \$50 million might now come in at \$60 million or more, due to the labor shortages stretching the project out and driving up daily operating costs.

While programs like EVIT and Mesa Public Schools are helping train the next generation of tradespeople, the shortage remains a pressing issue for contractors, project owners and the entire economy. With labor shortages

pushing up costs and extending project timelines, the construction industry faces a crucial crossroads.

If these trends continue, the delay and expense of building homes, schools and critical infrastructure may become a permanent feature of the Arizona landscape. The challenge is clear: unless the industry attracts more workers and continues to invest in training, the dream of new developments, from affordable housing to state-of-the-art manufacturing facilities, may continue to slip further into the future. ■■■

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BUILDING TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE TODAY

How EVIT and Mesa High School give students a head start

By LUX BUTLER

Industry leaders in the construction sector are turning to an unexpected group — high school students — to help address the shortage in tradesmen that is delaying projects across the state.

Trade school is an option every high school student is given at the end of their primary education but schools and organizations in Phoenix are giving students a head start in their future careers before receiving their diplomas.

In the East Valley, Mesa Public Schools career and technical education (CTE) programs and East Valley Institute of Technology's

(EVIT) career and college preparatory training experiences are allowing students to graduate with a resume full of valuable work experience. By prioritizing the next generation of skilled laborers these programs are hoping to supplement this continually depleting workforce.

Mesa High School

Beginning in a student's freshman year at Mesa High School, they are exposed to the possibilities for their future. Each year the school invites representatives from numerous fields

to speak with the students about entering the workforce.

"Freshmen take a career interest inventory and start learning about what they're interested in," says Marlo Loria, director of career and technical education for Mesa Public Schools. "Then they can go meet with employer representatives of those careers they're interested in while they're freshmen and start to decide, 'Okay, I really do want to go into this field.' Now they can start planning their high school courses and experiences to get there."



The CTE programs offered to nearly every public school student in Arizona is a modified version of the traditional high school coursework to give students a hands-on introduction to their chosen field. The classroom setting is swapped for work benches, salon chairs or a number of other real-world environments.

The programs are offered as substitutes for traditional electives like art, theater or physical education. These CTE courses not only count towards the student's graduation but also build their portfolio of expertise.

The construction CTE program at Mesa High School is a two year program that includes two year-long classes. During this course students are introduced to the basics of safety as well as the different aspects of the construction industry.

"They'll do all the things that are related under that kind of umbrella of trades for construction. They do little pieces of it here and then we bring in business and industry folks to also help support the kids as they go through all of that. And then they decide, once they're done with the two-year program, 'Hey, I

want to do HVAC. I want to do electrical. I want to do plumbing.' Because they've had that experience and the mentorship from industry to say that's what they want to pursue," Loria says.

EVIT

While Mesa High School's construction program provides a strong foundation in general construction skills, EVIT offers a more specialized and advanced pathway for students looking to deepen their expertise in specific trades like electrical, HVAC and plumbing.

EVIT serves students from across the East Valley, including those from Mesa Public Schools, and provides an opportunity for them to pursue certifications and hands-on training that directly align with industry needs. Students can either enroll in EVIT after completing Mesa High's CTE program or attend EVIT while still enrolled at their home high school, ensuring that they have access to the full range of career development opportunities.

"Our goal is to create opportunities for students to not only have a general understanding of the construction industry, but also to have the ability to specialize in some of those other areas that we know are a part of construction," says Dr. Chad Wilson, superintendent of EVIT.

Students from any high school in the East Valley can enroll with EVIT. Currently they have students from a number of schools including Mesa Public Schools, Chandler Unified School District, Gilbert Public Schools, Apache

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Chad Wilson



Marlo Loria

Junction Unified School District and Queen Creek Unified School District.

Students spend a significant amount of time engaging in practical, hands-on work at EVIT. They practice what they learn in the classroom through projects, demonstrations and direct experience in construction.

“We believe that students have a greater interest in actually doing the work, rather than just sitting through lectures. There’s a time and place for instruction, but the majority of the time is spent applying what they’ve learned through hands-on experience in real-world situations,” Wilson says.

At EVIT, the educators prioritize the certifications students can earn. In the construction industry every role has key certifications that are necessary to land a job.

“The certifications within each industry carry the currency for the student. It’s the most valid measurement of their skills and knowledge. Whether they stay here in the Valley or move elsewhere, those certifications go with them and open doors in the industry,” Wilson says.

For example, students in EVIT’s HVAC program will take the ATRAC exam to become a licensed HVAC technician. Similarly, electrician

students walk away from the program as licensed electricians.

Apprenticeships

Partnering with industry leaders to mentor and educate students has helped propel graduates from both EVIT and Mesa Public Schools’ CTE program into careers with top companies in Phoenix.

“One of the things we hear from our business partners, especially in the area of construction, is that a lot of times individuals start in the profession, but they aren’t necessarily completely aware of what the business and industry requires from them. The apprenticeships and internships give our students a much greater understanding of what the business and industry will ask of them as employees,” Wilson says.

Through advisory councils made up of experts from construction, HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and welding fields, EVIT ensures that its curriculum remains relevant to industry needs.

These partnerships also provide valuable opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience through internships, externships, and apprenticeships, giving them a

direct pathway to employment upon graduation.

One of the standout features of EVIT’s construction program is its registered apprenticeship initiative, approved by the U.S. Department of Labor. This program allows students to gain practical experience while still in school, working alongside professionals on job sites.

At Mesa High School, construction students are offered similar benefits, including mentors while learning and career coaches following their graduation.

“Any student that’s in our internship program has a career coach assigned to them. The coach helps the students with their resumes, interview prep, and continues to support them even after they’ve been hired, making sure they’re getting their hours and assisting with any issues that may arise on site,” Loria says.

Between EVIT and Mesa Public Schools, there is a long list of industry partners that have dedicated their support and opportunities to these motivated young adults. Included in this list are Wilson Electric, Canyon State Electric, CHASSE Building Team and Empire Cat. ■■■



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BUILDING A WORKFORCE

How McCarthy Building Companies addresses labor need through training

By LUX BUTLER

McCarthy Building Companies is taking the shortage in skilled tradesmen in stride and has made a model structure for onboarding young or inexperienced aspiring construction professionals. As a 100% employee-owned business, McCarthy Building Companies is one of the largest and most diversified construction companies in the country. Every year McCarthy crews are responsible for constructing a wide variety of spaces, everything from commercial buildings to healthcare facilities.

With two-thirds of McCarthy's healthcare facility projects costing as much as \$25 million alone, the sheer size and complexity of their work requires a lot of manpower. Today, however, it is more difficult than ever to find the workers with the skills necessary to complete McCarthy's ambitious projects.

To solve their problem, the same problem construction companies around the country are facing, McCarthy created an in-depth and innovative training program for individuals interested in joining the industry.

"The purpose of the Innovation and Craft Workforce Center (ICWC) is to give a place for our craft professionals. We've always had offices around the Valley, but we didn't have a place for our craft to come and be trained and be developed in the skills that they need to be successful in a career in the construction industry," says Eric Fields, senior vice president of operations for McCarthy Building Companies.

Opened in early 2023, the ICWC is a 40,000-square-foot, two-story



Eric Fields

facility, located in Chandler. The ICWC is utilized to conduct discipline-specific craft training including prefabrication and modularization of components for installation on McCarthy projects, providing space for McCarthy's craft-focused teams and to house equipment among numerous other things.

In addition to supporting McCarthy's 500 Arizona-based and 2,000 regional craft professionals and trade partners, ICWC also provides space for the youth to experience a real-world construction workspace in the Builders University section of the facility. The next generation is invited to McCarthy's ICWC through partnerships with local



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Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, the East Valley Institute of Technology (EVIT), Western Maricopa Education Center (West-MEC), ACE Mentor Program of America, and various other K-12 and college programs.

“From 2020 to 2023, we’ve seen an increase of 22% in the number of students attending those programs so we’re seeing an all-time high enrollment,” Fields says. “That next step is just connecting industry with those students to provide opportunities for employment post-graduation.”

Preparing for success

McCarthy’s ICWC is one piece of a larger process that the company has built to train individuals who are new to the industry. Whether they are recent high school graduates looking for a foot in the door or an older adult who is needing a career change, McCarthy’s training process sets new professionals up for successful careers.

From day one at McCarthy new hires are entered into a months-long training process to set them up for success at the construction company. For the first 90 days trainees are put through McCarthy’s onboarding program, which includes basic orientation and their Start Safe program.

Start Safe is a two-day course designed to teach new professionals all of the hazards of the industry. The Start Safe portion of the onboarding process covers OSHA 10.

“A lot of folks don’t have experience working in an active construction facility. So, making sure employees have

the basic skills to make sure they can protect themselves and the workers around them as they’re on the job site. That’s what the Start Safe program is designed to achieve,” Fields says.

After the first 90 days of training new hires are then put into another 90-day training program for their specific position. During this second 90-day program employees are then assigned a mentor and a skills matrix. The new employee, with the assistance of their mentor, will spend days 90 through 180 gaining on-the-job experience in the field learning before being tested to potentially be promoted to the next role.

At the six-month mark of any new McCarthy employee’s career, they are put into the company’s apprenticeship program to further hone their skills.

“Enrollment into an apprenticeship program allows students to continue that education and create their own career path from apprentice one up through general foreman, and then into superintendent. Really what McCarthy is designed to do is take those entry-level folks, provide them the training and development they need to get from an entry-level position all the way up through superintendent and senior superintendent. The connection to industry, getting new folks into the industry and then providing them with a detailed training map all the way through their career progression is one of the benefits of coming to work at McCarthy,” Fields says.

In addition to their traditional onboarding program, McCarthy has also utilized the ICWC to train new hires in

prefabrication before putting them in the field. Individuals who are hired at McCarthy but have previous experience in the field do not go through the entire onboarding process, rather they are evaluated and put in the position that affords them the most opportunity and growth.

“What we’ve seen being successful there is new employees are working in a controlled environment. They’re taught how to use the tools properly. They gain a basic understanding of the parts and pieces required for installation. It’s really a great onboarding experience for new people entering the industry in a controlled environment before they’re put out onto construction projects,” Fields says.

The company’s forward-thinking approach to workforce development ensures that individuals, whether fresh out of high school or transitioning from other careers, have the opportunity to build lasting, successful careers in construction. As the demand for skilled tradespeople continues to rise, McCarthy’s model may prove crucial in shaping the future of the construction workforce — and in providing the next generation of craft professionals with the skills and support they need to thrive.

Through its training programs, apprenticeship opportunities, and strong ties to local educational institutions, McCarthy is playing a key role in shaping the future of construction — one skilled professional at a time. ■■■

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