

Building new

by Maureen Wilkey

What do you want to be when you grow up? If you're a student today, chances are you haven't thought about being a carpenter, a construction site superintendent or an estimator. And as the baby boomer generation of craftsmen and managers is starting to retire, the demand for new recruits to work at construction companies is ever increasing.

"We've realized that our success is largely dependent on the quality of the people that we recruit, so we have to increase our aggressiveness in recruiting every year," says Steve Fort, vice president and general manager with Turner Construction.

And with some colleges advertising 100 percent job placement rates upon graduation from their construction management programs, the recruiting business has become much more than just job fairs, says Tracy Hagen, the human resources manager with Turner. Companies are now offering students internships as early as the summer after their freshman year and students are more savvy about doing research on the internet about the companies they could potentially work for, she says.

"It starts as early as high school," Hagen says. "We have mentoring programs, internships, alumni going back to their schools to recruit people."

Students aren't looking just for a place to work, but rather for a career path, says Diane Laliberte, the human resources manager with Riis Borg Construction Co. They want a company that "fits" with them and provides benefits and a "work-life balance."

"A few years ago, if you needed someone, you put an ad in the paper," she says. "Now, the demand is higher than the supply."



Building contacts

In a market with a lot of competition for new employees, the existing employees can act as a face and personality for the employer, says Carla Prewitt, area talent manager for Bovis Lend Lease.

"There's a lot of networking that goes on in the industry today; the biggest part of recruiting employees is through the referral effort," she says. "Only a very small number come in through the website."

Bovis offers a referral program where existing employees can benefit financially by helping recruit new employees. The system works partially because it helps the company recruit experienced employees who may be already working at other companies, she says.

Tony Wygonski, vice president with International Contractors Inc. agrees. He says that he's not sure the company's website has really come into play at all because most of the recruiting is still done by word of mouth.

"We recruit at a few specific colleges throughout the Midwest," he says. "But most of it is just talking to the juniors and seniors and letting them know what we're all about."

Having a new employee with some backing and reputation is also important, says Bill Birck, president with Reed Illinois Corp.

"Quality people are always going to be in demand, but our first choice would be someone who has a relationship already with our architects or clients," he says. "If our client already knows they like someone, we'd be silly not to hire them."

And the existing employees also make a difference when it comes to keeping the employees that you hire, says Paul Chuma with Meridian Design Build. While his company has only been around for about three years, Chuma says he has been working with most of the senior staff for the better part of his careers.

"It's easier to maintain the people we have than it is to bring on new people," he says. "It's my personal perception that a lot of the recruiters are trying to steal away people who aren't happy at their company. We try to keep our workers happy and getting along so that they don't feel that way."

Starting young

One of the keys to getting new employees to feel like part of the team from the get-go is through internships. Programs that allow college students to earn money and gain experience by working for a company for the summer give them a taste of the company's culture, as well as put them on the fast

track to landing a full time position straight out of college, says Lynn Treat, director of field operations with the Ryan Cos. Ryan tries to let students intern for two years or more in order to let them experience life in the field as well as in the role of the project manager with more office responsibilities. "They have a better understanding of the job after they've had an internship," he says. "If they haven't had one, sometimes they aren't as sure of the expectations."

Glenn Berg, human resources director with Leopardo Construction, says in previous years the company had focused mainly on getting juniors and seniors into the internship programs, but as competition gets stiffer, the company is now recruiting some sophomores as well.

"If you have two summers of employment, you're shortening the time you have to put in before you get a promotion because you've already been on the job six months before you even start working after graduation," he says. "You also have an understanding of the protocol. You know the systems; you know our people."

At Principle Construction Corp., students can participate in traditional internships or apprenticeships, or they can take part in a co-op program that allows them to alternate working full time for the company for one semester and going to school for one semester. The program requires the students to spend five years in school, but also assures that they know what they're getting into when they are employed full time with a contractor, says Jim Brucato, the company's president.

"It's a win-win because we get a good employee coming out of school and they get 15 or 20 months of experience," he says. "It also shows they're willing to make a commitment because they're going to take an extra year of school to do it."

The staff at Turner says internships are important not only so the students can know the company before they begin their careers there, but also so the company can get to know the student.

"We want to be sure not just that we're getting quality workers, but that we're getting quality workers who are also a good fit for Turner," says Mark Simonides, vice president and operations manager with Turner Construction. "We're not just hiring for the sake of hiring; we want to make sure they are right for us."

Turner starts even earlier in students' lives with the ACE program. The program is geared towards high school students in lower income neighborhoods and aims to get those students to think about the trades as a viable route to success.

"We use it to introduce them to the area of construction and engineering," says Fort. "We want to get to them while they're making potential college choices to get them engaged in thinking about careers in construction."

With tradesmen retiring and fewer high schools offering shop classes, getting the idea of being a tradesman in students' heads early is going to become important in the near future, Berg says.

"When students are thinking about what they're going to do after high school, almost all of them are choosing college instead of trade school," he says. "They're focusing on other curriculums. In the 1970s, lots of guys were training to be tradesmen. In 10 years, it's going to be very hard to find a carpenter."

Often, young people see the trades as dirty professions and prefer jobs involving computers to those involving physical labor, Berg says.

But traditional students are being replaced with immigrant workers in many cases, says Treat.

"We've seen a lot of Eastern Europeans coming into the trades as a way of making money," he says.

"Several of the organizations are also going out of the grade schools to talk to kids who are good with their hands but may not have the educational skills to succeed otherwise."

Mastering the web

With the increase in educated construction professionals taking on roles as project managers and superintendents comes an increase in knowledge of the company they're working for through web content. Laliberte says that Riis Borg has put special efforts into keeping their website current and informative for new recruits.

"People are coming through general websites like Career Builder or Monster," she says. "They want to see if the company is going to fit their lifestyle as well as checking out what we're building. They know they're going to be happier at a company with a lot of projects going on."

Turner has branded their Turner Knowledge Network website to help students get a better feel of what is going on with their company. Fort says they're not just using the website as a source of information, but as a way to "do their homework" to know what questions they should ask of the employer during an interview.

"We have to have it as a method of keeping up with the current way students are communicating," he says. "They're using it as a means to get information so they're prepared to interact during an interview. They know more about the company than candidates did a few years ago."

Berg says Leopardo uses their website not just for information about their own company, but also to link to articles about trends in the industry and to display places the company has appeared in the news.

"You're selling the company just like you would sell a product," Berg says. "We're working a lot closer with marketing than we used to. People are recognizing that marketing is everything. We have more opportunity if we come together with marketing."

And often, the companies are recruiting at web-heavy campuses like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign or Purdue University, Chuma says. They come into the interviews with a better understanding of the company culture and what the employer is looking for.

"The younger people definitely do a lot of research on the web," he says. "They come in knowing who you are and what your process is. A lot of the people we were recruiting last year would have a question that started with 'I saw on your website ...'"

Higher education

One of the reasons companies are having an easier time recruiting students out of colleges is that construction management programs at major universities have come into their own in recent years. Instead of learning a single angle, like business, architecture or engineering, students are coming out of the programs with the whole package, Birck says.

"They're young and enthusiastic and full of good ideas," he says. "We were interviewing some candidates a while ago and one of the guys who had been here a while came out of the interview and said 'I don't think I could get a job here anymore.' They're coming out better prepared."

Treat says that while such programs give students good experience to students, contractors still value in-the-field experience. Both sets of skills have different qualities to offer, he says.

"It's totally different for someone to have five or six years of field skill versus a college degree, and no one can minimize that," he says. "And together with the kids with the college experience, they can be a good combination."