

Building Oregon's workforce pipeline: Meeting the region's talent needs in construction

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The cranes continue to take prominence in Portland's landscape as the city is witnessing unprecedented growth from regional infrastructure investments. Construction is Oregon's fastest-growing sector, expanding by nearly 10 percent in the last year, according to the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI). Like the rest of the nation, the demand for skilled labor is at a critical juncture in Oregon. In the Portland metro area, this demand is increasing, as demonstrated by the 2018 labor market study commissioned by Metro and the City of Portland.

Career opportunities in the construction industry, however, have not historically been accessible to everyone in the community. As our region is rapidly becoming more diverse, there is significant opportunity for this increased diversity to be reflected in business growth, workforce training, and employment, who can benefit from strategic investment in a sector approach prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion.

The regional and collaborative approach connecting minority-owned businesses and under-represented workforce to the opportunities in the construction sector, both growth across the industry and significant economic reinvestment can be made to benefit communities across the region. With a focus on workforce, Oregon Tradeswomen is an example of a nonprofit organization that helps bridge the gap in connecting historically underrepresented populations to opportunities in the skilled trades workforce – an industry hungry for talent.

Established in 1989, Oregon Tradeswomen provides pre-apprenticeship training to women who want to pursue a career in the skilled trades and manufacturing. Pre-apprenticeship, also known as workforce readiness training, has gained more attention over the last few years since the U.S. Department of Labor set standards for the model in our industry in 2012. Oregon Tradeswomen, along with other BOLI certified pre-apprenticeship training programs, successfully provides quality training, support services, and job placement at no cost to our region's workforce.

With Portland's construction boom, Oregon Tradeswomen recognized an opportunity to help industry fill the severe shortage in skilled talent while also increasing diversity and equity in the sector's workforce. In collaboration with community and industry partners, Oregon Tradeswomen is helping to build a pipeline of skilled workers, ensure that women and people of color have access to these good jobs, and that equitable practices and respectful jobsite cultures support retention of regional talent in the industry.

In a June 2017 report by Portland State University, researchers Maura Kelly and Lindsey Wilkinson on the value of pre-apprenticeship for the construction industry, key findings show that pre-apprenticeship program enrollment, completion, and placement in apprenticeship are all increasing. Pre-apprenticeship graduates comprise a larger percentage of apprentices across the state, and these programs play a significant role in recruiting marginalized workers, particularly women, into apprenticeships. In Oregon, women make up almost 7% of the state's apprentices in the construction trades, while nationally that percentage is a mere 3%. Oregon Tradeswomen's placement rate of program graduates is 87% and through continued collaboration with industry stakeholders, can be even higher.

As employers in the construction industry acknowledge the need to attract a more diverse talent pool, pre-apprenticeship can be a significant tool to close the labor gap. Oregon Tradeswomen has expanded its training program by engaging with industry partners and by investments from community partners, including Bank of America, whose financial support and extensive resources have helped to build capacity to meet industry needs and to build a workforce that better reflects our community. In 2017 alone, Oregon Tradeswomen provided more than 1,000 women with career education and resources to pursue a career in construction and manufacturing, and placing hundreds of graduates in jobs and apprenticeships earning living wages.

With support from community and industry partners, Oregon Tradeswomen ensures women are able to move themselves and their families out of poverty and into prosperity while concurrently supporting industry and our region's workforce.

Learn more about Oregon Tradeswomen and how your business can partner with us to meet the growing workforce needs in construction in our region. Opportunities vary from investing with us in training workforce, participating in our annual Career Fair, joining us as a Business Member, or supporting us as a sponsor at one of our annual events.

Oregon Tradeswomen is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization that transforms lives by building economic independence through training, career education, advocacy, and leadership development in the skilled trades.