

McCarthy helps build the workforce that builds St. Louis

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The cranes, bulldozers and new structures that continue to rise across the region are visible signs of a strong, healthy local economy.

But behind this building boom is a stark reality: St. Louis faces a growing shortage of skilled construction workers.

As a growing number of skilled tradesmen near retirement, industry leaders recognize the urgency of building a new generation of construction talent. “I’ve experienced numerous economic cycles during my construction career of over 20 years, but the latest labor shortage is one that we must take seriously — and address at every phase of workforce development,” said Jeff Boyer, vice president, operations at McCarthy Building Companies.

In a recent survey conducted by the Associated General Contractors of America, 78 percent of construction firms report having a difficult time finding qualified workers to hire, 82 percent of them expect this challenging scenario to continue throughout 2018.

“Our businesses can only be as successful as the talent we attract,” said Kathy Osborn, president and CEO of the Regional Business Council, a consortium of executives representing 100 of the region’s largest employers. “McCarthy and other local companies are putting their time and resources behind unique partnerships to develop the skilled workforce pipeline that not only benefits them, but the entire region.”

Building the next generation of construction workers begins with reaching out to elementary, middle-school and high-school students to introduce them to potential construction careers.

“We need to expose young students to the many facets of the construction trades — from electrical and plumbing work to carpentry and general construction,” said Boyer. “Construction is a gratifying career where you can earn an excellent living while bringing real value to the community. There is nothing better than driving by a project and knowing you had a hand in building it.”

Vocational training programs at institutions such as Ranken Technical College, which offers a variety of construction degree programs, are key to building the talent pipeline.

McCarthy President and Chief Operating Officer Scott Wittkop serves on Ranken’s board of trustees and Visualization Manager Chris Campbell participates on the technology advisory board for the college’s architecture programs.

Because hands-on training is vital to building a construction career, McCarthy offers a trades internship program that enables individuals with little or no construction experience to work side-by-side with experienced tradesmen. Successful candidates have the opportunity to become a union apprentice, begin apprentice training and launch a career in the construction trades. And the company's carpenter apprentice internship embeds university students on a working commercial construction crew alongside tenured carpenter journeymen, apprentices and foremen.

Employees at Castle Contracting benefit from ongoing training opportunities that include an apprentice development program, foreman development program and foreman training program. "We take our people from one level to the next so they can broaden their knowledge, round out their skillset and grow in their careers," said Michael Pranger, vice president, operations at Castle Contracting.

Diversifying the workforce

McCarthy actively supports community training programs such the BUD (Building Union Diversity) pre-apprenticeship program, which focuses on expanding the construction talent pool within the area's minority and women population.

More than 130 individuals have graduated from the BUD program since 2014, with an 87 percent job placement rate.

"We give participants the best possible experience to help them be successful as they progress through their apprenticeship programs and into their careers," said BUD Program Director Russ Signorino. "We can't do what we do without the partnerships we have with local construction companies like McCarthy, workforce development agencies, nonprofit organizations and the trades themselves. It's that collaborative effort that helps us move the program and community forward."

The growing diversity of the construction workforce is key to meeting the region's ongoing construction needs, agrees John Stiffler, executive secretary-treasurer of the St. Louis Building Trades Council. "The future workforce looks much more like the community we serve than it used to," he said. "There are many more people of color and women, and that's really important for the industry to thrive."

Stiffler focuses on opening people's eyes to the many construction opportunities available. "You can make an excellent living, while building structures you can show to your children and grandchildren," he said. "It's a career that you can look back on with pride and dignity."