



## How Can Building Professionals Improve Training?

Success will likely come from robust in-house programs

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

**JLC recently ran** an online survey to gauge how building professionals might improve skills training. The need is obvious. We have been hearing about the shortage of construction labor for more than a decade, and the problem only seems to have gotten worse. The labor shortfall has no doubt been fueled by the pandemic, but our industry's labor woes began well before this. Overcoming the shortfall will require more deliberate training and education programs, and our survey centered on the premise that more effective on-the-job training is a natural but largely understudied first place to focus industry efforts. Trades schools, educational reforms, manufacturer-based installer programs, trade shows and conferences, union apprenticeships, and self-guided education are all part of the equation. But we at JLC, guided by an informal collaboration with M.T. Copeland, a company dedicated to providing video-based skills training for the construction workforce, feel strongly that professional building and remodel-

ing firms, which are engaged in on-the-job training by necessity, have the greatest chance of moving the needle to close the skills gap. At the heart of this proposal, however, are some fundamental questions about how companies are structured, how they handle hiring and management, and how they can better afford to develop formal, structured training for production staff.

### PART OF A BIGGER ISSUE

One respondent was disappointed that we pitched the survey as part of "solving the skilled trades gap" without asking about compensation. The respondent wrote, "The easiest sure-fire way to close the skilled trades gap is to both pay a good wage with good benefits and provide secure/steady work for tradespeople. Over time, this will both retain good people and attract new people into what can be a reasonable career path." This is a supremely important point but one that needs some unpacking; absolutely,



A good lead carpenter is the most effective teacher of building skills, bar none. But a company needs to account for the lead carpenter's loss of productivity—a detail that can frustrate lead carpenter and business owner alike when not addressed.

companies need to offer strong wages and benefits and (to add more) provide a compelling company culture and even offer flexible work hours to be competitive with other industries that are also trying to attract workers. However, we can't *just* look at pay and benefits as a solution. There is a finite number of people with skills to attract. It's a problem of demographics: Those most skilled will age out soon, if they haven't already. Ultimately, we have to solve the skills gap by bringing younger people onto the scene; that includes taking steps to expand the talent pool by attracting more women, Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, all of whom are vastly underrepresented in the construction workforce relative to the population as a whole.

The aforementioned respondent invoked "a reasonable career path," and I agree that to accomplish this vital demographic shift, we need to give prospective workers a strong sense they are building a career, not just filling a job. Along with the prospect of building a rewarding career will come a vital sense of professionalism, which we need to support at every turn to elevate the social status of construction work; positive opinions about construction workers are painfully lacking in our culture. But at the heart of the quest for a more engaged workforce is the vital question: How will we impart the required skills to the next generation of carpenters?

#### THE HIRING PROCESS

Finding qualified help is the first step to building a skilled crew.

A common response to the question "What is your hiring process for new carpenters and other skilled tradespeople?" was that the "skilled" part is optional. As one respondent wrote: "At this point it's hard to be picky so I mostly look for someone with a good attitude and willingness to learn." Indeed, "attitude," "work ethic," "character," "personality," and "integrity" factored into a majority of responses as top qualifications for prospective hires. Some added "intelligence," "thoughtfulness," "ability to communicate,"

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and "eagerness to learn." As another respondent wrote: "Skills can be taught; attitude is hard to teach ... If they simply care about what they do, they will learn the skills because they *want to*, and they will produce a quality product because they *want to*, and they will show up to work every day because they *want to*."

Most respondents described a conventional hiring process that includes reviewing an applicant's resume and conducting a verbal interview followed by an on-site evaluation of the applicant. A few

Photo: Sara Lukaszewicz





Mike Guertin is one of the stand-out building skills instructors at JLC Live and Remodeling Show/Deck Expo. These educational events, now run by the international exhibitions company Informa Markets, have become a key element in many residential contractors' continuing education efforts. Even when most professional building and remodeling firms don't offer a formal, structured employee education program, respondents say that such yearly continuing education for crews offers an effective training option.

rely on word-of-mouth referrals to vet applicants. One respondent uses "social media to screen applicants." A number indicated that asking to see pictures of prior work (which may be part of the applicant's social media postings) is an effective way to gauge applicant skill, experience, and overall excitement with building.

Doug Howard of Remodelers Advantage urges that "hiring is not a single act, but a process ... to be effective in catapulting a company forward, the hiring process needs to start earlier and last longer than you might at first expect." Howard's perspective underpins a handful of respondents who indicated they deliberately extend hiring beyond the offer to include a "trial" or "evaluation" period. Different respondents expressed it differently, but there was a recurring suggestion that it takes time to evaluate skills. As one respondent elaborated: "I will put them with a crew and get feedback from the foremen. All people are apprehensive on a new job, and also, there are certain personality conflicts that arise at first. I give them a month. By then I know the score."

As to starting earlier, one respondent offered the practical suggestion of maintaining an online application to allow a company to always be collecting prospects to job postings. This strategy is consistent with an "always be hiring" strategy that some companies have been advocating in the current market, when so many firms have a backlog of work and demand has far outstripped most companies' ability to complete jobs. In this business climate, a company cannot begin to hire just when it has a vacancy but must always be searching for prospects.

#### STRUCTURED IN-HOUSE EDUCATION

When asked, "Does your company have a formal, structured training program for either new hires or existing crew members?"

90% of respondents responded, "No." But 25% of these indicated in one way or another that they should or would like to. More than half of responses (including some among those indicating "no") elaborated that "OTJ," or on-the-job, training (also expressed as "working alongside new hires" and "working closely with a lead carpenter" or with a "foreman") was the way they brought their crew up to speed on skills.

From the few respondents that indicated they ran some level of formal in-house training, here are some examples:

"For apprentice carpenters, we take them through the book *Modern Carpentry* [published by Goodheart-Wilcox; G-W partners with YouScience to correlate this textbook with a standards test]. At the end of the course, they take a test where they can receive a certificate. Lead carpenters are required to become Certified Lead Carpenters [via National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI)]. In addition, we train all new employees on key areas for our company, like setting a door, flashing windows and doors, and dust protection."

"We have a training agenda once every month usually on prints, specs, shop drawings, etc. The workforce dictates the year's training sessions on what they feel is most beneficial to their respective duties. We are a GC with laborers, carpenters, and concrete masons."

"Once a month we meet at the shop for a company-wide training session, usually an hour. Effectiveness is varied, but still beneficial. I'd say teaching the teachers is where we are missing the opportunity with monthly training."

"For new hires, we have several unlisted YouTube videos [made by the respondent's company and posted to its channel] that focus on different materials and techniques that are intended to bring a new person up to speed on baseline skills very quickly. We send

Photo: Andy Wornier

## One respondent noted, “A company always pays for training, even if it’s never a line item in the budget.” Indeed, mistakes and reduced productivity take their toll.

the link out to anyone who comes in for a tryout, so that the crew they are paired with isn’t saddled with having to maintain production while holding the new guy’s hand ... But there’s no substitute for hours and hours of actual practice. From that point, the company will pay for basic building science courses for anyone who’s interested (such as BPI Building Science Principles). We also have a company-wide meeting every Monday morning and frequently discuss a detail or technique that needs attention, and usually apply a building science concept to that so the crew develops ‘building as a system’ thinking.”

“As a GC, the work is varied. Being able to formalize the training would also allow us to assess skill set, which would help establish wages, instead of the current instinctual guess.”

While few companies are offering structured in-house programming to employees, a solid 75% lean on “continuing education” opportunities. Trade shows (including JLC Live, Remodeling Show, Deck Expo, and the International Builder’s Show) and training events organized at lumberyards are the most often cited.

One respondent added: “We believe all of our employees should

be pursuing some level of college education whether an associate degree or preferably beyond. Also specialty training in products and work protocols is considered critical. The formal education will (in our opinion) lead to a better grasp of why certain product installation requirements are important and not just ‘a case of over-design’ by the A/E team.”

“Creating a training program ourselves is going to be a long, slow process—hard to find the time for developing that. Having a trusted outside training program would be ideal.”

### TRAINING CONTENT

It came as no surprise that almost all respondents think that “hands-on” or “in-person” training is the most effective method of instruction. This was often joined with “by far” or “no substitute” or the like. Still, there was a stronger vote for other formats than I expected. “Video” and “online” material tied with “books,” “textbooks,” and “magazines” for about 30% of responses mentioning these as viable supplements to reinforce training; few think of it as an alternative.

A handful of respondents indicated that online alternatives work especially well at the beginning of the training process or to train on specific products but are less effective for learning how to problem solve. The quality of the content, not just the format, also mattered to respondents, with many questioning the reliability of much of what can currently be found on YouTube and through search.

### TRAINING BUDGET

As with formal in-house training, almost none of the respondents have a training budget, but about 16% of respondents indicated it would be a worthwhile overhead expense to add. A few who do budget for training offered varied advice: “Our budget is informal, but it would be about \$1,500 per employee in first year if they take full advantage of and are approved for the programs; probably about \$500 to \$750 each year after that.”

“We do have a small budget that we automatically add to every month (0.5% of revenue) for continuing education, subscriptions to trades media, etc.”

“Training and training budgets have to be built into the job costs and marked up as well.”

Paying for training may be inevitable. As one respondent noted: “A company always pays for training, even if it’s never a line item in the budget.” Indeed, mistakes and reduced productivity take their toll. Another echoed: “The industry is changing more rapidly than ever, and the customers and lawyers have made it clear there’s no room for ignorance.” To control costs and reduce risk, a deliberate spend on training could be the best course of action.



Elly Hart, a production manager on high-end multifamily developments, offers an in-depth course on reading commercial blueprints—one of many video-based training courses offered by M.T. Copeland. As courses like this come online, building professionals are discovering that high-quality video runs a close second to hands-on training and on-the-job experience. And for some technical skills that require a lot of study, video may be the place to start.

Photo courtesy M.T. Copeland