

Labor

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There are 197,421 apprentices in the construction industry.

Photo courtesy of Banco

Construction Jobs Hard to Fill Despite Apprenticeship Comeback

[Jennie L Phipps](#)

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The number of apprentices in the construction industry is rising, but apprenticeships and jobs are still hard to fill, even with a labor shortage.

Associated General Contractors (AGC) of America, whose members come from both union and nonunion companies, reported in 2022 [that 91% had open positions they couldn't fill](#). Why? One reason is that older workers are retiring. Also, demand for the kinds of skills workers in the construction industry possess is increasing compared to other industries. And most telling: 77% of AGC respondents said job candidates aren't qualified. They either lack job skills – or they can't pass a drug test.

At the same time, [Apprenticeship USA](#), a U.S Dept. of Labor resource for apprenticeship information, reports the number of active apprentices in construction rose by 64% between 2013 and 2023. There were 197,421 apprentices in the construction industry in 2021.

Leonard Toenjes, president of AGC of Missouri and a member of the Missouri Workforce Development Board, said despite attractive starting wages, benefits and low or no tuition costs, attracting knowledgeable and physically able people into apprenticeship programs continues to be a challenge.

"We really have to work harder at recruiting than I've ever seen. People are not coming knocking at the door. We're going to departments of corrections; we're going to drug rehab; we're going to military veterans; and to traditional high schools," Toenjes says.

Among the stumbling blocks to recruitment he cited negative attitudes toward the construction industry in general making it harder to convince the uninformed and inexperienced that a career in the construction industry can provide a good life and income.

"Somewhere we lost the sense of the honor of working with your hands," Toenjes says. "The respect that came with being an artisan and a craftsman degenerated into Joe Six Pack and Plumbers' Crack."

Image improvement needed

Overcoming that challenge requires effort. "There have been a lot of people doing a lot of work to restore the image and the honor of construction as a profession, demonstrating that both physical skills and cognitive abilities are required to be successful in construction," Toenjes says.

The best candidates sometimes turn out to be nontraditional students, says Sean Thouvenot, vice president of Branco Enterprises, a general contracting firm based in Springfield and Neosho, Mo. Branco has operated an apprenticeship program since 1993. Students work for Branco four days a week, go to class at [Crowder College](#) in Neosho on Fridays, and finish with a two-year degree.

That sounds like a sweet deal, but getting people to sign up isn't easy, Thouvenot says. "Traditionally, we would look for high school students. We would recruit farm kids because they were used to working sun up to sun down and getting room and board. But in the last few years that hasn't worked for us. We've had more success recruiting non-traditional students ... somebody who has taken a job somewhere else or went to college and decided that wasn't what they wanted.

At 21-24 years old, an apprenticeship program sounds good to them," Thouvenot says.

Unions Offer Most Apprenticeships

Union apprenticeship programs train 7 out of 10 construction apprentices in the U.S. In the world of collective bargaining, employees are portable among employers who sponsor the apprenticeship system and pay for it. In the open-shop world, there is no such sharing.

"That creates some challenges around the portability of employees. If I'm going to train somebody and put them through an apprenticeship program, I certainly have some expectations that they're going to stay with me and, and not move into a larger labor pool," Toenjes says.

Branco's Thouvenot says that in less competitive days, nonunion shops like his could get away with paying less, but today they have to match union wages and benefits to find good people and succeed.

But Cihan Bilginsoy, emeritus professor of economics at the University of Utah and an expert on construction economics, says the real problem in the U.S. is "a market failure problem."

He says that in countries like Germany, where wage agreements affect almost all workers and companies are required to support apprenticeship programs, "they pool resources and train workers."

"The real question in the U.S. is whether we are going to select a high-road construction industry, which relies on skilled workers, high productivity workers, high wage workers, or are we going to select a low-wage or low-road in construction, which is going to rely on lower productivity workers, lower wage workers, and semiskilled workers," Bilginsoy says.

The ACG reports that the hardest construction jobs to fill, based on the percentage of companies that are searching for people with those skills, are: pipefitters, 89%; concrete workers, 87%, pipe layers, carpenters, and iron workers, 85%, installers and heavy equipment operators, 83%; bricklayers and plumbers, 82%; and project managers, 81%.

Apprenticeship USA reports that the states with the most apprenticeship programs in 2023 include these in the Midwest:

State	Apprentices in 2023	Average Apprentice wage
Ohio	21,170	\$17.08
Illinois	17,621	\$21.54
Michigan	17,235	\$19.21
Missouri	17,223	\$18.84
Indiana	17,095	\$17.68
Wisconsin	11,554	\$19.86

Iowa	10,359	\$18.61
Kentucky	4,762	\$17.25
Nebraska	4,015	\$15
Kansas	2,199	\$17.92

Here Come the Robots

As the industry looks forward, the need to provide training seems inevitable. Toenjes, who started his career as a carpenter's apprentice, says the trades that are the least vulnerable to robots are the ones that may give new trainees the most opportunities. That potentially includes any trade that requires the sophisticated intellectual and hands-on skills that an apprenticeship program can provide. "Not that they're totally immune to technology advances, but having diversified skills is important. The more you can diversify your skills within a craft, the higher demand," he says.

Recent research shows another reason to adopt an apprentice program. Researchers from the Washington State Dept. of Labor and Industries [compared workers' compensation claims between 2000 and 2018](#). The researchers found that journey-level plumbers, both union and nonunion who graduated from apprenticeship programs had workers' compensation claim rates 31% lower than plumbers with no apprenticeship training.

This is a good economic argument for training, Bilginsoy said. "Apprenticeship programs cost, but it is a necessary cost. Without it, you are going to have lower productivity, lower quality construction, more breakdowns, and construction that takes longer. Not training is going to create even greater costs down the line."