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Question of the Month: How is education shaping the construction industry today?

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Long gone are the days of an abundance of new skilled workers who can complete tasks ranging from sitework to electrical - today we're faced with a shortage of young professionals who have the hands-on experience and skills necessary to navigate the construction site. More and more, students entering college are seeking a plush desk job after graduation. To make matters worse, there is also a lack of educational institutions which offer construction related programs. Where does this leave us? This task becomes more difficult than ever leaving business owners, human resource managers, and project managers responsible to staff and manage complex, multi-million dollar projects with thin margins and greater risk.

As business owners, we must deal with adversity and use this situation to our benefit. Every downdraft is followed by an updraft - despite a declining skilled workforce, there is also a surplus of college educated young professionals looking for a job. It is our challenge to take the communications major, and turn him or her into a hard working laborer - then a skilled carpenter - then a multifaceted superintendent - and then a resilient project manager...the progression goes on. As a third generation family business looking to secure our future, our objective is to educate each of our employees in processes that will take us to our goals. We look to standardize and streamline each and every pathway regardless of what it must take us - hours of training, and tedious software setup come to mind. We must utilize the latest in construction software just to remain competitive - and even then, who can compete with a 0% fee?!

As a company, and I believe an industry, contractors have become extremely more service oriented and must become experts at disseminating the information outputted by these complex computing systems. Let me qualify that statement - GIGO, or, garbage in, garbage out - It all begins with the data entry and user skill. Enter a new college graduate. I challenge anyone to find a college aged individual who cannot master a computer program in a matter of minutes, or hours.

So let me recap: We have a declining skilled workforce, a surplus of educated, computer literate young professionals seeking jobs, and a construction industry which is fastly becoming computerized and service related...I see a great opportunity.

I see the opportunity for construction firms to become purveyors of information as well as bricks and mortar. Information for the owner is key in today's environment. When they ask for a cost analysis, cash flow projection or long lead procurement schedules, we must be poised and in a position to deliver. In today's world, the only thing that will allow any of this to happen, is simple. Education in the business, education in the processes required to disseminate that information and education in how to make your company lead all others.

However, we must continuously educate our employees in order to remain competitive. We must pair these young, educated individuals with industry veterans so that they can parlay insight only

learned after years of experience. The symbiotic relationship works both ways requiring the tech savvy young gun to return the lesson and instruct the veterans on how to utilize new technology to it's fullest potential.

As in any industry, there is a natural diffusion of innovation when a new technology or way of business is developed. Some people are eager to adopt new technology and we call them innovators and early adopters. This group of technology entrepreneurs tend to have a high risk/reward complex; they tend to be opinion leaders; they tend to take a risk with the hope of a large reward by investing resources in new ideas and technology. As an industry we must not fall into the last category on the spectrum, laggards. Those are the people who are afraid of change, afraid to take a risk, afraid to invest, and afraid to evolve. We must be willing to challenge ourselves and become the groundbreakers, think outside of the box, and be the opinion leaders. As an industry we can achieve this through social learning and openness.

This transformation and excellence begins with education. Education plays a key and vital role in our industry today and into the future. Gone forever are the days of takeoffs from an 8 1/2 x 11 sketch. Is it still done "old school"? Sure it is. But, can any company be competitive in this economy and survive "old school?" Our industry today requires extensive knowledge in computer literacy. Can we learn by doing? We must be ready to excel.

Peter Zlotnick is vice president and corporate secretary of Zlotnick Construction, Mansfield Center, Conn.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540