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Construction industry balances optimism with lack of skilled workers - by Mike Dion

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When a new year rolls in, so do revived feelings of eagerness, motivation, and optimism. While the economy continues to improve, many in the construction industry look to an opportunistic year in 2017.

With a national unemployment rate at 4.8%, and 227,000 new jobs added in January, 2017, the new year is already seeming to project good fortunes overall. Among those 227,000 jobs, the construction field is happy to boast adding 36,000 to the workforce. Here in the New England area, Boston's commercial and multifamily building construction is up 50% from 2015, with a total of \$7.58 billion in starts for 2016. Some of the contributing factors to this substantial growth included continued low interest rates, and more lenient lending standards from banks to business.

While all signs point toward a bright future, there is still one glaring concern for employers in construction: who is going to do the work?

The newest and biggest challenge facing construction is the lack of skilled laborers. This is not just a local concern - it's a national one. Cities across the United States are reaping the benefits of a growing construction world, but are left without the manpower. The Department of Labor is seeing its highest ratio of job openings to construction businesses hiring since 2007.

Despite this looming concern, New Hampshire has continued to see positive changes in the construction workforce. In December, 2016, NH held a construction unemployment rate of 4.7% - a percentage ranked amongst the lowest five in the country. In April of last year, Vermont was able to boast a rise in overall employment with construction being the highest performer, and specifically saw a sharp increase of hiring in the construction field.

As part of ABC, our job doesn't necessarily stop when we leave the office. If we want to see our field thrive and further grow in 2017, it is up to the veterans currently in the field to motivate people

to follow their ambition into skilled work and trade. ABC has, and continues to encourage growth in training and workforce development.

With the arrival of a new year comes high hopes in the construction field for 2017. It is important to share that optimism with potential workers, and encourage them to become a part of our workforce. It is encouraging to see that employers are already trying to incentivize new workers by offering higher pay and other benefits. Other solutions include promoting the values of ABC, the programs we offer, encouraging Young Professionals Group involvement, training and education, as well as encouraging high school and college-aged students to explore the many career paths within the construction industry through promoted school recruiting events. By implementing these solutions, we can ensure success for our workforce and our industry while we also enjoy what looks to be a prosperous 2017.

Mike Dion is president of Metro Walls and Exterior Designs, Manchester, N.H. and Atlantic PreFab, Nashua, N.H. and is the 2017 chairman of the board Associated Builders and Contractors New Hampshire/Vermont chapter, Bedford, N.H.

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