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Building the future together: More opportunities for women to enter and advance in the industry - by Lori Peters

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Going back to the time when stones were used as hammers and fast-forwarding through the Industrial Revolution, which established the construction industry as we know it today, construction has evolved in many ways. Despite this, the construction industry today still evokes images of men in hard hats and work boots and remains a largely male-dominated industry. Although women account for 43% of the workforce, they comprise only 9% of the construction workforce – but, fortunately, this figure is beginning to change.

Over the last year, construction has experienced a cultural and technological transformation that shows no signs of letting up. A variety of factors have led the industry to this watershed moment, including stagnant productivity, a skilled labor shortage, and an influx of digital attention and investment. Faced with growing construction activity and a lack of available labor, contractors have turned to emerging construction technologies to optimize resources in place and attract the next generation of workers. We are now in uncharted territory, and there are greenfield opportunities for women to enter and advance in the industry.

The New Digital Toolbox

Without a pipeline of experienced and skilled workers ready to go, contractors have had to attack the problem from another angle and are increasingly leveraging IoT-enabled technologies to harness their most valuable resources on site. Armed with smart devices and real-time tools that connect the field to the back office, contractors are eliminating manual processes and unlocking efficiency. With tools to increase visibility, detect safety incidents, automate time and attendance, and provide access to the latest blueprints, companies are maximizing resources and building smarter than before.

Additionally, leading contractors like Suffolk and Skanska are taking an enterprise-wide approach to innovation and creating formal R&D strategies and processes for identifying, evaluating and adopting technology. For younger workers who expect technology in the workplace and prioritize opportunities for on-the-job growth, personal development and cross-training, this helps attract a new, traditionally underrepresented population into the construction industry. Leading firms are

developing dedicated innovation or construction technology positions – something that 69% of BuiltWorlds’ “50 Adoption Leaders” expect to grow significantly over the next year.

This focus on – and embrace of – technology is working to shed construction’s reputation as one of the least digitized U.S. industries. According to KPMG’s 2017 Global Construction Survey, an overwhelming 93% of respondents think technology/innovation will significantly impact their business. In 2017, the number of respondents who consider mobile capabilities “important” to “very important” jumped by nearly one-quarter since the JBKnowledge Construction Technology Report was first launched in 2012 – a clear sign of the times.

Shattering Stereotypes

This digital revolution is breaking traditional construction industry stereotypes, showing young women – and men – that they can be part of something innovative and rewarding. Twelve of the 20 ENR New York’s 2018 Top Young Professionals were female, and organizations nationwide are working to increase the female labor pipeline by reaching out to them well before they reach the jobsite. The Boston-based Policy Group on Tradeswomen’s Issue, for example, collaborates with local project owners to meet and expand hiring goals and develop apprentice programs, and is striving for 20% female participation on projects by 2020.

By encouraging a younger generation of workers, especially women, to join the construction industry, contractors are helping to bridge the industry’s skilled and technical labor gap, and by committing to technology innovations, they are helping to ensure a diverse, sustainable, bright future.

Creating the New Face of Construction

With all the activity, investment, and innovation that is happening in construction right now, there has never been a better – or more exciting – time to be involved in the industry. This opportunity, however, will be squandered if we don’t work together to attract a more diverse generation of workers and solve continued safety and productivity challenges with the latest tools and technologies.

It feels fitting, therefore, that almost one year to the day that I switched industries to join a growing construction technology company, I will be attending the Construction Institute’s 3rd Annual Women Who Build Summit, an event that champions women leaders making a difference in the AEC industry and beyond. By giving everyone a seat at the table, examining our current processes, barriers and challenges, and embracing innovation in all forms, we can ensure a smarter, more profitable future for construction.

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