

Women in Construction: We've Come a Long Way, But Have a Long Way to Go

Think about the impression that's made when a young girl's mother loves to work with power tools and together they build fun projects on the weekends. And when considering her college major talks with her dad about getting a degree in engineering and he encourages her non-traditional ambitions. When she graduates with a degree in engineering, she is one of only four women out of a group of 50 students in construction.

These experiences can have a profound influence not only on shaping a young girl's interest in construction, but also preparing her for a career in a traditionally male industry. I know because it is my story.

Women in Construction Week in March reminds all women in construction of our shared responsibility to do whatever we can to introduce young girls to the world of opportunities available to them in construction, where every day is different and tangible results are built to last.

Exposure is the key. We need to talk with our daughters, nieces and the girls who live next door. We need to participate in career days at local schools and actively participate at STEM career events. We need to encourage girls to build with Legos and play with dump trucks. And we need to get the message across that whether girls like designing, creating art, writing, math, solving problems, working on computers, interacting with people or using their hands – the construction industry will allow them to be the best they can be.

My own 15-year career roadmap is a good example. After getting my foot in the door as an intern working on heavy civil/highway work, I have also managed work as a MEP superintendent and assistant project manager. But what really grabbed my attention was the emergence of 3D coordination and the use of building information modeling (BIM) to streamline and improve coordination efforts throughout the lifecycle of the project. Today I'm loving my career as a Virtual Design and Construction (VDC) manager where my most recent project is a new 16-story inpatient tower for Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis.

I've been fortunate to serve many different roles on projects throughout my career, and I want to break down the myth that there are limited opportunities for women in construction. Our industry needs great people, regardless of gender, race, age or any other characteristics. Women can and do perform any role on a project that grabs their interest. It's not about what you look like, it is the passion, enthusiasm, expertise and drive that you bring to the role that's important.

One of my colleagues, Beth Barton, a carpenter foreman, has a different story. Growing up on a hog farm in rural Missouri, she always enjoyed working with her hands. When she made the decision to become a carpenter, she was the only woman in a class of 200 at the local union apprenticeship program. Thanks to lots of support and her determination, she achieved her goal, and today she is one of the construction trade's strongest advocates.

Beth sees her role as an opportunity to show other young women that construction can be a terrific, rewarding career option. From 2008 until 2021 she served as a founding member and president of the Missouri Women in Trades (www.MOWIT.org) organization, which helps women succeed in the industry by serving as a support group to cope with challenges, as well as to learn ways to advance in their careers.

The positive attitude, experience, and energy that she brings to the jobsite every day has garnered her the respect and admiration of the entire team. She is great to work with and I am excited to get to spend the next few years learning from her.

Valuing Women in Construction

Despite many advances, the construction industry is still challenged to attract women. Even before today's current labor shortage, many companies understood that diversity of backgrounds, experiences and opinions contribute to success both on the construction site and behind the scenes.

Women currently make up just nine percent of the U.S. construction workforce, which is one of the reasons McCarthy committed several years ago to ensuring that number continues to rise. To equip female employees for long-term success, the company developed a two-year career development program, McCarthy Partnership for Women, a national employee resource group that supports a diverse and inclusive work environment within the company.

The Partnership is focused on providing women new to the company with personal and professional development opportunities. The curriculum includes strategic communication, negotiation, decision-making and other topics that help women be more effective in their jobs.

Throughout McCarthy, there's strong support toward driving diversity of perspectives to help deliver even better results for our clients and provide a rewarding culture for our employees.

Dispelling Construction Myths

All too frequently, women avoid considering construction careers because they have an inaccurate perception of the industry as a rough, tough, good-old-boy profession. The way TV portrays construction is not accurate at all. Folks in the field take a lot of pride in the work that they do, and there's a real community that extends all the way to the office.

When starting a career in construction there is no expectation that you already know how to build, the expectation is that you know how to learn and that you are excited, willing, and able to dive in and start figuring it out.

A really important skill is the ability to listen, to take in a whole lot of information from different sources, sort through it, and collaborate as a team to develop a plan and a vision for going forward. The higher you advance in the field, the more interpersonal "soft" skills are needed to be successful. And as in any industry, the key to success depends on the ability to plan, communicate and engage your team in the process, helping everyone work towards the ultimate goal. Many women are unaware of how much management of data, interpersonal communication and consensus-building are required in this industry, and statistically speaking women often excel in these areas.

Dispelling these construction myths is key to attracting more females to the profession because once on board, women find out that it can be a really exciting profession with so many opportunities, and no two days are ever the same, which is one of the things that I love the most.

At the end of the day, construction is a career path that is open to anyone and everyone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kara Lewandowski, Manager, Virtual Design and Construction for McCarthy Building Companies since August 2020 (with McCarthy since Oct. 2015), also has prior experience as a project superintendent, assistant project manager, and field/office engineer. McCarthy Building Companies, which is 100 percent employee-owned, is the oldest privately held national construction company in the nation, and has approximately 5,000 salaried employees and craft professionals. More information about the company is available online at www.mccarthy.com

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