

It's Time to Coordinate Our Work Force Solutions



BY MICHAEL KENIG

WE ARE FACING A SHORTAGE OF SKILLED WORKERS. We hear that message almost daily. Many reports say the shortages are already here. We have heard the reasons: an aging work force, letting 30%

of our people go during the recent downturn, a weak immigration policy, bad industry image and students unaware of construction career opportunities. The time to focus on solutions is now.

The shortage must be solved at the local level, but first we need a national strategy. In mid-February, President Barack Obama wrote a letter of apology to Ann Johns, an art history professor at the University of Texas.

The last sentence of his letter said: "... [Please] understand that I was trying to encourage young people who may not be predisposed to a four-year college experience to be open to technical training that can lead them to an honorable career."

The president was responding to an e-mail he received after a Jan. 30 speech in Wisconsin. He encouraged the expansion of training programs: "A lot of young people no longer see the trades and skilled manufacturing as a viable career, but I promise you, folks can make a lot more potentially with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree."

Though he obviously did not mean to throw an entire field of study (art history) under the bus, we applaud the president for his main point—that a career based on technical skills can be honorable.

Fifty years ago, our country was heavily weighted toward career preparation, but over the last 30 years, we have moved almost exclusively into college prep. In our zeal to push students toward college, we still pay some attention to those "who may not be predisposed to a four-year college experience," but not enough. That must change.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker and Labor Secretary Tom Perez summed it up perfectly:

"Good work force development is good economic development." Every community, county and state can benefit from having a strong work force. The heart of a local work force strategy is to better articulate educational models and connect those directly to career pathways (e.g. taking community college classes while still in high school). The key is making those connections early.

Here is a framework for grassroots efforts that can be implemented locally: Awareness + Connections + Solutions = Employment.

The awareness must start within the industry. It is not just about the need for students or teachers to see the opportunities available in construction (though their awareness is critical too). It is also industry's awareness of local training and apprenticeship programs, of the schools that offer training and of the needs those schools have and how our industry can help them.

There are many examples of where connections can be made. One is the connection of industry directly to schools that offer construction education in their own communities. There are many successful local programs across the country. We just need more of them. We also need to know what makes them successful and how to duplicate that success.

Finally, the construction industry needs to recognize that other less-fragmented industries will continue to improve their work force training and recruiting as well. Those other industries (energy, telecommunications, etc.) are much better organized and funded in their efforts than construction.

If our industry hopes to recruit its share of the talented individuals who want to learn a skilled trade, then we must begin coordinating our efforts to find solutions now.

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LESSONS LEARNED

- Develop a national strategy on work force issues.
- Make connections on a local level to implement solutions.
- Increase awareness of local training and apprenticeship programs.