

LEADING THE CONSTRUCTION CONVERSATION



JEFF

ROBERT

As construction project demands continue to rise, two long-standing industry insiders — new to the Burns & McDonnell family — are ready for the challenge. Jeff Rashall, president of Ref-Chem, a heavy industrial services contractor, and Robert Brockington, COO of AZCO, an industrial construction company, share a commitment to safety, quality and customer service.

WHAT ARE THE TOP DISRUPTIVE TRENDS AFFECTING THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?

JEFF RASHALL: The No. 1 challenge is the shortage of qualified craft labor. Demand will rise sharply in the next couple years, especially in the Gulf Coast region, and having enough qualified labor is definitely a concern. A related disruptive trend is the current difficulty of finding and hiring qualified, well-trained front-line supervisors for the field. Lastly, as shops and fabricators continue to get busier, the procurement process for engineered equipment delivery is starting to lag, which might affect construction schedules.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION TO THE QUALIFIED LABOR SHORTAGE?

ROBERT BROCKINGTON: Unfortunately, in the short term, the solution is money, in the form of per diems or subsistence for labor attraction. Though it wasn't a typical challenge for unions in the past, it will become a bigger issue if we can't provide the number of qualified workers pledged during the bidding process. And who will be held responsible? The contractor. It's a very difficult obstacle to overcome.

WHAT STEPS NEED TO BE TAKEN TO RECRUIT QUALITY CRAFTSPEOPLE?

RB: From a recruiting standpoint, there are a lot of avenues to focus on. One is at the high school level, to inform students that the building trades offer a lucrative career option outside a four-year university track. I've even conducted a presentation at a local elementary school, using a virtual welding machine to show kids how much fun trade work can be. We also need to tap into the unique and valuable skill sets available in our country's veterans and offer them a great place to be employed.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO RETAIN THESE SKILLED LABORERS?

JR: Project planning and good working conditions in the field — along with good wages — are going to help us retain quality craftspeople. It's discouraging if completed work has to be redone because of poor planning or miscommunication. People want to enjoy where they work and feel like they're adding value.

HOW IS ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY CHANGING ON-SITE ASPECTS WITHIN CONSTRUCTION?

JR: The ease of information availability with technology in the field is difficult to overlook. Rather than having reams of paper to define a project, computers with 3D models and digital drawings are in the field so any piece of information can be accessed in a matter of minutes. This makes the craftspeople on the front line doing the work better, faster and more efficient at what they do.

SAFETY IS CRITICAL. HOW CAN IT CONTINUE TO BE MADE A PRIORITY ON-SITE?

RB: We integrate safety into every daily task, developing a safety plan prior to tasks beginning. Our front-line managers are able to properly identify, outline, deliver, monitor and correct any deficiencies at the project site because they are required to attend and graduate from the AZCO Safety Academy. This is an intense three-day course that outlines safety leadership, management and core competencies. During weekly on-site phone conferences, all site management and executives discuss the safety performance of the project and how that aligns with our behavior-based safety program. We review any leading trends and develop a plan to address new items proactively. To continue to prioritize safety, executive leadership visits project sites at least once a month to discuss and review the safety culture and project performance.

HOW IS AN INTEGRATED DELIVERY APPROACH BENEFITING THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?

JR: It's all about planning. Projects are getting faster with more overlap between engineering, procurement and construction. Construction workers continue to enter the field earlier in the project life cycle, long before engineering is even complete. A truly integrated team and open communication flow from engineering and procurement to the field during construction create more successful projects. ●