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## 5 Things the Next Generation of Construction Leaders Wants You to Know

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Over the last seven weeks, Construction Dive has spoken with 10 young professionals from their early 20s to their early 40s about their goals for a career in construction. These individuals represent many — but certainly not all — of the different roles, backgrounds and experiences at work in the field today.

Some have taken up the mantle of implementing new technology and green building practices, while others are helping to reframe the idea of a career in construction for the next generation. They all acknowledged that they still have much to learn, but they were also open and introspective about how they intended to do so and what challenges they anticipate ahead.

Below, we've gathered some of the common themes and insights from those interviews. Here's what the future generation of construction leaders wants you to know.

### They want hands-on training

Sandra Malm, 26, grew up in the industry and is now a project manager for a division of her family's homebuilding business focused on infill spec homes in the Washington metro area. Malm's proximity to homebuilding during her childhood gave her strong footing, but it didn't replace on-the-job training. For her, supervisors that gave more information than needed early on was invaluable.

"Often, I'm walking a house with [my supervisor] or one of the other project managers who are senior to me, and they'll just talk about why things are done a certain way," she said. "They don't have to be giving me all this information. I'm on my fourth house now and can pretty much get from start to finish with very few questions."

Kristy Thompson, 23, who currently works as a site superintendent at Addison Homes in Greer, SC, said the company's system of "processes, procedures and checklists" helped guide her in the field. The opportunity to spend more time shadowing a senior employee would have been helpful, she said. But she acknowledges the pain points. "The industry is so-fast paced and everyone's so busy right now that it's kind of hard for builders to do that," she said. "You need to have the personality and initiative to figure it out for yourself most of the time."

The young professionals are advocates of technical training, too. In May, Paul Tse, 30, testified before a Congressional committee to discuss the benefits of such programs. Tse said he wasn't a top

student in high school, and he didn't think a traditional four-year degree would serve him well. Instead, he joined a technical education program during high school and graduated into an apprenticeship, which turned into a full-time job. Today, he's a project manager with the same company, Shapiro & Duncan in Rockville, MD.

"The path of going down a four-year technical program in lieu of a four-year or two-year college should be open to everyone, not just people who couldn't make it in school," he said.

### **They're willing to work to prove their skills**

Zakiah Reed, 32, a Trimble crew member at Alpharetta, GA-based Tebarco Mechanical Corp., said she's often the only woman on a job site. While intimidating at first, the situation has pushed her to work harder to make sure no one counts her out. "Everybody's going to have their impression by the look of you, but no one actually knows what you're capable of," she said. "So, I prove it to them."

Shon Smith, 40, completed a four-year tour with the U.S. Navy in Hong Kong before joining ACI Mechanical in Ames, IA, as a sheet metal fabricator. Today he serves as a prefabrication manager for the company. Success in construction, he said, comes from a combination of effort, accuracy, speed and being able to put your own stamp on your work. "Showing that pride of craftsmanship is something that few people do, but if you can get through those first three steps, you can use that craftsmanship to set everybody's perceptions of you," Smith said.

And although Thompson saw herself working for a small homebuilder in the long term, she opted to intern with D.R. Horton in Charlotte for a summer between her junior and senior years of college to learn how the homebuilding business works at a large scale.

### **They're tackling topics like sustainability and technology head on**

"There's a misconception that climate change is not going to impact us greatly for many years, and that is absolutely false," said Amy Vetal, 34, a consultant with Jacobs based in Washington, DC, who is currently managing the Smithsonian Institution's climate change adaptation plan. Vetal became involved with sustainability early in her career, when many firms referred the topic to young professionals because they were often more recently trained in the subject and were eager to dig in as the industry rapidly shifted.

Tracy Young, 31, had her eye on efficiency when she and a fellow construction engineer came up with the idea for PlanGrid, the mobile project management software company for which she is now the CEO. Stunned by the volume of paper required to track plans for large projects, the system puts those documents in the cloud, accessible by users through a tablet.

"We got a lot of nos early on, a lot of skeptics, a lot of doubters, and we so believed that it could completely revolutionize the construction industry that we just kept working," she said. Today, PlanGrid counts "tens of thousands" of architects, contractors and owners among its users.

## They don't think they know everything

Instead, the individuals we spoke with see collaboration as a necessary tool. "There's a generation in leadership roles in the industry who don't want to collaborate with other ... firms," said Charles Hendricks, 43, a partner at The Gaines Group Architects in Harrisonburg, VA. "They see them as competition and hold their secrets tight."

To help combat that position, Hendricks joined the Construction Specifications Institute. "It's the one organization in the industry that brings everyone to the table as an equal: product representative, architect, engineer, specifier, contractor," he said.

Brandon Bryant, a homebuilder in Asheville, NC, focused on sustainability, as he learned to reach out to other local builders when troubleshooting issues faced his firm, Red Tree Builders — especially early on. "I found that they were very open to saying: 'Hey, what are you struggling with?' or 'I'm struggling with this, how are you handling it?'"

## They value diversity

Similarly, many cited the importance of having a variety of perspectives represented on a project. Young credits the launch of PlanGrid to "two domain experts who were super lucky to have three incredibly talented hacker friends." She and her engineer co-founder persuaded three of their tech-savvy friends that construction's "paper problem" was worth their time to help solve.

Eliza Horstman, 32, started with Lendlease in a full-time role on the job site nearly a decade ago and has since been encouraged by her mentors to try out project management. In addition to the importance of seeing different sides of a project, she notes that diversity in viewpoints and backgrounds are also essential.

"If you end up with the same group of people always doing the same thing, nothing's ever going to get any better," she said. "Inviting young people, women, people from different backgrounds, people from different parts of the country, parts of the world, they're going to bring something new and special to the table."

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