

Construction Corner

INDUSTRY INSIGHTS FROM A CONSTRUCTION LEADER



BY JEANIE J. CLAPP
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF,
CONSTRUCTOR MAGAZINE

Willis Towers Watson's history with the construction industry stretches more than 50 years in North America. During that time, the company has been involved in some of the world's most iconic projects and, for the last 20, has been a significant partner with AGC of America on its Construction Safety Excellence Awards program. Earlier this year at the association's 100th Annual Convention in Denver, *Constructor* sat down with Bill Creedon, construction industry leader for North America, to talk about the industry, its trends and the association.

Q: The Construction Safety Excellence Awards (CSEA) program is a significant event at AGC's Convention. What makes it unique?

A: This event is a big commitment, both on the part of contractor members, as well as the association. Representatives come in — including some senior leadership — and present to a panel of judges. The pride these individuals have for their company and their safety programs is a true testament to the uniqueness of the competition. These people are more interested in floating an industry than they are their own company. They are proud to share their individual statistics and their culture and are passionate when talking about their colleagues, employees and their work life. There aren't many industries that not only create the vehicle to share information, but actually encourage it. More industries should move toward that philosophy: sharing best-in-class practices.

What's also notable is the presence and influence of a new generation. These individuals think differently. They present differently. It's great to see the diversity there.

Q: Diversity and inclusion is another emphasis of AGC and Willis Towers Watson. Can you talk about the value of having a diversified workforce?

A: We actually view it as inclusion first and then diversity, which is so important to our own firm. We try to drive these same objectives to our business partners, such as the AGC and its members. A great example is our continuing sponsorship of the AGC Diversity & Inclusion Excellence Awards which recognize members who are champions in advancing diversity and building a culture of inclusion within their work-



force, their supply chain and within their communities.

Part of the sponsorship includes four scholarships with the AGC. The challenges of today and tomorrow require that we have bright, talented minds at the table. Through the scholarships, we are able to support the growth and development of young diverse talent to join this thriving industry which is another way to help attract more people to construction.

For any firm to be successful long term, you need to make this a critical foundation of your culture. Deliver on what you're promising. It's one thing to say you want to be inclusive, but you need to follow through. For instance, if you don't include a diversified group in the interview process, you will not reach your goal of bringing in new diverse recruits. New, emerging talent who are evaluating the construction industry are very particular about what any prospective employer is doing within the community and within its own ranks. Actions speak louder than words and everyone wants to see that you are walking the walk. Inclusion is the first action point and we all need to be sure we include diversity in our interview teams and diverse candidates in our recruitment pools.

Q: Since we're talking recruitment, let's discuss the workforce shortage.

A: This is a huge issue and a complicated question because there is not one "fix" for the situation. It is a combination of an aging labor force coupled with a labor shortage. This makes for a tenuous environment because you have fewer workers available, which means your current crews need to work longer. For an aging workforce, this can mean more injuries and a longer time to heal — and greater chance of a permanent disability — if an injury does take place.

The drive to find more workers has also created new entry points and from sources that have very limited experience which requires heightened training programs to prevent the trend of claims in the first six months. Many contractors are setting up onboarding programs that run from easy steps, such as having new workers wear different colored hardhats or vests to larger firms establishing their own dedicated training centers to ensure safety workers are as prepared as possible the first day

they walk on the job. Everyone on the site needs to take ownership of making sure each worker goes home at the end of a shift.

In addition, to find more labor, a plan needs to be developed and executed to allow a smooth knowledge transfer to take place from the senior skilled workforce who will be transitioning out over the next five years. The key is to start today to actively find ways for this population of skilled workers to share the wealth of knowledge and experience they have gained over their career. We cannot leave this to chance; it needs to be outlined in a formal plan to be sure it takes place.

Many companies are doing an excellent job of navigating different avenues to attract new talent. Some of it involves going to colleges; some are going into high schools and even further back to elementary classes. They are talking about the industry, the benefits it provides, the education programs available, the type of careers to obtain.

But one group — one company — isn't going to solve it. We should all be sitting at a table actively saying 'What can we do?' As an example, Willis Towers Watson has an Emerging Construction Professionals group that consists of younger individuals on the construction specialty side. The purpose is to get them together, have them think bigger, think forward. That's grassroots and that's how things get started.

As all of this is taking place, we need to be aware of other factors such as legislation that can impact our foreign worker strategy. There are some recent bills, supported by AGC, aimed at overhauling the U.S. immigration system in order to help contractors supplement their workforces with temporary workers from abroad.

Q: What are some of the challenges contractors are facing (or will soon be facing) on their projects and bottom lines based on current trends you're seeing?

A: Weather is becoming more extreme. At the same time, owners are shifting greater risk to contractors and tighter schedules with less relief. This combination requires careful evaluation by the contractors and will have them evaluating new parametric-type weather products that are triggered in the event of certain conditions, such as a determined amount of rainfall over a specific period of time or the experience of se-

vere temperature extremes on a project. It is a very exciting area of risk management and in light of all the data now available to help predict frequency or chance of such an event, it is broadening that market.

Also, mental illness is certainly one that needs to be talked about and addressed more in the industry. While we are pleased to see it becoming a more common topic, the focus needs to stay a priority. A recent report I saw noted that one in five crewmembers are struggling with mental illness. This subject needs to be as much in the forefront of our minds as safety equipment to create an environment where people can easily and comfortably ask for help.

Q: How has technology affected safety practices within the last five years? Given the rapid changes the association is seeing from a technology perspective, how do you see risk and safety practices changing in the near future?

A: The opportunities are endless for people who have tech as their strength. There are so many new technologies ranging from apps for safety checklists to full virtual reality training equipment that creates a full "on the job" learning environment prior to anyone stepping on-site. The industry is also moving more toward using BIM to help understand where there are safety concerns in a project and how again they might be addressed before we put anyone at risk.

We are also seeing technology being used more in off-site fabrication work and in the use of modular construction which can certainly expand the definition of the jobsite. You need to be certain safety is maintained as a top priority.

There is a trend of the increased use of wearables by the crew. The technology allows you the ability to know at any given time where an individual worker was and what were they doing. This personal type of technology can also create reports to help senior executives and risk management understand where you may have a concentration of risk at any point in time. It's exciting but there are also some concerns that we may be encroaching on privacy concerns with the wearables. The technology is one thing but understanding how to use the information is the most important aspect.