



Recruit at the Workforce Frontier: *Women and Millennials*

By Jennifer E. Day, PhD

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A problem we see for construction stakeholders is that they often try to solve current workforce development problems in the same way that they have successfully solved other problems: by implementing localized change and remaining true to the recruiting and operating practices that have made them successful. Recruiting through both high school and college alumni associations, for instance, is great practice. So, in theory, is recruiting high school students into a construction-mentoring program. One program we know in the Midwest is fantastic, providing a three-week “boot camp” that initiates high school graduates into various elements of

construction, from estimating and project management to machinery and concrete. More than 130 students have enthusiastically passed through the program and gone to the field to start as laborers. Would you venture a guess at how many are still on the payroll of those companies?

Three.

We need to try something else. In this article, we propose that managers consider an expanded understanding of two major target populations from our larger body of work: millennials and women.

OUR TARGET POPULATIONS

We focus on these two (overlapping) populations because they are groups that

could help us to solve the labor crisis in construction. They are sizeable populations with the needed language skills and geographic proximity. Women represent more than half of the active workforce, and Millennials represent the largest single group in the workforce, the vast majority of new workers, and include new college graduates. (Fry, 2015 and 2018.)

ATTRACT THE YOUNG WITH CLARITY

Immigrant or local, farm stock or city kid, male or female, college graduate or high school dropout—most young people in the workforce now are Millennials. They outnumber Gen X-ers in total employment numbers. They have had a different life

and, thus, have different expectations than the Generation X-ers and Baby Boomers. Like it or not, if we want to recruit a young workforce, we must adapt to their expectations—even as we train them to work in the industry we have built.

According to publications by the Army and some Millennial writers (e.g., Garrett 2011 and Cole 2016), one feature of the Millennial generation is their expectation of clear, direct instructions and rules (Figure 2). Some of us laugh or scoff at the lack of creativity that this rule-boundedness implies. We want to develop creative, independent workers who can adapt to a variety of situations. There is evidence that Millennials also want this kind of creativity in their work experience, but that they expect to arrive at mastery via a different route. In the generations prior, there was a “sink-or-swim” mentality in our training. We were thrown in and expected to find our way.

This generation was not raised that way. Most saliently to us, all their lives, they had clear processes in place to make sure they knew the rules and that everybody played by them. Schoolyard (and online) bullying is now seen as a major problem to be eliminated, whereas older generations simply put up with it as a part of our school experience. Millennials’ desire for clear rules and procedures, then, speaks loudly to the need for clear processes in our industry. If we want to recruit and keep them, then one of the best ways will be to make sure we have clear processes in place.

Fortunately, clear processes help the whole company. Our research strongly suggests that compliance to process dramatically improves construction outcomes. Profit goes up; time-to-complete drops. Employees who succeed in their jobs feel happier, and they stay with their companies longer. They also recommend their work experiences to their friends. That leads to another great strategy for recruiting and retaining Millennials: Recruit and retain their friends. Millennials like to work with their friends, and they often come to companies in pairs. Pairwise recruiting is a win-win for talent-poor construction industry firms.

RECRUIT WOMEN BY CHANGING THE INDUSTRY’S PUBLIC FACE

Recruiting women may be the key to our dismal recruiting record. Industry-wide, fewer than ten percent of construction employees are female. This is a massive,

virtually untapped workforce that numbers over 70 million working-age women, aged 18 to 64.

Right now, our industry is simply not welcoming to women—either as members of the workforce or even as passers-by. Many women and girls feel intimidated and off-put by the harassment that they frequently experience when walking near construction sites. We might imagine how this kind of expectation of the industry would impact our ability to recruit women to our ranks.

Recently, I was walking by a road construction site. I could clearly discern the superintendent on duty. I was following a younger, Millennial woman through the pedestrian walkway, and I heard a worker make a comment about her body (Figure 3). Those of us who study these things know that those comments are intended to disempower and dominate the victim. I reflexively steeled myself, feeling hardened and jaded. I turned to the workers and said, “Come on, guys. Do we still really live in the dark ages?” Then, I glared at the superintendent, not expecting him to intervene, and I stalked away.

An hour later, I had to walk back via the way I came, and I seriously considered taking a much longer route to avoid the construction site. I decided in the end that I would not cower in fear, but instead would be prepared for an onslaught if it came. What happened surprised me. John, the superintendent, walked up as I was walking through the site and introduced himself. Again, I was on the defensive, thinking he was going to try to establish some sort of domination over me. Instead, he apologized for his workers and told me what he had told them: that women should be able to walk by a construction site without being harassed. He promised that would never happen again on his watch. I believe he will do as he says.

This story illustrates both our capacity to hold long

impressions of an industry—as in my tenseness and belief about how I would be treated walking by the site—and our capacity to change. As a woman, I can change my beliefs about construction sites. As a supervisor, John can change how he manages. In turn, the workers can change the face of the company on the street. Right now, that young woman walking ahead of me might hesitate to apply for a job. A better experience on the street interface with construction might change her mind. We can all overcome this “everyday sexism” (Bates, 2014) that has become so normal that we hardly think to call it out—to everyone’s detriment.

Recruiting women to construction, then, might mean a strong effort on the part of construction industry firms to reach out to women and let them know that this company, or this industry, is changing. This could start with female-friendly and harassment-free signage on construction sites, coupled with exemplary behavior by workers. Companies could encourage women who are harassed to call a company representative, then follow up to let her know how they handled the complaint.

RETAIN WOMEN WITH FEMALE-FRIENDLY POLICIES AND CULTURE

Once we have more women in the ranks, our next task is to keep them. Women’s dif-



Figure 2 – Millennials are uncomfortable with ambiguity and appreciate clear direction and instruction.

difficulties with the construction industry are not simply a matter of overtime interfering with childcare arrangements. They are deep and complex, and we can adapt to them. We recommend that leaders in the construction industry keep the ideas below in mind as they retain and manage women. They are largely inspired by Babcock and Laschever's 2009 book, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*.

Women are more relationship focused. Women are more concerned than men about disrupting a good working relationship, either with a boss or colleagues. This can manifest in a number of ways in the office or on the worksite. For instance, some conversations that men see as routine, women may view as being confrontational and thus threatening to the working relationship. Often, male employees will simply ask for a raise, for example. A female employee will likely wonder whether asking will threaten her relationship with you and, thus, not ask.

Women want you to notice their hard work. Women are less likely to ask for a raise or promotion than men, and they are much less likely to self-promote. Just like men, they want their hard work to be noticed. However, they are much more likely than men to wait for their work to be noticed, rather than bringing it to your attention. A woman with exemplary sales performance, for instance, is far less likely than a male employee to point this out to the boss. Managers, we all know, under-

standably must direct their attention to problematic areas. An unintended consequence of this is that they can fail to recognize and acknowledge good performers.

Women want to be invited. Women on a construction site may not feel entirely welcome in the environment right away. For well-meaning male bosses, offering the job may seem like the ultimate gesture of acceptance. Inclusive-minded male colleagues might think that saying nothing is the best way to invite a female colleague to eat with them on the break. While this is true, remember that your female employees—especially if they are new to the job site—might not understand that these cultures are in place.

Women don't have as much access to male bosses in casual settings. Think about when those important, developmental conversations happen with your male employees. In our experience, they are just as likely to happen in the hallway or when you're golfing or watching football, as they are in the office. A woman looking for a casual opportunity to complain to or query her boss for more overtime may find fewer opportunities to have this conversation. Considering that she may already feel uncomfortable because she sees the subject of such a conversation as poten-



Figure 3 – Credit: The Niall Boylan Show

tially threatening the relationship, she may simply never find the right time to have the conversation.

Female employees want to be treated as equals, but for bosses, this does not mean simply treating them exactly like men. Good managers recognize that socialization creates barriers for women that men don't face. Simply treating them exactly the way you treat your male employees is not only ignoring all of that socialization, but also isn't the best way to generate their maximum productivity and potential. Men who manage women in construction do well to remember a few key approaches. The great thing is that these practices can equally apply to all employees—male and female—so there's no need to especially single women out to implement them:

- Recognize good work and strong compliance.

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- Let workers know they can talk to you.
- Include everyone in social events.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Attracting and retaining a few more quality-producing employees may grow single-digit profit margins to double-digit ones. Achieving a strong workforce is a complex and lengthy endeavor, and we observe that many stakeholders need patience and grit to see it through. The great “wild card” in our industry is its people. The same material, equipment, and subcontractors are available to each firm, but yearly results are dramatically different from bottom-quartile to top-quartile companies. A deep focus on improving the workforce is deserved. The payoff will be outsized. 

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