Throughout time, women have come to the rescue when work needs to get done and men are scarce, usually due to military conflicts. The most noteworthy examples in recent history occurred during World War I and World War II. The wartime draft created a major labor shortage across many industries in the United States and abroad. To fill the gap, women were called upon to perform jobs that were traditionally held by men, such as construction work. This was a considerable paradigm shift, as before this time, women generally did not work outside the home, especially if they were married. World War II in particular was a pivotal time for women, as it required them to fill the 16 million open positions left by men drafted in the war. These new opportunities were essentially an unintended consequence of these wars, but the long-standing impact showed that women could thrive in their new roles.

Although certainly less dramatic, the United States is staring at a similar labor problem today as it did during both world wars. According to the Employment Policy Foundation (EPF), a systemic labor shortage is expected as the gap between baby boomers and entrants of college-educated workers widens due to the boomers’ mass retirements. If the U.S. economy continues to grow at three percent per year—the economy’s consistent average since 1948—the workforce will have to increase by 58 million employees over the next three decades if the same rate of productivity is maintained. Yet, according to the Employment Policy Foundation if the current population trend continues, the number of workers will only increase by 23 million. This trend would create an overall U.S. labor shortage of 35 million workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports that participation rates of working-age men have actually fallen from 87 percent to 75 percent over the past 50 years. During the same period, the participation rates of working-age women have increased from 32 percent to more than 60 percent. Robert Szafran wrote in “Age-Adjusted Labor Force Participation Rates, 1960-2014,” Monthly Labor Review that by 2015, the projected participation rates for men and women are expected to be equal. The bottom line is that businesses must transform recruitment and hiring programs in order to attract more working-age women to meet their workforce needs.

Construction is perhaps one of the most hard-hit industries in terms of meeting its labor needs. Faced with this issue, construction companies today are investing a greater amount of time and energy in developing their candidate pipelines. This includes such efforts as lobbying for immigration reform, recruiting veterans, partnering with local governments, supporting high school-level construction skills academies, and even mentoring future craft workers. Although most of these efforts should eventually pay off in the long term, they lack the immediacy of action that appears to be necessary to address the current situation. As history repeats itself, the biggest untapped pool of qualified workers may be women.

One specific example of a company looking to women to fulfill its labor needs is Masco Contractor Services (MCS). Since MCS is a rapidly growing company, specializing in installing insulation, fireplaces, gutters, garage doors, and other residential products, it is facing a tight labor market. In 2013, MCS hired more than 3,000 installed products specialists across its 180 divisions. Robert Buck, CEO of MCS said, “Our most important initiative in 2014 is addressing the labor shortage that all construction companies are dealing with right now. We’re attacking the problem from several angles, but bringing more women into our workforce is one of the ways we can be successful.”

How is MCS attracting more women to apply for installed products specialist positions? Heather Burks, Director of Talent Acquisition is implementing a comprehensive plan to get women through the door. “We start by designing our job ads to appeal to women, focusing on our competitive salaries and benefit offerings, like tuition reimbursement, a company match retirement program, paid training, paid vacations and holidays, and flexible work hours,” said Burks. “We also know that safety is top of mind for women considering a job
in the construction industry, so we make sure to highlight our safety culture. Aside from the job ad itself, we train our managers to create an environment that’s truly welcoming to diversity, and stress the importance of employee development.”

MCS has made measurable progress in appealing to female candidates. One example is the recent hiring of Nicole Heil in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., who joined the company as an Installed Products Specialist. “When I found out about the job, I became interested to learn more about installing insulation,” said Heil. “When I went to the division, I applied using their kiosk, and was interviewed right away. I had a great interview with the production manager, John Ferris, so was hired pretty quickly. On the job, I mainly install batt insulation. It took me a few weeks to get up to speed, but now I make very good money. The work itself is physically demanding, but if you’re motivated, you can do very well regardless if you’re a man or a woman.”

Danny Allen, MCS Division Manager in Monroe, North Carolina, speaks proudly of the female installed products specialists that he’s hired in the past. He said, “Coincidentally, many of the female installers I’ve hired came to me from a NAWIC connection. I even have a plaque on my wall from NAWIC! Anyhow, they mostly install after paint products, which includes shower mirrors, shower doors, and bath accessories. I tend to assign them more to the products that require a lot of skill to install and that are more visible to the customer. It has to be pleasing to the eye and done correctly. They need to be meticulous and take the time to do it right. I also find that the women I’ve hired are more customer-friendly; they’re readily accessible to the customer and take the time to answer their questions. They’re very customer oriented.”

Ultimately, there is no single answer to the labor shortage challenge in the construction industry. Bridging the gap will undoubtedly require a combination of long-term solutions like immigration reform, training programs, internships, etc. and immediate fixes like broadening the labor pool to include a greater percentage of women. Irrespective of the timeline, the common theme amongst all the solutions is a need for awareness. The construction industry is back in a big way, and the rewards and opportunities are there for anyone who is looking for a great career.

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