

NORTHAMERICANDESIGN

Out on the Tiles

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LABOR OF LOVE

It seems as though everybody's telling the same story: "It's getting harder and harder to get good help."

Fresh, innovative ideas in tile and stone product lines are presenting architects, designers and flooring experts with a broad scope of design possibilities. However – in Texas, for instance – finding the skilled labor force to do this complex work is a challenge, especially with architects and designers pushing the envelope and treating their tile designs as pieces of art, rather than just considering form and function.

Certainly, it is exciting to be part of this influx of freshness in the trade, and a sense of pride springs forth when projects are completed. Unfortunately, many times the zeal and passion are lost along the way as creativity dies in the hands of budgets and time restraints.

While Texas and the rest of the Southwest battles to remain stable during these economically turbulent times, those contractors reporting a growing volume must continually balance labor costs and scheduling nightmares. Most would agree it is getting harder to hire qualified workers.

The Austonian

According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, the United States' construction industry has been growing rapidly in the past seven years. Currently, it employs 7.7 million people and will add more than 1 million new jobs in 10 years.

But many commercial flooring companies are feeling a pinch. For example, Austin, Texas-based Commercial Flooring Systems was hired to install the tile, stone and carpeting at the Austonian, the tallest residential building in Texas. The contemporary concrete, steel and glass high-rise project involved routine installations.

However, as with most signature projects, the team was pushed hard to maintain quality while driving at a fast pace. Adding to the pressure of completing multiple floors on a tight timeline, several areas called for intricate layout and installation with artistic precision.

The Austonian project was highly demanding for Commercial Flooring Systems' tile installer pool. The firm had skilled staff on-hand, but additional help was required.

A potential solution is to work longer hours with the existing work force, while searching for more qualified help. To meet schedule demands or fulfill other contractual obligations, it's key to resist the temptation of manning the job with

just warm bodies. Experienced workers ultimately ensure quality. Thus, pre-planning is the best to combat the problem and complete projects on time and to the specifications.

The Difference

The distinction between a skilled and unskilled worker in the tile industry is the ability to see the big picture. In the end, it comes down to dollar and cents for companies. An investment in the labor force, whether on-the-job training or an apprenticeship for tile and stone, is crucial to a project's success.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, every dollar invested in apprenticeship training provides a return of \$54. Unfortunately, the Texas construction industry is finding it increasingly difficult to realize such a lofty return. Many contractors believe spending money on training is a waste. They fear if they train someone, he or she will quit and go work for a competitor offering higher wages.

However, training staff and losing them to a competitor is not as bad as having them stay as an untrained worker. Inexperienced workers will open up a company to costly accidents and mistakes on a job. Ultimately, the trade itself suffers when poor quality is allowed to remain the norm.

Changing of the Tide

According to a U.S. Construction Industry Training Report from FMI Corp., traditional sources for employees are no longer yielding as many workers. Although mosaic tile installations can be traced back throughout history, not as many men and women are choosing construction careers today. The reason new talent is not racing into the trade is both sociological and systemic. In today's world, guidance counselors, teachers and parents often encourage a college education over a trade. Vocational skills are rarely taught in public schools. There are only a handful of institutions throughout the United States offering trade apprenticeships. These currents run deep and pose great challenges for the industry and the quality of its future.

To overcome these challenges, forward-thinking contractors will need to change their business practices and deploy an old-school-meets-new-wave approach to attracting, hiring and retaining the best young craftspeople. At the heart of this approach, there are two consistent key elements fueling their futures: a well-defined company vision and new forms of apprenticeship.

ITT Technical Institute and Penn Foster Schools have some of the better-known courses, but more companies see the cost effectiveness in offering their own apprenticeship programs and recruiting through the local Boys and Girls Club or other high school programs. This changing demand on the industry requires a new approach to recruiting that will attract fresh talent to the skilled labor force.



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