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PRONETWORK NEWS

Risk Management Tools for the Design Professional

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The Aging Infrastructure Workforce

By Anthony Kerr / New Dawn Risk

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024 "Occupational Outlook Handbook" projects that jobs in infrastructure-related skilled trades will grow considerably faster than the national average over the next decade – at a rate of over 5%. This is over two-thirds faster than the overall projected national average of about 3%.¹

At the same time, the US construction industry is set to face a wave of retirements over the next decade. Nearly one-fifth of those currently working in the US construction industry are over 55 years of age, with the median age being 42 years. There is no quick fix for this demographic timebomb, especially since those skilled trades generally rely on multi-year apprenticeships programs that facilitate knowledge and practical "know-how" across generations.

The industry must not only replace retiring workers but also expand its workforce to support a massive infrastructure boom. This includes replacing outdated systems in the developed world and building state-of-the-art infrastructure in emerging economies across Africa and Asia, while addressing growing urban needs for power, water, and transportation.

A recent McKinsey report, "The Infrastructure Moment", estimates that the global economy will require \$106 trillion in investment through 2040. This mindboggling number breaks down as \$36 trillion for energy and power, \$19 trillion on digital, \$16 trillion on social and \$6 trillion on water and waste infrastructure.²

The Associated Builders and Contractors trade group estimates the industry will need to bring in 456,000 new workers by 2027, up 30.7% from the 349,000 needed this year. The ABC also said that "every additional \$1 billion spent on construction translates to demand for 3,450 fresh jobs."³

So, what needs to happen?

Action now – the industry needs to highlight the appeal of skilled trades careers that require no college degree – and avoid the long-term debt that often accompanies one. In a job market likely to be shaped by AI, construction is one of several occupations likely to be relatively unaffected by rationalization.

Preserve existing talent – with an aging workforce likely to seek retirement from the frontline of the industry in the next five years or so, it is essential that their experience is

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passed on to a new generation. Skilled tradesmen should therefore be encouraged to take up training roles.

Take away the tedium of necessary but mundane tasks – Many necessary but repetitive oversight tasks on worksites, such as monitoring progress and ensuring safety, can be automated. Advances in Autonomous drones technology and AI tools could be further developed and deployed to handle critical path observation, and even be used for on-site safety tasks.

Gen Z workplace entrants already appear to recognise the benefits of skilled trades. U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics data suggests that workers entering skilled trades aged between 18 and 25 accounted for nearly one-quarter of new hires. This is despite only making up 14% of new hires in the overall U.S. workforce.⁴

In a world where AI is already transforming white collar occupations, the construction industry, and those in skilled trades, face far less of an impact. Burcin Kaplanoglu, founder of SBK Technologies, wrote in ENR in November 2025: “I believe construction jobs will become more attractive as jobs in other industries become automated.”⁵

John Mielke, senior director of apprenticeship at Associated Builders and Contractors, noted in 2025: “there has been a promising uptick in Gen Z participation in the U.S. construction workforce”. He added, “While this is great news, we still have a long way to go to shore up the talent pipeline and address the industry’s chronic workforce shortage.”⁶

The Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce, drawing on US Bureau of Statistics data, recently provided a report on projected lifetime earnings (median) in the US. This revealed that a bachelor’s degree recipient earns about \$2.8 million, compared to roughly \$2.4 million for a skilled trades worker. Importantly, tradespeople typically earn wages during training, while college graduates often start their careers burdened by debt.

So, the key takeaways? An aging workforce is retiring just as demand surges for infrastructure replacement and expansion.. Much of this work requires human physical labor that AI will struggle to fully automate in the near term. The industry must act urgently to attract non-traditional applicants, including younger generations and career changers, by emphasizing competitive pay, job security, and debt-free entry paths.

¹ Sandra Lawson, BlackRock “On the Record: Infrastructure and the Opportunity in Skilled Trades.

² Alastair Green, Ishaan Nangia and Nicola Sandri – McKinsey “The Infrastructure Moment”.

³ Jason Ma, Fortune Magazine February 7, 2026

⁴ Bryan Gottlieb for ENR “SkillsUSA Sells Gen Z on Work in Tech-Driven Building Trades” – July 2, 2025.

⁵ Burcin Kaplanoglu for ENR “AI in Construction Momentum Will Only Continue to Grow” – November 2025.

⁶ Bryan Gottlieb for ENR “SkillsUSA Sells Gen Z on Work in Tech-Driven Building Trades” – July 2, 2025