

Building industry faces manager shortage

Work in Progress

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Many local construction companies are struggling to find qualified managers and supervisors. Worse yet, high school students are losing interest in construction, which raises questions about where the next generation of managers will come from.

Jim Maloney, controller for Herre & Sacco Inc., a mechanical contracting company in East Hempfield Township, said it's not easy to find middle- and upper-level managers in this area. The company, which employs 120, is battling a labor shortage that will likely get worse.

"We're an aging company, and people are starting to retire here," he explained. "We can't replace managers who have been here for 20 or 25 years with young people who don't have the skills necessary to succeed. We're having to rob other companies of their skilled workers to fill our management vacancies, and that doesn't serve anybody well."

Herre & Sacco staffs seven to 10 project managers in the corporate office as client contacts, and it employs 20 to 25 foremen

who lead crews on-site. The average employee has been with Herre & Sacco for 15 or 16 years, said Jim Miller, company president.

Bob Plumeri, president of Richard D. Poole Inc., a York Township-based general contracting company, said his best managers are home-grown and trained in-house.

"The ideal manager or supervisor is someone with a lot of education and experience," he said. "With a bulge of work available now, it is more important than ever to find qualified leaders, but it's been very hard for us.

"Right now, all our management slots are filled, but we're going through an incubation, or training period, which has controlled our business' growth. We've had to turn several jobs down because we can only handle so much work."

Plumeri said that although business has picked up quite a bit in the past two or three years in the area, high school students are not as interested in working for construction companies as they once were. The industry is not as glorious, attractive or high-paying as it was a few years ago, and people seem less willing to endure the physical rigors that go with the job, he added.

Keith Hamberger, president of Markey Builders Inc., a general contracting company in York, said there is no quick fix for the management labor shortage.

"It takes a good deal of time to get our

managers and supervisors up to par," he said. "You can't just put an ad in the paper and expect to find qualified leaders in a day or two."

Hamberger said the company prefers to have its workers participate in a four-year apprenticeship program, starting as a carpenter's helper and eventually becoming a carpenter or journeyman. If a student excels as a carpenter, he can become a supervisor for smaller projects. After a year and a half, if the student proves his skills, he is eligible to manage bigger projects in the \$1 million to \$1.5 million range.

"It's a tough sell to get kids interested in this business, but we have to keep on trying," he said. "Unfortunately, this shortage will probably continue for some time, and local construction companies are definitely feeling it."

Project managers who work in corporate offices can expect to make anywhere from \$40,000 to \$65,000, depending on experience and the complexity of the project, according to Dave Sload, with Campbell Siebert, a York-based design-build contractor.

In the field, middle- and upper-level managers can earn a similar salary, Sload said.

Ira Wolfe, president of Success Performance Solutions, a work-force consulting firm, said today's managers and supervisors must be able to deal with

language barriers, cultural differences, domestic problems and generation gaps. Businesses are spending much time searching for lower-level workers, but they're failing to recognize that managers are in short supply, too, he noted.

"There were 78 million baby boomers, many of whom moved into management positions about 20 years ago, who are leaving the work force," he explained. "Since there were only about 45 million people born during generation X, there is not a large enough influx to fill these soon-to-be vacated positions."

Wolfe, a man who uses statistics to drive a point home, cited a Bureau of Labor Statistics study. In 1955, for every person who retired, nine workers entered the work force; in 2000, only two workers replaced every retiree.

Cliff Ellis, president of Compleat Restorations Inc., an Ephrata-based general contracting company, said he is dealing with a shortage, too, but not of managers.

"There is a shortage in our industry, across the board, that has us focused intently on promoting from within to fill management jobs," he explained. "The problem now, though, is our entry-level tradespeople aren't being replaced quickly enough.

"We're going to have to do something as an industry to make it enticing for young people to get back into construction."