

# Oregon's highway construction workforce needs

Dr. Maura Kelly, Portland State University  
December 2022

In order to assess the needs of Oregon's highway construction apprenticeships, PSU researchers conducted:

- An analysis of BOLI data on apprenticeship
- A survey of 231 apprentices who completed or terminated an apprenticeship in 2020-2021
- Interviews with six contractors, two general contractors, one representative from a minority contractor association, one union representative, and two representatives from pre-apprenticeship programs.



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## Industry Need 1

Address the demand for more workers through increased recruitment

Across the board, contractor and labor partner interviewees agreed that within the short term (next five years) many more workers will be needed. Estimates for the additional workers needed range from 5% to 50% on top of addressing the current labor shortage and that there is a particular need for more minority workers (Black, Indigenous, and people of color, and women). Notably, many of the other needs cited (journey workers, project engineers, project managers, and superintendents) will require ongoing investment in the apprenticeship system to ensure a strong pipeline of highly skilled workers. The industry need for workers who can travel more must be addressed alongside workers' needs for flexibility and work-life balance.

Pre-apprenticeship remains, to date, the only approach that has been empirically documented to increase the recruitment of women into the trades in Oregon. While contractors and labor partners noted the importance of pre-apprenticeship programs that primarily serve adults, they focused more of their time and energy on how to improve the image of construction careers broadly, while specifically generating interest among middle and high school students (as well as their teachers, counselors, and parents).

"I think the biggest issue with recruitment is communication and education at the middle school, high school, and college level." (Labor partner).

"There's a stigma that comes along with construction that [trades workers are] all Neanderthals. They're uncivilized or unintelligent. That they're not a welcoming group." (Labor partner).

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## Industry Need 2

Address the demand for more workers through increased retention

The overall completion rates for apprentices who started a highway trades apprenticeship in 2014–2015 was 49%, with lower completion rates for women and people of color. Apprentices, contractors, and labor partners all reported that jobsite culture was a major issue impacting retention. While apprentices also described problems with a lack of access to OJT hours and a lack of high-quality training on the job and in apprenticeship classes, contractors emphasized the lack of a work ethic among apprentices. Some labor partners reported that it was not a lack of work ethic but a shift in concepts of work, specifically, younger generations of workers, who expect more from their jobs, such as to be treated with respect, be safe on the job, and have a healthy work/life balance.

"Someone took photos of my butt while I was bent over and shared with co-workers/friends. That same person was my journeyman and later a lead on a job where he mentioned to a co-worker that he could get me beat up." (Apprentice)

"It's like they're doing it because it's a job but they really don't want to be there." (Contractor)

"Young people now would rather not come to work and be mistreated." (Labor partner)

"I kept getting laid off and every two or three months would have a lull in work" (Apprentice)

"My journeymen did not want to train apprentices, so they made that pretty clear and treated me awful." (Apprentice)

## Contractor and labor partners' recommendations for addressing retention:

- Worker and supervisor trainings to support respectful workplaces
- Implementing anonymous reporting processes
- Financial support for apprentices (e.g. Higher pay, Hardship funds)
- Offering flexibility in work hours (e.g. Four ten-hour shifts)
- Increased flexibility to address work/family conflict (e.g. Time off for caregiving, Sick time)
- Mentorship programs on and off the jobsite
- Partnerships with other organizations (e.g. Safe from Hate, Oregon Tradeswomen)
- Including apprentices' voices at the table.

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## Industry Need 3

Improve understanding and collaboration across stakeholder groups

Some contractors and labor partners interviewed for this study had views on retention of apprentices that did not align with the experiences reported by apprentices, suggesting the need for increased understanding. As noted above, some contractors and labor partners encouraged additional input from apprentices, noting that efforts to address retention would benefit from having apprentices' voices at the table. Additional collaboration with community partners was identified as a strategy to address recruitment and retention. Contractors and labor partners also suggested the need to work with project owners to address barriers to recruitment and retention.

"We keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result. We've been trying that for like fifty years and we have a zero success rates. We need to come up with a new approach." (Contractor)

## Contractor and labor partner recommendations for project owners

- Provide clear and consistent requirements for contractors, such as addressing shifting mandates (e.g. contractual requirement for hiring apprentices) and closing loopholes in contracts (e.g. contractors hire apprentices to meet contract goals but do not provide quality training)
- Offer incentives for contractors who meet workforce goals (e.g. RFP points, tax credits, bonuses, good press)
- Encourage better communication and partnership between project owners and contractors

Full 2022 report available at <http://maura-kelly.com/>

