



Metro



OREGON TRADESWOMEN / DAWN JONES REDSTONE

Construction Career Pathways Framework

A CASE STUDY IN JOB CREATION FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Diversifying the construction industry will help address generational labor shortages, control costs for project owners, and provide economic mobility for women and other marginalized workers.

Background

Despite economic volatility related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the construction industry remains a high-growth sector and one of the last bastions of middle-wage jobs in an era of extreme income polarity. Because of this, construction careers provide a reliable pathway for younger generations to achieve economic mobility. The job opportunities in this industry are not, however, equitably accessible to everyone in the community. Construction continues to be a male-dominated and racially homogeneous industry. In 2021, nearly 88% of people employed in construction were white, and less than 4% were women in non-office jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

At the same time, construction businesses report a severe shortage in skilled talent, and foresee a 'silver tsunami' of Baby Boomer retirements in the coming years. This labor shortage reflects not only an age gap, but also gender and racial inequities. Unwelcoming and often hostile workplace cultures, as well as a lack of training and on-the-job support, can make it difficult for women, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian and immigrant workers to succeed in the construction industry. This occupational segregation is a significant barrier to economic equity for women and BIPOC communities.

Metro's Construction Career Pathway Framework shows how government agencies can collaborate with stakeholders to influence the culture of an industry long-considered immune to change.

oregonmetro.gov



A changing workforce

Construction workers are aging out of the workforce and younger workers are not entering the field in large enough numbers to replace them. For every five workers nearing retirement in the Portland (Oregon) region, only three workers under 24 years old are entering the construction workforce⁵. Left unaddressed, the shortage of workers will continue to grow as current workers age and the population becomes more diverse. A smaller pool of skilled construction labor increases costs and risks for public project owners.

Government agencies have both the opportunity and the imperative to invest in robust and equitable labor pathways, and to establish high road standards in the construction industry. These strategies create multiple public benefits: to rectify historical inequities and promote shared prosperity; to make jurisdictions more competitive for federal funding; to stabilize a volatile labor market; and to transform the construction industry by normalizing inclusive practices and accountability. Public project owners further benefit by making costs more predictable, improving job quality and preventing labor strikes.

Methodology

Having identified a need for 14,000 construction workers on over 80 capital projects green lighted for building in the Portland Metro Region over the next ten years, Metro convened a Public Owner Workgroup representing 16 public agencies to develop a roadmap to increase both the supply of and demand for women and BIPOC workers in the construction industry. This process was informed by a comprehensive market study¹ that focused on the opportunities and challenges facing women and BIPOC workers in the construction trades, as well as significant input from community advocates such as Oregon Tradeswomen, construction businesses and labor unions. With the adoption of the Construction Career Pathway Framework², the Portland metro area is the first to use governmental standards to address worksite culture.

Framework

The Construction Career Pathways Framework is a comprehensive strategy for aligning public programs with community resources for creating new employment opportunities, strengthening the workforce contributing to public capital projects and reducing the long-term cost of construction.

Best Practices for Developing Workforce Equity Policy in Your Jurisdiction

BUILD A FOUNDATION



Build a broad & inclusive table

- Do a market study focused on worker experience
- Partner with community and workforce NGOs early
- Find fellow governments to work together

IDENTIFY STRATEGIES



Center the experiences of women & BIPOC workers

- Set goals that push you to achieve more together
- Prioritize investments in capacity building and retention efforts
- Build a durable policy or strategy

FORMAL COMMITMENTS



Get commitments from agencies to invest, plan and implement

- Help each other by sharing best practices and lessons learned
- Focus on the coalition of the willing to invest
- Build onramps for other agencies to join

COLLABORATION



Launch a collaboration table focused on implementation

- Aim to align systems and processes
- Dedicate resources to implementation
- Don't reinvent the wheel: develop the model further!

The framework focuses on:

- Setting consistent workforce diversity goals
- Investment in recruitment, training, retention
- Changing the culture on worksites
- Utilizing workforce agreements to establish job quality, job access and project delivery expectations with union labor partners
- Tracking and measuring diversity outcomes region-wide

The cornerstone of the Construction Career Pathways Framework is **creating demand for a diverse workforce by setting consistent goals across a region**. Goals are based on the current availability of workers as well as local demographic data in order to be realistically ambitious. Inter-agency coordination strengthens the effectiveness of these goals by establishing consistent standards among public projects.

Robust investment in **culturally-relevant recruitment, training and retention programs helps build a diverse supply of skilled labor** for capital projects, and supports the community as a whole by providing pathways out of poverty for women and BIPOC communities. Some of these programs serve girls as young as 8 years old. Data in the Portland region shows that providing extra support such as childcare and rental assistance to people in apprenticeship programs significantly boosts the rate at which they complete their programs. The effect is even greater for women and BIPOC workers³.

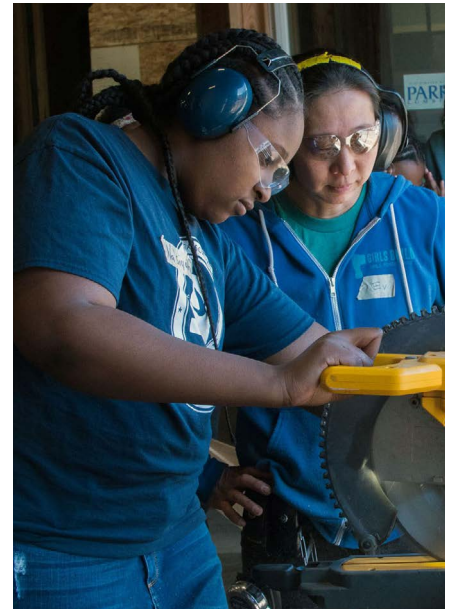
Workforce Agreements that establish job access, project delivery and compensation standards, and Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) that increase stakeholder engagement and define concrete community improvements can be included in project contracts. Both are **legally binding agreements that hold parties accountable for hiring practices and worksite conditions**. Consistent metrics are defined in a Public Owner Toolkit⁴, and the goal is to create a uniform regional tracking and reporting system that will **readily assess diversity outcomes** and provide public transparency.

Challenges

While the benefits of a stable, skilled and diverse construction workforce are clear, the project group faced some resistance from partner agencies and contractors alike. Many conversations were needed to uncover and assuage concerns about the framework. These concerns included: costs associated with recruitment, training and retention programs; the intractability of worksite culture; and the relative market impact of regulating only public projects.

By focusing on the much greater costs of inaction—both in terms of community poverty, social injustice, and project labor shortages—advocates were able to persuade other stakeholders that the proposed investments will yield high returns in the long term. Community advocates used testimonials and profiles to show that women and BIPOC apprentices are well-equipped with both passion and aptitude for construction work, noting that harassment and discrimination are never acceptable.

Though public project owners represent only a fraction of all construction job creators, they draw from the same workforce as private projects. An increased supply of skilled labor will benefit the sector as a whole, and



A new mental model for what it means to be a “construction worker”

Biases in the construction industry are deeply ingrained. In a recent survey⁶, nearly half of all women in local apprenticeship programs reported receiving unwanted sexual attention. For this reason, it is often assumed that construction jobs “aren’t good” for women and people of color because of prejudices about physical capability and worker attitudes.

In order to meaningfully address barriers and transform worksite culture, all stakeholders must commit to a new mental model of what it means to be a “construction worker” and agree on two things: women and other marginalized people are capable of any job on a construction site, and harassment isn’t acceptable in any industry.

Metro is the only directly elected regional government and metropolitan planning organization in the United States. Metro serves more than 1.5 million people in Portland, Oregon, and 23 other cities. Established in 1979, Metro provides regionwide planning and coordination to manage growth, infrastructure and development issues that cross jurisdictional boundaries.

Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc. helps transform lives by building community and economic independence through empowerment, training, career education, advocacy, and leadership development for women and gender non-conforming job seekers in the skilled trades.



Nickeia's story

During her apprenticeship, Nickeia faced harassment and discrimination, but she persevered, and has been a Union Carpenter since 2011. According to Nickeia, "When we build each other up by creating respectful workplaces, it is hard work, but not impossible work. You must support and educate craft workers while creating safe job site environments. This means having spaces to

make mistakes, be corrected and educated, not isolated, ridiculed or alienated."



Liz's story

After graduating from high school, Liz went to college because it was what she was 'supposed to do.' But years after earning her degree, she was still struggling to earn enough to build her future. "Until I got into the trades, I didn't earn a living wage," she says. "Because of Oregon Tradeswomen, I now earn a living wage working a job I love. I cannot overstate how important this has been to my confidence

and how important it has been to me in my life."

improvements in worksite conditions in public projects will influence standards on private worksites. By asserting their authority as public project owners, government agencies can make progress toward their goals as responsible stewards of public resources.

Conclusion

Public agencies are accountable to the people they serve. This means ensuring all of their work—including construction projects—benefits the community equitably. Investing in workforce equity in the construction industry is not only the 'right thing to do,' it also makes good business sense for municipalities needing a steady supply of skilled labor to build capital projects that fuel economic growth. Government agencies and community-based organizations can work together to change the culture of the industry as well as prepare historically marginalized people for middle-wage careers in construction. Intergovernmental alignment to set high-road industry standards incentivizes contractors to modernize, and helps make collective progress toward diversity, equity and inclusion goals.

- 1 oregonmetro.gov/sites/default/files/2018/07/02/C2P2-regional-construction-workforce-market-study-executive-summary.pdf
- 2 oregonmetro.gov/construction-career-pathways
- 3 Wilkinson, Lindsey and Maura Kelly, 2016. (Still) Building A More Diverse Workforce in the Highway Trades: 2016 Evaluation of the ODOT/BOLI Highway Construction Workforce Development Program.
- 4 oregonmetro.gov/sites/default/files/2019/11/04/construction-career-pathways-regional-toolkit-20191029.pdf
- 5 oregonmetro.gov/news/snapshot-efforts-diversify-greater-portlands-construction-industry
- 6 Wilkinson and Kelly, 2016.