People—can? live with them, can’t live without them. So goes the old whine. In the construction industry, finding good people, the kind you can live with, is not so easy these days. With the market being down in some areas (the Northwest particularly), finding people, good or bad, may not be an issue right now and has not been for two or three years. In fact, five of the 14 people canvassed around the country were either not hiring or even letting people go. But for those contractors who are looking every now and then, the biggest issue seems to be that prospective employees talk up a storm, but when it comes to walking the walk, they stumble around, getting in everybody’s road (five complaints). Three other contractors had a related complaint—that few prospects were properly trained, apprenticed or experienced.

How does one navigate this minefield? Two contractors check references: “When you call references and they’re evasive,” explains a Californian, “they don’t say anything bad about the individual but they don’t say anything positive, either, that raises a flag.”

A contractor from Alabama thinks, “calling references is trial and error. We pick their mind to find out what they know and don’t know, what different areas of construction they’ve been in, what skill levels they think they have. A lot of them are over-qualifying themselves. We specialize in waterproofing, which is an application of a coating. A lot of people think that if they know how to hold a paintbrush, they know how to apply a coating.”

Two other contractors also do extensive interviews that can include asking the candidate to do something. Says
another Californian, “We do a rigorous interview process with no less than four interviewers to make sure we’re not being fed a line. Sometimes we’ll ask them how they would bid certain projects, just to get a feel of how they do things versus the way we do them. These tests often reveal people who miss an awful lot—as in, ‘Maybe estimating isn’t your strong side, maybe you should be in sales or something!’”

Another Alabaman, like two other contractors, prefers to “test the applicants who sound like they’ve set the world on fire to see if they’re all they’re cracked up to be, by putting them on the workforce part time with an experienced foreman for a few days. That way we can get his observations of them in action. We have 35 to 40 percent success this way.”

LOOKING FOR A NAIL IN A JOB SITE

How do contractors get these candidates to walk in the door in the first place? Word of mouth and networking is the proven way for five contractors. “Our hiring is almost totally by networking, word of mouth,” says an Ohio contractor. “Our carpenters know the A, B and C players in town.”

“If we’re looking for an individual,” agrees a Californian, “we tell our suppliers or contractors that if they hear of anyone looking for a job, to have them contact us. They know our company and think we’re fair, so they push prospects our way. That’s the way we hire most of our people.”

Two contractors rely on ads and two others on state or private agencies. Neither routes appear to be successful. “We’ve tried headhunters but all they did was bring us a few people they’ve moved around from one company to another and couldn’t find a home for,” recalls a Californian.

A fellow Californian adds, “It seems we have the most trouble finding reliable office staff who will show up every day. They can come through an employment agency or ads in the paper that generate a lot of responses, 50 percent of whom either have all sort of excuses for not turning up to work or over-qualify themselves—meaning they literally can’t add 2 and 2. We normally put them on a three-month trial basis during which
they show their true colors. I’m sure there are better screening processes, but they are awfully costly, too. We receive screened people through employment agencies, but they bat a 50 percent average, too.”

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE PLAIN UGLY

A perception among four contractors is that the industry is scraping the bottom of the work-force barrel. “The most amazing thing to me is the number of people in the industry—50 percent or 60 percent—with criminal backgrounds,” reports a contractor from Alabama, “that you only find out about when doing your research. It’s right on our application that lying is grounds for termination, and yet they still withhold their criminal history.” He goes on to add, “These are the people who can’t pass drug tests. The only reason they’re working (in residential especially), is they’re not qualified to do anything else, period.”

Reflecting the views of an Ohio contractor, another Alabaman adds, ‘A lot of these people are like gypsies, traveling from one construction company to another. I tell them from the outset that I’d like the person to stay with me 10 or 15 years. They’ll act that way initially, but after six months, they’re ready to go somewhere else.”

Finding an attentive audience, the Alabaman is on a roll. “We’re mostly in commercial but residential is the absolute bottom of the barrel: You don’t know if they’re going to come to work that day or not. Residential construction isn’t a company level project. To build a house, you have a series of two- or three-man companies with no insurance, no nothing, working by the day, cash, no taxes or anything. It’s just a big black hole out there, and no one can figure how to handle it. You can’t attract people to that industry. You see a lot of opportunities to work in McDonald’s, but you don’t see many to work on construction sites—people don’t want to work in a dirty, un-air-conditioned environment. There’s a stigma to being a construction worker. Where you are
going to work the next day is another issue. Now we’re in a slowdown, we’re laying off people who’ve been working with us for a while.”

Rather than just complaining, though, this contractor does suggest that “the best way to solve the problem is to educate people that construction is a good livelihood, which we’re trying to do.”

A Washingtonian has a similar suggestion to make: “I think there’s a perception out there about construction that is incorrect. I read a survey a few years ago that said drywall workers were considered right down at the bottom of the list with migrant farm workers. In my view, what we do in the commercial drywall industry with firewalls and structural walls is every bit as important as any mechanical or electrical contractor’s work—look at the fire-safety and life-safety aspects. It’s hard work, and it’s not simple—you have to know what you’re doing to get it right, and I think it’s a pridelful trade.”

American youth is not interested in joining the trades, as one of the Alabama contractors implies, and the Washington contractor continues to spell it out: “All of our kids are going to college and training as computer programmers today and just don’t want to do the hard work that drywall and metal stud framing requires. The old second- and third-generation family worker seems to be a thing of the past, a problem that echoes throughout our industry.”

Like the Alabama contractor, he is focusing on education as the solution: “We are working with the unions to reach the high school kids, let them know there are other options if they choose not to go to college, there are well-paying jobs and respectable careers. But getting that word out is not easy. We’ve been in the business for 18 years and have seen a change—we’re not able to replace the guys that are retiring, and trying to get apprentices into the trade to grow them into the same position is getting a lot harder these days.”

This perception problem is actually a problem for public relations. Rather than a few uncoordinated contractors doing their best in their own area, the industry as a whole might be better off hiring a PR
agency to run a campaign that finds the buttons youth has today and works out how to promote the industry as a desirable career choice. If the army could gain popularity through a PR campaign, so can the construction industry. There is nothing glamorous or desirable about being a grunt and risking having one’s head blown off, but the army pushed the right buttons and found a lot of people wanted to be all they could be.

HELP FROM UNIONS AND ...

There are two other sources that can make it easier to find good people. In a nutshell, they are two conflicting but possibly synergistic forces that can pull the building industry up by its bootstraps: Unions on one boot and Hispanics as a group on the other. How come?

Half the contractors cited unions as sources of good employees through their training and apprenticeship programs. “The Carpenters’ union has been very successful in providing quality people to us,” notes an Arizonan. “The pendulum is swinging back in favor of unions as people realize that quality, service and value all go together. They’re committed to providing training programs, and these have been real helpful.”

“The union is keeping us supplied with good guys,” agrees a Massachusetts contractor. “They have a decent four-year apprenticeship program where someone comes in for less money than a journeymen, like half the money. Every six months, they go to school for two weeks to learn a new aspect of carpentry and after four years, they’re journeymen.”

Three contractors mention the difficulty in keeping personnel during downturns, but an Arizonan points out that unions prevent the cyclic loss of personnel during these downturns: “Sometimes, when well-qualified people can’t find a job as a carpenter, they’ll go to work for Motorola or something, and we lose good people that way. With the union, the employee returns to union hall and other union contractors hire them, so they stay in the system.”

While one of the Alabama contractors doesn’t openly support unions, it seems, he admits that “One thing hurting the construction industry more than anything is that we have moved from a union shop to a non-union shop over the years. I’m not advocating bringing in the union, but a lot of people stopped receiving any increases in wages. The construction worker used to be paid fairly well compared to a factory worker. Now he is at the bottom of the barrel. Twenty years ago, we were paying a journeyman plasterer $10 to $12 an hour. Now they’re at $18. The car they used to buy for $4,000 now costs $40,000! A pick-up truck was $6,000 and now is $22,000. They should be in the $30 to $40-an-hour range. It’s the owners who have won out at the expense of the men on the job.”

Confirming this view is the Washingtonian, who notes, “We are union and get better personnel because the wages are higher and the benefits better. The wages have certainly stayed up and so have the benefits—these guys are making about $30 an hour plus benefits.”

Although unions come across clearly in the survey as a definite asset, they do have some quality issues. “Some guys slip through the cracks,” claims the Massachusetts man. “We do drywall, and we’ll call the union and they send us a guy that has never even seen a screw gun before and can’t even figure out what gauge or tool to use. We had that problem especially in the late nineties when we were booming with 200-plus guys and we would turn over a dozen each week.”

“There are always good (80 percent) and bad (20 percent) union workers. We judge them on their skill ability and productivity,” agrees a Californian. And the Washingtonian adds,
“When there was a demand for men, a lot of guys came into the union because of the money, but they didn’t have the training. When we hire a guy, if we don’t know him, there’s a good chance he just doesn’t have the training to do this work properly. So there’s a very aggressive joint effort by contractors and unions right now to get the men trained across the boards.”

IMMIGRANTS

When it comes to unions and illegal immigrants, it seems there is no love lost, at least not for a South Dakotan:

“There are so many of these undocumented brethren from south of the border working up here that finding real, union-type craftsmen isn’t that difficult, because they are out of work. How many plasterers do you want by the end of the day? You want some good rock hangers? I can get you some. How about some stud men? They’re here, too.

“The INS says it’s too busy fighting terrorism in South Dakota to arrest illegal aliens unless they commit a felony. We have no idea what their scale is, they’re living in garages and I think they work for $5 per hour plus meals. Up here, union people are at $22 per hour. But by the time you’ve paid your insurance etc., the real cost is over $30. These undocumented aliens are no different than us, after a few years they catch on in terms of gaining the needed skills. I’ve tried whining and that didn’t work. [Senator] Tom Daschle came and did some stuff and got a response from the INS. There are only about 15 or 20 of us living in the whole state, so when somebody whines, he usually answers up.”

These outspoken words may well be heard echoing through building sites in many states. But there is another angle on this whole issue that the Washingtonian expresses best: “We’ve had a lot of Hispanic people come up to the Northwest over the last five years. We welcome this influx because most of them don’t just talk-they just work hard! They don’t have the training, but they make up for it in plain old work ethic. We send them to ongoing classes to learn new things and make them more universal in their skills. In a way, they are the replacement for the second and third generations who are opting out of the trade. A lot of the ‘old school didn’t want to see these Hispanics up
here at first, but they have come to appreciate their presence. We’ve finally got guys who don’t grumble about hanging [wallboard]. It was at a point before where workers only wanted to frame: ‘We don’t know who is going to hang that board, but it’s not us!’ But these Hispanics, they’re paid to hang [wallboard], so they do it.”

**WON’T YOU STAY A WHILE?**

Finally, the contractors were asked what actions they found to be successful in keeping the good people. Half of them said maintaining a friendly working environment, often from the boss on down, with a family atmosphere, group activities and maybe things like the exchange of Christmas presents.

Five contractors said it was good wages and benefits, and two more said providing steady work. Another five said they run profit-sharing schemes: “Share the wealth and if they’re good, they’ll reciprocate,” claims a Californian. The South Dakota disagrees: “Cutting them in for a share of the action isn’t a good idea as the bookkeeper is smarter than me and can make those numbers look like anything. If you really want to keep them, give them a pickup [truck].”

Two claim that treating employees fairly is important. A Californian even helps employees with life goals: “We make sure we understand their needs and goals in life. If he comes in as an estimator and he wants to be a project manager, we don’t say, ‘No, you’re going to be an estimator for the rest of your life.’ We’ll listen to him and if that’s really what he wants to do, maybe that’s what we’ll have him do.”

The overall impression in talking to contractors is that recruitment is not a major issue at present, because existing employees are happy enough to be staying in sufficient numbers to handle the workload. But before the next building boom occurs or the Old Guard retires, it might be better if we, as an industry, have our solutions in place. If there’s one thing we can’t do without, it is people. ☞

**About the Author**

Steven Ferry is a freelance writer based in Clearwater, Fla.