

# BUILDING A TALENT PIPELINE FOR WOMEN

## The opportunities and challenges for women in construction

### TABLE *of* EXPERTS



*Moderator*

**DAWN FILTZ**

Vice President,  
National Association of  
Women in Construction,  
Milwaukee Chapter 105

Preceding her current term as Vice President of the NAWIC Milwaukee Chapter, Dawn has also been a Board Member and served on the Treasurer & Finance and WIC Week Committees.

For more than 55 years, NAWIC has helped women take advantage of the opportunities in construction. Whether embarking on a new career, establishing a networking base, being a mentor/mentee, making a difference in your community, continuing education, or investing in great friendships, NAWIC offers a variety of opportunities — large and small.



**SHAUNA BOYER**

Project Manager, J.H. Findorff &  
Son Inc.

Shauna has over 12 years of experience in the construction industry and is currently a project manager for J.H. Findorff & Son Inc. As an adjunct professor for the Milwaukee School of Engineering's Construction Management Department, Shauna is proud to be an ambassador of the construction industry and help develop future leaders. She is heavily involved in the Associated General Contractors of Greater Milwaukee's Construction Leadership Council and is a past committee chairperson for the National Association of Women in Construction.



**ANGELA BRZOWSKI**

Construction Executive,  
Mortenson

With 19 years of construction industry experience, Angela is a construction executive and serves as the corporate market sector leader overseeing \$100 million of work for Mortenson's Wisconsin Operations. She leads Mortenson's Women Advancing Mortenson affinity group.

Angela holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the University of Wisconsin – Madison. She has a passion for sharing her expertise and enthusiasm for design and construction and has served as a guest lecturer for the University of Wisconsin, as well as for local high schools.



**HOLLY HAWKINS**

President, Tri-North

Holly Hawkins is President of Tri-North's Milwaukee office. Prior to her current role, she spent years as a project manager and Director of Sustainability Services at Tri-North, during which time she successfully managed many of the firm's largest and most complex projects across Wisconsin and beyond. Notorious for her resourcefulness and depth of knowledge in all aspects of construction management, Holly is committed to using her expertise to contribute to sustainable growth in the Milwaukee community.

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Construction has traditionally been a male-dominated industry but offers family-sustaining careers for women as well. The challenge for construction firms has been to show women the opportunities that are available to them and to demonstrate that they have company cultures that are inclusive and supportive. In honor of Women in Construction Week (March 4 – March 10), The Milwaukee Business Journal recently assembled a panel of experts to explore what construction companies are doing to educate women about the opportunities in the construction industry today and to create career pathways for them.

**DAWN FILTZ (MODERATOR):**  
**WHAT'S THE CURRENT STATUS**  
**OF WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION?**  
**ARE WE SEEING WOMEN ON**  
**CONSTRUCTION CREWS? ARE WE**  
**SEEING WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT**  
**AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP**  
**POSITIONS?**

HOLLY HAWKINS: We are seeing more and more women in management in

the office. I think in our corporation we are now over 40 percent women for senior-level management positions. Half of our executive team members are women. We also have a female superintendent out of our Madison office who has been with us since her apprenticeship and worked herself up to a management position in the field. Right now, she is the only one who has done that in the field.

SHAUNA BOYER: There are still not a lot of women in construction, especially in the field. We have several women at our company at various levels within the organization, however, a specific individual I'd highlight is our Yard Operations Superintendent. She came up through the field and is now overseeing our entire yard operations, but that is still the exception. One thing that I am noticing, however, is that more women are entering the field. I teach at MSOE, and the construction program there is now 35 percent women, which is much better than the 10 to 15 percent when I went to school. We may not see it so much for those working today, but I think younger women are starting to catch on that construction can be a good career opportunity.

ANGELA BRZOWSKI: Thirty-four percent of our team members are women, including a senior vice president and our CFO. Women in our skilled trades is lower, around 10 percent. We have three women superintendents here in Milwaukee building projects for the Bucks, Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin, and soon, MSOE. They are out there leading and defining how we build our projects, and that is an exciting evolution that has occurred in the last couple of years.

**FILTZ: WHAT TRAITS DO WOMEN**  
**BRING TO THE TABLE THAT YOU**  
**THINK BENEFIT CONSTRUCTION**  
**COMPANIES?**

BRZOWSKI: In our industry we work on teams, and studies show that team intelligence goes up when you have a diverse group sitting at the table. Women are strong managers and multitaskers. Our willingness to seek input from many areas helps us to come to the optimal solution. Women are also really good relationship builders, which is important because our industry is all about relationships. HAWKINS: I think multitasking is very

important. Many women are also moms. As a mom, you are breaking up fights, fixing problems, anticipating issues and listening to everything that

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**ANGELA BRZOWSKI**  
*Construction Executive*

is going on. I think women also tend to be even-tempered, work really well on teams and are used to pulling things from all different directions to get a job done.

**FILTZ: CONSTRUCTION HAS BEEN A MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY. WHAT ARE COMPANIES DOING TO MAKE IT MORE INCLUSIVE?**

BOYER: Construction is male dominated and will probably be male dominated for a long time. Those of us who enter the industry know that. Some go into it because we like the challenge. Having said that, construction companies do need to focus on making their cultures more inclusive. At Findorff, we embrace diversity and inclusion from a corporate



We are proud to provide our employees with equal opportunities for professional development, education, leadership training, and much more.

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## General Construction Statistics



Men 9,389,000

Women 939,000

**SOURCE:** Bureau of Labor Statistics — Current Population Survey at <http://stats.bls.gov>. This is an annual average based on monthly surveys of 60,000 households, equaling 150,000 people. Numbers are rounded off to the nearest thousandth. Dec. 31, 2016.

level. Everyone undergoes diversity and inclusiveness training, and have the opportunity to attend trainings focused on different communication styles or how to remove your inner

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**SHAUNA BOYER**

*Project manager, Findorff*

biases. It's not about making the culture more inclusive just for women. We also have minorities and people from other countries who have very diverse backgrounds. We focus on trying to make everyone feel included, regardless of their age, gender, race or ethnic background. We believe that everyone is part of the family and should be treated the same.

HAWKINS: There is no question that construction is male dominated. It goes all the way back to high school. I was taking drafting and CAD classes with the football team, and my teacher was the football coach.

BRZOWSKI: Culture shifts are not easy. They aren't successful without passionate leadership. About three years ago, our senior leadership initiated a journey recognizing that we need to have an inclusive environment in order to have a diverse workplace. All of our senior leaders have gone through comprehensive assessments, coaching and training, as well as ongoing continuous learning. We are

now rolling out that coaching and learning for all team members. We are changing the way we recruit, so we can draw from a more diverse talent pool. And we have employee affinity groups. Two years ago, we started our own Women Advancing Mortenson affinity group, which has gained a lot of traction. It allowed us to start dialogues on tough subjects like unconscious bias, differences in communication styles and micro inequities.

### FILTZ: IS IT WORKING?

HAWKINS: More so in the office than in the field. The field is tougher. That being said, just because it's a slow process does not mean that it is not working. I believe that the intentionality and passion with which leaders in our industry are examining where we are now and how we can get from here to a better future is going to produce a more inclusive, creative, innovative construction industry than has ever been seen. I think the changes in the office will eventually flow into the field space as well, as long as we continue to remain open to new ideas.

BOYER: The field is more like the military. It is hands-on, physical work and, at the end of the day, there are different physical thresholds between what men and women can do. But women have different strengths, so it becomes a matter of how best we can utilize those different strengths in the field to get the job done.

BRZOWSKI: Is it working? That's an interesting question. We are having dialogues we were not having before. We are seeing more women being promoted, and I think that will help other women see the opportunities available to them. I agree that diversity is more of a challenge in the field, which is why we are focusing on creating a more inclusive culture in the field.

### FILTZ: FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE, WHAT OBSTACLES REMAIN AND WHAT BARRIERS HAVE BEEN BROKEN DOWN?

BOYER: You are going to run into people who just don't want to listen to women in construction. There is always someone, usually in the trades, who doesn't want to listen to a woman. What you need in those cases is someone who has your back and reinforces the fact that they need to work with you. Your team needs to

be supportive. The same can be true sometimes when you are working with building owners, or inspectors, or architects, especially if they are older. Some of them are just not used to listening to a woman when it comes to a construction issue. That is a challenge I think we are going to face for a while until the industry as a whole adapts, but overall, I think it is becoming less of a problem.

HAWKINS: I took over my position running our Milwaukee operations when I was 34, which was fairly young for a male or female. What I saw going on then was that the CEOs would talk to the other men in the room instead of me. I had to continually reinforce the idea that women are knowledgeable and that we would not be in our positions if we did not know what we were talking about. Most of the issues I run into are with the subcontractors, because a lot of times they don't have women in leadership and they don't have the training we do.

BRZOWSKI: Some barriers have been broken down. The fact that we are seeing women in every level of the company shows the progress that has occurred in the last five to 10 years. The fact that we are having these dialogues is important. That's progress. One of the primary obstacles we continue to face is balancing a construction career with family responsibilities. We have

explored ways to be more flexible, but that can be challenging in construction.

### FILTZ: WHAT ARE THE TWO OR THREE MAIN CHALLENGES IN GETTING WOMEN TO APPRECIATE THE OPPORTUNITIES IN CONSTRUCTION AND HOW DO YOU ADDRESS THOSE CHALLENGES?

BRZOWSKI: To me, it is all about getting out there and promoting our industry, which is complex and technology-driven. We do much more than build buildings. We want to be valued business partners that offer a full range of services.

HAWKINS: When people think about construction careers, a lot of them think about the traditional, hands-on jobs like carpenters and painters. They don't think about the many positions within the office, like legal, marketing, graphic design and quality. Educating people about these career paths is critical. And because certain personality traits are good for certain careers, it's important for middle school and high school educators to keep an eye out for students who have those traits, so they can guide them into suitable careers.

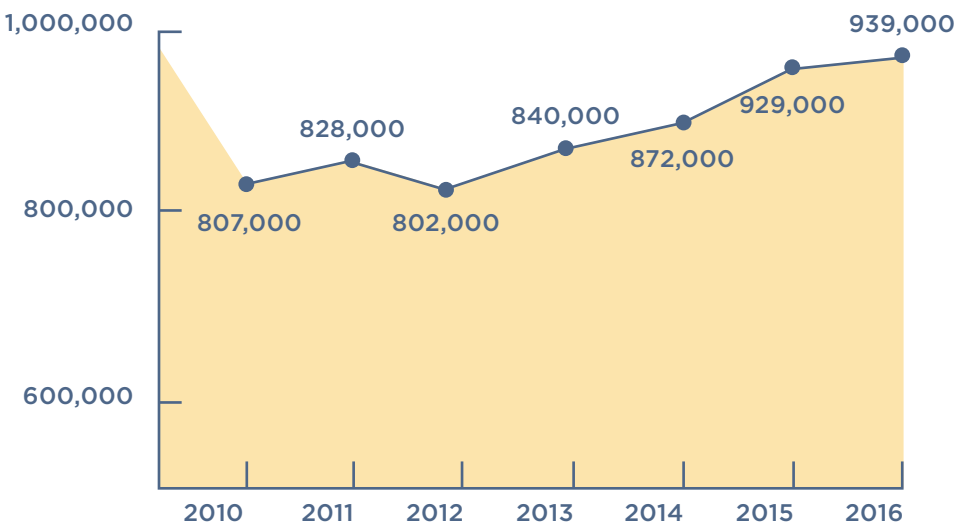
### FILTZ: YOU TALK ABOUT TRAITS. WHAT KIND OF TRAITS SHOULD EDUCATORS OR PARENTS BE LOOKING FOR, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO YOUNG WOMEN?

**446,216**  
RETAIL SQUARE FEET

**17.35 ACRES**  
- WITH -  
**244**  
APARTMENTS  
- AND -  
**9 RETAIL BUILDINGS**



# Numbers of Women in the Construction Industry Sector



**SOURCE:** Bureau of Labor Statistics — Current Population Survey at <http://stats.bls.gov>. This is an annual average based on monthly surveys of 60,000 households, equaling 150,000 people. Numbers are rounded off to the nearest thousandth. Dec. 31, 2016.

HAWKINS: They might really like to play with Legos or are always building things. Maybe they are good at geometry or have good spatial skills. Above all, we need problem solvers in our industry, so any kiddo adept at analytically and creatively figuring things out has great potential in construction in some way.

BRZOWSKI: They should look for students who have a natural curiosity about how things go together, who are strong leaders, and girls who shine in math. Educators should encourage girls not to shy away from math if they show strength in it.

BOYER: Those of us who are in construction appreciate it, because we make a good living and we know it is a great career. But, there are a lot of people who do not realize it is a viable option. There are a million different things you can do inside the world of construction, and you don't have to go to college for a lot of them. If I have students at MSOE who are really struggling and they're not sure college is the right path for them, I tell them they should think about joining a skilled trades union and work their way up through the field. It's possible they could end up in the same position that they were going to college for. There are great opportunities in construction right out of high school, and I don't think we talk about that enough.

**FILTZ: I TOTALLY AGREE. I NEVER WENT TO COLLEGE. I LEARNED AS I WENT, AND I CAN TELL YOU THAT THE OPPORTUNITIES ARE UNBELIEVABLE. THERE ARE A LOT OF CHALLENGES, BUT THE REWARDS ARE IMMENSE.**

HAWKINS: I agree. You don't need to go to college to have a good career in construction. You just need to work for a company that is willing to educate and promote from within. One of our assistant project managers started

out as an administration receptionist. She showed a passion, so we helped to educate her and worked her up through the ranks.

**FILTZ: WHAT KIND OF OUTREACH, IF ANY, IS BEING DONE TO HIGH SCHOOL AND MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS TO PROMOTE CAREERS IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?**

BRZOWSKI: The grassroots efforts are very exciting; having team members engaging in the community, spending time to teach, participating in events like COSBE Be the Spark tours or Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day. We also partner with Bradley Tech to run TechTerns programs, which are super exciting because we expose inner city kids to construction through multi-year, multiple-site visit programs where they learn different aspects of the AEC industry through hands-on activities.

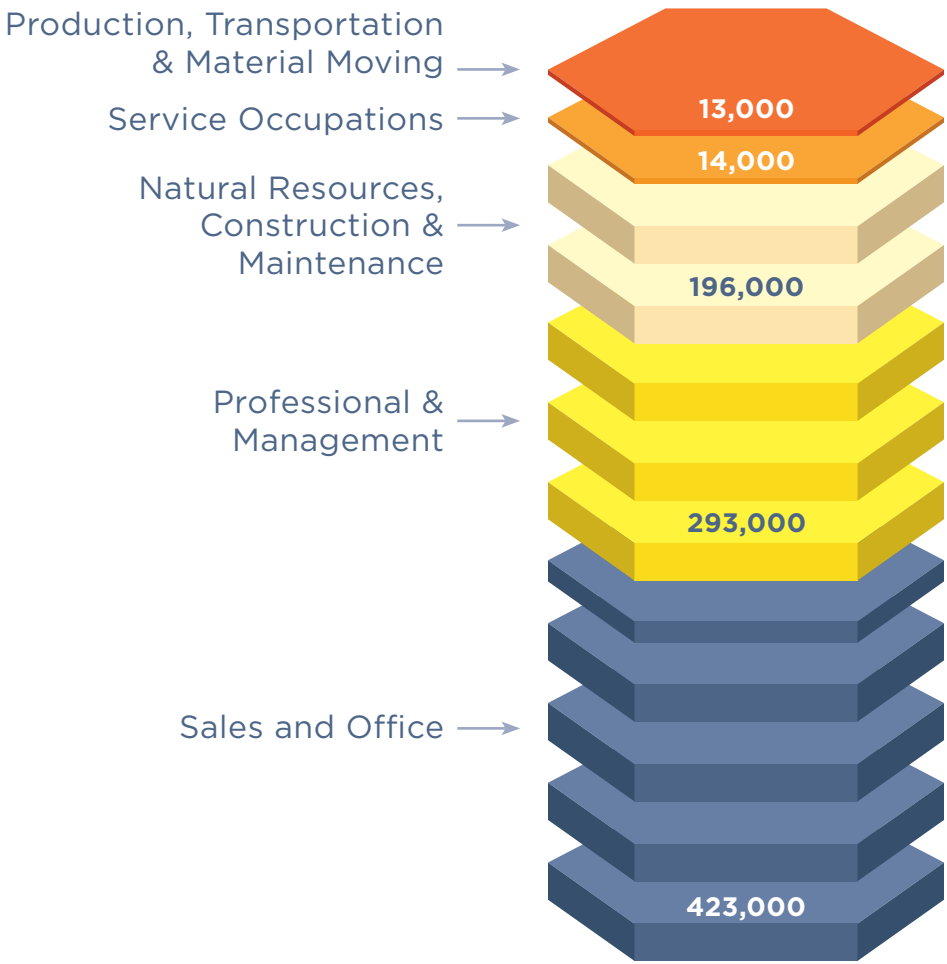
BOYER: We are involved in many outreach activities that promote careers in the construction industry; all the way down to the elementary-school level. For instance, our project managers and field leaders take the opportunity to teach students about the construction that is happening on their campus, what it means to be safe on jobsites, and we often attend career fairs focused on STEAM and STEM programs. It's so fun to see kids excited about construction at their schools; we are very focused on being good stewards of the industry. HAWKINS: We have been getting involved with different school districts to expose students to construction during career counseling. We are also working on a pilot program to bring area school superintendents and guidance counselors into our organization for an

all-day session to describe all of the different roles within our company. And we helped to found a non-profit called Kids Building Wisconsin which is based out of our Madison office and

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**HOLLY HAWKINS**  
*President, Tri-North*

## Breakdown of Women in Construction



**SOURCE:** Bureau of Labor Statistics — Current Population Survey at <http://stats.bls.gov>. This is an annual average based on monthly surveys of 60,000 households, equaling 150,000 people. Numbers are rounded off to the nearest thousandth. Dec. 31, 2016.

primarily aims to educate kids and parents on the various exciting, family-supporting careers available in our industry. Waukesha County Technical College is looking to start a program where seniors who were interested in construction will go to WCTC for a half day and then go to high school for the rest of the day. One day would be focused on architecture, one day would be focused on plumbing and one day would be focused on HVAC throughout the week. They are trying to get a pilot set up for this fall, but they are still working through a couple of issues.

**FILTZ: IF A GIRL OR YOUNG WOMAN CAME TO YOU ASKING FOR CAREER ADVICE IN CONSTRUCTION, WHAT WOULD YOU TELL THEM?**

BOYER: Be confident in yourself and happy with yourself before you walk into work each day. If you are not confident in the decisions that you make, the people working with you will see right through it, and your job will be made much more difficult.

HAWKINS: Don't settle for anything less than you know you are worth. There is no such thing as a barrier when you are supported at home and by your employer.

BRZOWSKI: Regardless of which career path you choose, be bold, find your voice, get involved, and create a network internally as well as externally. Find a strong mentor and ask a lot of questions.