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Amid nationwide shortages of skilled labor, experts share tips for attracting young talent to the electrical construction industry

By Susan Bloom

With more electricians currently exiting the workforce than joining, the electrical construction industry faces a well-documented shortage of skilled labor—to the tune of an estimated 85,000-plus unfilled positions by 2024, according to recent forecasts by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Many baby boomers are hitting retirement age and opting to leave the industry full-time or take contract positions," said Paul Pompeo, president of The Pompeo Group, an Albuquerque, N.M.-based recruiting firm specializing in positions within the lighting, electrical, internet of things and controls arena. "We definitely need to add more people into the pipeline to meet the demand."

Flipping the script

As many electrical contractors know, this is easier said than done, often due to the absence of positive publicity as well as misconceptions about the electrical construction industry.

"A lot of parents think that electrical contracting is all about digging ditches in the hot sun," said Kevin Tighe, executive director, labor relations and workforce development at the National Electrical Contractors Association. "Today, however, the opportunities go beyond just being an electrician/electrical contractor and include roles as supervisors, specialists in cutting-edge technology, and IBEW leaders. The branches on this tree of opportunity grow wide, and a job in the electrical construction industry can be a great career.

"All of these are achievable with hard work and commitment; candidates just need to have a passion for their career, show up ready to go and bring it every day, and we can teach them all of the hard skills," Tighe said.

At NECA, Tighe works to promote the NECA/IBEW apprenticeship program, through which more than 10,000 scholarships, each valued at \$50,000, are given out to a nationwide pool of deserving candidates each year.

"I speak to high school teachers and administrators all the time, and unfortunately, many don't promote electrical apprenticeships to their students," he said. "Based on the opportunities we're offering, we want the top thinkers and leaders coming out of high schools, not just those who aren't academically inclined. My No. 1 goal is to flip the script and dispel the myth concerning what our industry can provide, because many schools just aren't connected to what we can offer today.

"The fact is, through our earn-and-learn program, a young person can earn more than \$300,000 over the duration of our five-year apprenticeship program, thanks to annual \$42,000–\$82,000 salaries they'll hold down all while they're on a \$50,000 scholarship. Here in the Washington, D.C., area, for example, candidates can come out of the program earning a salary of \$92,000 with rich benefits, including full employer-paid family insurance and employer-funded pensions. I've seen trainees graduate and buy houses when they're 23 years old because they're able to move the needle that much earlier than their friends," he said.

This experience stands in stark contrast to that of many of their college-bound peers, who can accrue \$50,000–\$100,000 in debt during their time in school.

"In addition, we guarantee equal pay and are excited to offer great opportunities for men and women of all backgrounds to excel," Tighe said.

Top recruiting tips

These days, a bevy of trendy, tech-savvy companies in more media-friendly fields are competing for the pool of top young candidates.

"Young people aren't necessarily thinking about our industry, and recruiting is our challenge because our industry doesn't appear as sexy as others, at least from the outside," Pompeo said.

Tighe and Pompeo shared some tips for successfully broadening the appeal of the industry in the eyes of young talent:

Don't wait: "It's been a candidate's market for the last decade or so, even before the Great Recession of 2008–2009, with many companies competing for the best candidates," Pompeo said. "The better the candidate, the more likely they'll actually be interviewing different companies themselves and receiving multiple offers.

"[If you like a candidate,] don't let the hiring process get in the way—delays will kill you. Take no more than seven to 10 days between each stage of interviews and conduct no more than three rounds of interviews. The committee interview process, whereby a large group of colleagues interviews a candidate, is ineffective and is rarely done anymore."

Recruit in schools: Tighe said it's never too early in a student's development to begin learning about careers in electrical construction. NECA chapter representatives regularly speak to teens and preteens in schools nationwide.

"For example, the NECA/IBEW Powering America Team of the Arizona Chapter of NECA, IBEW Local 640 and Phoenix Electric JATC recently partnered with Madison Park Middle School in Phoenix to create the CACTUS Program (Careers in Architecture, Construction, and Trades Uplifting Students)," Tighe said. "Through the program, sixth- through eighth-grade students work together with electrical industry professionals to bring electrical construction projects to life, and the pilot project included their construction of solar-powered dog houses."

Tighe has helped to get an electrical training curriculum into some 121 high schools

across the country. Through the program, students can elect to take the class in their senior year, where they'll receive hands-on training and a jump-start on a career. Upon graduation, they are eligible to complete the five-year NECA apprenticeship program in just four years.

"We're getting our scholarships and the student winners announced and recognized in high school assemblies, where two or more of the top students in each of these high school electrical training classes will win our \$50,000 scholarship," Tighe said.

Students will have a career for life, and many will make more than \$150,000 a year by their mid-20s.

"We need to get in front of students, parents, and teachers and show up as an industry to promote the opportunities we offer. If every person in our industry could recruit one person, our labor shortage will be solved."
—Kevin Tighe, NECA

"The truth is that we're underserving 25 percent of our kids and penalizing 18 percent who will end up going to college and failing out with debt by not promoting this opportunity in schools—schools and students could benefit if they only knew about it," Tighe said.

Career development and technology: Millennials tend to have shorter job stays than workers in other demographics, but there are ways to change that.

"Millennials need to see a progression and career path and like to be involved in discussions related to their next steps," Pompeo said. "Companies also need to demonstrate that they're technologically savvy by possessing current technology and offering ongoing training opportunities."

Mine the military: Former military personnel make optimal additions to the industry.

"With their skills, commitment, responsibility, experience in working hard and with their hands, and understanding of management structure and leadership, military personnel are tremendous candidates," Tighe said.

Some 200,000 men and women (typically aged 22–30) retire from the military

each year after a four-to-eight-year stint and currently represent about 10 percent of new candidates coming into the electrical construction industry. EC firms can work with recruiting organizations that help ex-military personnel transition to civilian jobs, such as Helmets to Hardhats and Hire Heroes USA.

Promote work-life balance: "Benefits that relate to quality of life are often as important to millennials as money," Pompeo said. "They look at their job within the context of their whole life and don't always define themselves by their job, as many people from past generations tended to do."

Benefits such as gym memberships, flexible schedules, the opportunity to work remotely, and other life and health-related perks of employment hold increasing value for younger candidates.

Give back: "If a company is involved with local causes, gives back to the community, and can share that story on their website and social media, that's very meaningful to younger candidates, who appreciate the opportunity to contribute to a greater good and make a difference," he said.

Modernize your company's face: "Having a presence on social media is critical because that's where young people are, and millennials also respond well to videos and visual content," Pompeo said. "Make sure that your website has a modern look and feel and that it includes current profiles of your company and key managers, because your website is the first place a prospective candidate will go to research your company."

Pompeo recommends that firms have younger team members review the website to ensure that it features elements younger demographics will find attractive.

Be the change: "Electrical contracting is an exciting field full of opportunities for young candidates and firms need to get out front and tell that story," Pompeo said.

Tighe agreed that the story is key.

"We need to get in front of students, parents, and teachers and show up as an industry to promote the opportunities we offer," he said. "If every person in our industry recruits one person, our labor shortage will be solved." ⚡

BLOOM is a 25-year veteran of the lighting and electrical products industry. Reach her at susan.bloom.chester@gmail.com.