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## Seeking Concrete Solutions To Labor Shortage In Construction

*By Jeffrey Steele*  
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The construction industry is seeking non-traditional solutions to its labor shortage.

The construction industry is booming. But as it oversees the building explosion across the U.S., the sector is also seeking solutions to its most vexing challenges. Among them are the industry's labor shortage and the world's growing need for natural disaster-resistant materials.

In the current labor market, cited by many as among the tightest if not the tightest in a half century, few fields have labored under the skilled and semi-skilled employee shortage like the building sector. The past decade has served

up a double whammy. During the 2008-09 Great Recession, many skilled workers left the field for other occupations. Then the industry suffered a falloff in new hires when it rebounded in the downturn's wake.

Companies and the entire industry have had to get innovative in finding new hires, said Joel Galassini, president for Texas and New Mexico with Cemex USA. The building materials and services provider is based in Houston, Tex., its parent Cemex in Monterrey, Mexico.

“Throughout the U.S., we've experienced the tremendous labor market and three percent unemployment rate,” Galassini says. “And while that is good for the economy, it's a challenge for the construction sector. If you think about it, most of the jobs are blue collar, skilled trades, and not a lot of people are going into that market. A lot of people are pursuing four-year degrees, and not construction trade jobs. These are good paying jobs, but we don't have a lot of people interested in working with their hands. Across the industry, the challenge is not trucks or jobs, it's that there's not enough labor to meet the demand.”

## **Break from tradition**

Cemex and other building industry leaders have had to turn away from the approaches of yesteryear and embrace new means of locating, recruiting and retaining workers.

Admitting he has no silver bullet, Galassini says his company is exploring a wide array of what he calls “non-traditional avenues,” in hiring. They include placing greater effort on hiring women workers and military veterans, boosting recruitment from trade schools and even launching efforts to appeal to foster children approaching 18 years of age.

“We are having to look at attracting different populations into the industry, where we can give them the skills,” he says.

If Cemex USA is investigating non-traditional routes to prospective employee pools, it's looking to attract today's workers with non-traditional tools as well, he says.

“We also recognize employees are requesting digital tools to help them do their jobs more efficiently,” Galassini says. “The building materials industry has used paper for years. We are looking to lead the digital transformation by first offering our customers a digital end-to-end solution with Cemex Go. We are exploring similar solutions for our employees.”

## Three pigs

Another issue for the industry is the need for what Galassini calls “future-ready materials.” The list of horrifying natural disasters seems to grow longer each year.

“Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Florence, these are devastating events that impact the communities they hit very long-term,” he observes. “In the fable about the three pigs, you learn you make your house out of stone. We’re trying to promote more concrete used in building.”

A concrete-reinforced structure delivers greater resistance to hurricanes. It is more resistant to flooding because wood rots. And it is more resistant to fire because it doesn’t burn like wood. “It’s a material that will resist the test of time,” Galassini says.

Fiber-reinforced concrete is being innovated to make it stronger and more resilient, he adds. “And you can . . . create anything you want, with dyes to impart color and texture,” Galassini says. “Concrete gives you a blank canvas that limits you only by your imagination.

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“I’m so proud of this industry. I grew up in it. We literally build the foundation of America.”