Moving Up the Career Ladder

When I first began my career with Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) almost 25 years ago, the construction industry did not see many women entering its ranks. Times certainly have changed. Today, women can be found on the jobsite as master craft professionals, project managers and safety officers. Even more impressive, women now hold top positions with construction companies working in every segment of the industry, from marketing and business development to human resources. And, the number of women-owned construction companies continues to grow each year.

At a time when the construction industry suffers from a severe workforce shortage, women are contributing in a big way to the success of the industry by serving as role models for those considering careers in construction. In fact, many of these women play active roles in recruiting a future workforce by reaching out to young women’s groups, such as the Girl Scouts, to challenge any gender stereotypes regarding construction work.

Two associations, the Women Construction Owners and Executives, USA and the National Association of Women in Construction, must be applauded for their dedication to supporting women in the industry and educating the younger generation about the life-long career opportunities the industry offers. ABC is proud to have in place a national-level agreement with each group to promote free enterprise and empower minority- and women-owned firms by providing them with access to services, training, networking and other programs.

Construction Executive celebrates National Women’s History Month with “Industry Trendsetters,” featuring the challenges faced by three successful women who now call construction their career.

And, be sure to enjoy this issue’s look at historical restoration projects. “Rebuilding History One Brick at a Time” highlights the specialized work required to transform urban areas across the country, from San Antonio, Texas, to Omaha, Neb.

Kirk Pickerel
Publisher
Industry

MEET THREE
WOMEN THRIVING IN
CONSTRUCTION CAREERS
AND ENCOURAGING
OTHERS TO FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

TRENDS

But as many construction businesswomen attest, it sure can't stay that way.

BY LAUREN PINCH
Although misconceptions, lack of encouragement and gender expectations may still play a part in deterring women from entering the industry, the numbers don’t tell the whole story.

With growing industry-wide support for diversity programs, continuing education and business partnerships, women are making significant inroads in construction. According to the latest available figures, in 2005 an average of 882,000 women were employed in the industry—a 6 percent increase from 2002.

Each year, more and more talented women choose careers in the construction industry, as administrators, entrepreneurs, estimators, project managers, craftworkers, machinery operators and more.

Women thriving in construction careers say progress is evident, and despite obstacles, being in the minority gives them the opportunity to stand out among male peers.

Many women, in fact, are the brains rather than the brawn behind their companies’ success, helping to run the show behind the scenes. Seventy-nine percent of women in construction work in the sales and office occupation sectors and about 15 percent hold professional and management positions, according to BLS.

And, more women are starting their own construction firms and receiving support from the U.S. Small Businesses Administration and organizations like Women Construction Owners and Executives, USA, the National Association of Women in Construction and Associated Builders and Contractors.

According to the Center for Women’s Business Research, women-owned businesses account for two in five of all businesses in the United States, generate $1.9 trillion in annual sales and employ 12.8 million people nationwide. For the past two decades, women-owned firms have continued to grow at about twice the rate of all firms.

Meet a few trendsetters who are changing the face of the construction industry.
ROBERTA ADAMS
TD Industries

Roberta Adams, marketing and communications specialist at TD Industries, Dallas, found a career in the construction industry during a turning point in her professional life.

After 13 years of working for ARCO, an oil company now owned by BP that suffered several layoffs in the 1980s, Adams left to start her own decorating company. While a rewarding experience, the income associated with self-employment was inconsistent, and the financial demands of a mortgage, car payment and two children living at home pressed her to seek other options.

She applied at TD Industries, an employee-owned HVAC, facilities and specialty construction firm, for a position as an executive assistant to Harold MacDowell, the company’s CEO.

“The great news is that when I
INDUSTRY TRENDS

got the call from TD’s People Department asking me to come interview. I’d never heard anyone so excited to be working at a place,” she says. And that positive energy helped her overcome any apprehension about starting a new job in an unfamiliar industry.

“I have to admit, the office was a little ‘rough’ when I first started. The cubicles were from the 1960s, my desk was actually two tables pushed together, and wires on the floor were covered with duct tape,” she says.

Ten years later (her anniversary with the company is March 10), the office has experienced some dramatic changes. A major remodeling took place two years after she started, and TDIndustries has grown into one of the most respected firms in the country, being named to FORTUNE magazine’s list of 100 Best Places to Work for the past 10 years.

With 1,400 employees, TDIndustries is smaller than where Adams began her career, and that gives her the feeling she’s making a difference at a place that values employee leadership.

“When I first came here, I was hired to be an executive assistant for one executive,” she says. “Over the years, he’s encouraged me to take on more tasks and responsibilities and learn new skills. Now I am responsible for all of our marketing, advertising, graphic design, promotional items, exterior signage, and keeping our branding consistent across all of our geographies.”

These opportunities and more present themselves to women at construction firms nationwide. “While the construction industry is predominantly male, there are still many great opportunities for women in leadership at TDIndustries,” she says. “I feel confident that if I wanted to make a career change at the company, to another department or to the field, I would be supported and encouraged.”
And the industry continues to show signs of progress for women. "In 10 years, I've seen more and more female engineering and construction management graduates coming into our workplace and more women interested in our business."

To encourage young women to apply for new openings at the company, TDIndustries actively recruits at job fairs and colleges like Texas A&M and University of Texas. The company also encourages family members to spread the word about careers in the industry.

In fact, Adams' husband and one of their sons now work for TDIndustries. "I think construction is a lot of fun, and I encourage women to explore careers in an industry that is not matched 50-50," she says. "You are going to be in the minority, but sometimes that can be a good thing."

**KAREN SAY**  
*Saybr Contractors*

Karen Say, founder and president of Saybr Contractors, Tacoma, Wash., believes being one of the few women in her field is actually an asset. "Being young and being female, the biggest issue I've faced is a lack of credibility upon first impression. When I walk into a room full of men, I tend to go through a lot more technical informa-
tion to build a rapport, whereas a man in a suit doesn’t need to do that. The process of building trust is slower,” she says.

“On the flip side, everyone remembers meeting me because I am different—and this is a huge advantage from a marketing standpoint.”

Saybr started in the construction industry as a receptionist during college at O’Sullivan Construction, which was later purchased by Omega Environmental. With a lot of determination, she worked her way up the career ladder in nine years from accounting into estimating and project management. She took over as operations manager and eventually became the branch manager of the firm’s petroleum division.

“It was an unintended course into construction,” she says. “But it was high-energy and suited me very well. I had several bosses who afforded me opportunities when I felt like I needed more of a challenge, and when it was sink or swim, I had

Saybr assisted Seattle Biodiesel, LLC in building an award-winning commercial biodiesel facility—the first of its kind constructed using few formal plans or specifications.

Saybr provided extensive sitework and landscaping for the University of Washington’s extension campus in Tacoma.
no choice but to swim.”

But when the company filed for bankruptcy about eight years ago, Say became a reluctant entrepreneur.

At age 29, Say risked her house, her car and everything she and her husband owned to start Saybr Contractors out of the 400-square-foot front room of their house, bringing with her only four employees from Omega.

Now the company employs 50 people and earns about $16 million a year through petroleum systems and federal contracting work.

“I never dreamed the company would grow to this point,” she says. When the company first began, environmental regulations drove construction opportunities for various petroleum projects, and Say thought she might need to pursue a job elsewhere if the work dried up. But it never did.

“We diversified. Because our customers were happy with the petroleum work we’d done, we were able to expand from these jobs. The relationships that I built stayed with me.”

The company recently installed fueling stations for Safeway sites across Washington and Oregon, replaced 22 underground storage tanks at more than 25 sites for the U.S. Navy, and provided and maintained generators at remote Federal Aviation Administration facilities.

The Puget Sound Business Journal named Saybr Contractors one of the 100 fastest growing private companies in the region.

“I attribute my success to the passion I have for the industry,” Say says. “I love what I do. If you’re passionate about something, you will be tenacious even when circumstances are tough.”

To encourage other women to seek jobs in the industry, Say recommends they find a side of construction that’s a personal fit—whether it’s the business side, the project management side or the people side of the business.

Say leads by example, networking at industry functions and proving stereotypes wrong.

“It’s definitely a man’s world, but do I see changes? Absolutely. Now I am seeing more and more women business owners, and for years I rarely met a woman who is doing what I’m doing.”

HEIDI BIANCO
Wohlsen Construction

As human resources director at Wohlsen Construction, Lancaster, Pa., Heidi Bianco actively encourages young people—especially girls—to consider careers in the construction industry.

She is responsible for recruitment, retention, employee benefits, training and development at the general contracting firm, which builds in the health care, education, commercial and industrial sectors throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.

Bianco participates in local career days at elementary, junior and senior high schools.

“We are planting a seed, and hopefully the seed will grow so that the industry can continue to recruit well-qualified craft specialists, male and female alike,” Bianco says.

Recently, she spoke to a Girl Scouts troop—a group that might have been ignored in recruitment efforts years ago—and showed them a video clip of a female business owner running a piece of heavy construction equipment.

“I want to tell them, there are so many things in construction that you can do that do not require physical labor, and that women can do just as well as men,” Bianco says.

The fact that classes at the local high school’s career and technical center are full and competitive is a sign the message might be starting to sink in. “Students are recognizing they can go from classes at the technical center directly into an apprenticeship, and parents are seeing the value as well.”

Although her father was a carpenter by trade, Bianco’s career path didn’t begin in the construction industry. She graduated from Franklin and Marshall College with a major in mathematics and a minor in economics. She worked for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in the Joint State Government Commission before taking a job adminis-
munity in several ways,” she says.

In her current role, Bianco encourages a work-life balance for the company’s employees and recognizes the need for flexible schedules and part-time arrangements for working mothers. Legislation like the Family and Medical Leave Act was a turning point for women working across all industries, not just construction, she says.

Wohlsen built St. Peter’s Church in the Great Valley, Paoli, Pa., a reproduction of an 18th-century Chester County bank barn with post and beam framing.
Career Partners for Life

Women construction leaders seeking networking and professional development opportunities—and moral support—need look no further than organizations like Women Construction Owners and Executives, USA (WCOE), and the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC).

“Think of it as a good old boys network working for the good old girls,” says Deborah Wilder, WCOE national president. “We need a support system because there are not a lot of women that choose to go into this nontraditional field.”

WCOE was founded to promote the role of Women Business Enterprises in the construction industry, assist women in executive management positions, provide professional development resources and monitor legislation that benefits the small business community.

The organization took root in northern Minnesota, where 11 women first met in 1983 to discuss its formation. The group grew to 69 women when WCOE’s executive board signed its charter in February 1984. Today, WCOE is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and continues to grow.

WCOE’s member-businesses include general contractors, top-level policy-making executives, architects, engineers, construction project managers, subcontractors and other businesswomen and professionals related to the construction industry.

Teaming with other associations like NAWIC and Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), WCOE takes a proactive role in the political process, advocating legislation that benefits small and women-owned businesses.

For example, WCOE opposes contract bundling, or the grouping of small contracts into one larger contract. (Separately bidding smaller contracts for jobs, like roofing or asphalt paving, gives more firms an opportunity to win the work.) The group also pushes for equal access to surety bonding—an issue that challenges smaller construction firms.

Last June, WCOE entered a national-level agreement with ABC and the National Association of Minority Contractors to promote free enterprise and empower minority- and women-owned firms by providing them with access to services, training, networking and other programs.

NAWIC, founded in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1955, shares the same goal. NAWIC’s national Women in Construction Week, taking place from March 4-10, promotes the role of women in construction through Construction Career Days, Habitat for Humanity projects and other programs for adults and children.

For example, at a local shopping center, NAWIC’s St. Louis Chapter participated in Construction, a team event bringing together members of the design and construction fields to build giant sculptures out of canned foods—celebrating the industry before a wide audience. At the close of the exhibition, the cans of food were donated to local food pantries.

NAWIC serves approximately 6,000 members in nearly 200 chapters in the United States and Canada.

“When women business owners should certainly consider joining an association,” Wilder says. “The relationships come in handy. I can pose a question to a fellow WCOE member and get an honest and practical answer. It’s the business contacts that matter.”

—Lauren Pinch