Chapter 11
Resolving a Workforce Crisis in the U.S. Roofing Industry

John G. Schehl

National Roofing Contractors Association, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA), a nonprofit construction trade association established in 1886, was challenged to find a solution to overcome a severe industry workforce shortage that emerged as the economy recovered from the great recession. The NRCA leadership, staff, and other industry stakeholders focused on developing strategies to address the workforce crisis head-on and committed resources to develop a series of performance-based programs to overcome the crisis. The new initiatives relied on limited U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data to support development decisions. Aware that the available BLS data was insufficient, NRCA commissioned the Arizona State University (ASU) to conduct the roofing industry's first ever comprehensive demographics research study. New data gleaned from the research changed not only NRCA's approach to resolving the workforce crisis, but it may potentially change how the entire roofing industry operates.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Established in 1886, the National Roofing Contractors Association (2020) is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit trade association serving the needs of the entire roofing industry supply chain including contractors, manufacturers, distributors, architects, consultants, engineers, code authorities, building owners and county, city, and state government agencies. As one of the construction industry's most respected trade associations, it has become the voice of roofing professionals and the leading authority in the roofing industry for information, education, technology, and advocacy. The National Roofing Contractors Association has been the home for generations of entrepreneurial craftsmen and enterprises who shelter and protect America's families and businesses, as well as each other. Its vision is the recognition of its members as professionals and to unifying the industry to that purpose.

The National Roofing Contractors Association's mission is to inform and assist the roofing industry, act as its principal advocate, and help members in serving their customers. The National Roofing Contractors Association continually strives to enhance every aspect of the roofing industry. A dedicated staff of 60 professionals operate from the National Roofing Contractors Association's headquarters in Rosemont, IL and five additional staff in Washington, DC, to best serve its member's needs.

The National Roofing Contractors Association has nearly 4,000 members from all 50 states and 53 countries and is affiliated with 97 local, state, regional, and international roofing contractor associations. The National Roofing Contractors Association's contractor members range in size from companies with less than $1 million in annual sales volumes (50 percent of the current membership) to large, commercial contractors with annual sales volumes exceeding $100 million. More than half serve both residential and commercial roofing markets, and more than one-third are family-owned small businesses continually operating for more than a quarter of a century (MCRA, 2020).

SETTING THE STAGE

The early 1980s saw a shortage of skilled roofing workers as the U.S. economy rebounded from the recession of the 1970s. The economic boom continued through the 1990s and, simultaneously, new low- and steep-slope roof system technologies emerged, creating an exponential demand for a larger and higher skilled workforce.

This demand peaked in 1998 at 135,720 skilled roofing workers, excluding helpers/laborers, according to the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics. This wave of workers fell far short of meeting the industry workload at that time. Simultaneously, immigrant worker populations—primarily Latinos—filled the void. The immigrant workforce in the roofing industry increased from less than 15 percent in 1994 to about 27 percent by 2000, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Then came the tragic 9/11 attacks on important political site in the United States, grinding the U.S. economy to a standstill. The demand for roofing work diminished significantly and the workforce crisis appeared to dissolve (Siehoff, 2020).

Roofing industry productivity gradually returned to previous levels as the U.S. economy healed, although inconsistently across regions of the U.S. The workforce went back to work and met the demand. Then came the worldwide economic recession between 2007 and 2011, leaving in its wake a permanent void of skilled roofing craftsmen as mass numbers of workers exited the industry to pursue other career opportunities.

In 2017, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projected industry-wide employment of roofers to grow 12 percent from 2018 to 2028, much faster than the average for all other occupations. They predicted this growth will be driven through replacement and repair of roofs as well as the installation of new roofs (Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). See figure 1.

Nobody thinks about roofs until one leaks, disrupting or destroying a home or business or shutting down an entire manufacturing production line. The public depends on local roofing contractors to fix their roofing problems. The vast majority of the National Roofing Contractors Association members are family-owned small businesses generating less than $1M in annual revenues.

Leading up to and during the National Roofing Contractors Association's annual July 2018 committee meetings, the most discussed industry issue that was causing members enormous personal and financial pain was the shortage of skilled workers. Manufacturers of roofing materials were experienc-

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