

Redefining the Construction Professional

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According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the term “construction professional” typically refers to occupations requiring a college degree or certification, including engineers, architects, and construction managers. These professionals are responsible for the overall planning, coordination, and execution of construction projects, distinguishing them from tradespeople, who often perform manual or technical tasks. Traditionally, the construction industry has been divided into two distinct groups: professionals and tradespeople. The former, engaged in design, management, and supervisory roles, are seen as decision-makers, while the latter – such as carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and welders – are viewed as performing physical labor.

This traditional division has historically undervalued the expertise of tradespeople, contributing to a skewed understanding of the workforce. Given today’s highly segmented and specialized construction industry, it is important to recognize that many tradespeople possess skills and professionalism equal to their counterparts in supervisory or design roles. By challenging this divide, we can foster greater respect for trades and promote a more holistic view of career opportunities in the construction sector.

Traditional Definitions of Construction Professionals

Construction professionals are typically formally educated in construction-related fields, often holding degrees or certifications qualifying them for leadership roles. These individuals engage in tasks such as project planning, structural



design, cost estimation, and quality control. They are often perceived as the “white-collar” segment of construction, distinct from the manual labor associated with tradespeople.

While the contributions of architects, engineers, and managers are essential, this traditional definition excludes the professionals responsible for the direct work that brings these plans to life. Tradespeople have historically been categorized separately, which has led to a hierarchical view that undervalues their vital contributions.

The Undervaluation of Tradespeople

Tradespeople have often been overlooked as “professionals” due to the perception that their work is manual, routine, and lacks the intellectual rigor associated with design and management roles. This view reinforces stereotypes that

discourage young people – often under the influence of parents – from pursuing careers in the trades. As a result, university degrees and “higher-status” professions are frequently promoted over trade-based careers.

However, this perception is inaccurate and outdated. In today’s construction environment, tradespeople often need deep knowledge of materials, techniques, and regulations relevant to their field. Many are certified and undergo years of apprenticeship or formal training, engaging in problem-solving, collaboration, and quality control – key elements of professionalism.

The Emergence of Skilled Trades in Today’s Construction Industry

The construction industry has become more segmented and specialized than ever before. Advances in technology, materials, and construction methods have led to the rise of highly skilled tradespeople who perform specialized tasks with great precision. From installing complex electrical systems to ensuring the structural integrity of buildings, tradespeople today are not merely manual laborers but highly trained professionals who apply specialized knowledge and expertise to their work.

Many trades now require certifications and ongoing education, like the requirements for architects and engineers. Electricians, for example, must be licensed and regularly update their knowledge of electrical codes, while plumbers and HVAC technicians must stay informed on evolving regulations and energy efficiency standards. These professions require a blend of technical knowledge, problem-solving ability, and practical skill – traits typically associated with traditional construction professionals.

Despite this, tradespeople are still often viewed in a less favorable light than their white-collar counterparts. This bias is especially evident in career advice given to young people, where university degrees are frequently promoted over trades, which are seen as “less desirable.”

Reframing the Construction Trades as a Career Path

To change this narrative, it is essential to reframe the trades as respectable and rewarding career paths. With growing demand for skilled labor in construction – particularly in a rapidly


urbanizing world – opportunities for tradespeople are both abundant and promising. Many trades offer competitive wages, job stability, and clear pathways for career advancement. For instance, a journeyman electrician can progress to become a master electrician, and eventually a contractor or business owner.

In addition to financial rewards, trades offer a unique level of job satisfaction stemming from tangible accomplishments. Skilled tradespeople, such as carpenters or masons, can take pride in seeing the physical results of their work, whether it is a home, a bridge, or a public building, standing for years to come. This craftsmanship and sense of achievement are often overlooked elements of professionalism.

Moreover, trades offer opportunities for entrepreneurship. Many skilled tradespeople eventually start businesses, employing others and contributing to the local economy. The skills required to run a successful construction business – such as leadership, fiscal management, and customer service – are the same skills that are highly valued in traditional construction professional roles.

Conclusion

The traditional division between construction professionals and tradespeople no longer reflects the realities of today’s industry. As construction becomes more specialized and technology-driven, the lines between “professionals” and “tradespeople” are increasingly blurred. Skilled tradespeople play an indispensable role in the construction process, and their expertise should be recognized as equally valuable to that of architects, engineers, and managers.

By changing the way we view tradespeople, we can encourage more individuals to consider careers in the trades, which would benefit the entire construction industry. This reframing can help address labor shortages, increase productivity, and elevate the status of the trades within the broader economy. The future of construction depends on recognizing the professionalism, skill, and expertise of all those involved, from the office to the jobsite. 



About the Author

Dennis Milsten, CCM, is the director of federal programs at [Siris](#). He is an experienced professional with a diverse background in capital program management, construction quality management, construction procurement, and business development in both the public and private sectors.

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