

# The Future for Union Sheet Metal Construction

## Executive Summary

### Overview

Union sheet metal construction is at the most important point in its history. Actions and decisions undertaken over the next few years will determine not just how well the industry thrives over the next 20 years, but if it survives.

SMWIA and SMACNA leaders must understand the complex and dynamic forces that are impacting union sheet metal construction. Commonly held assumptions about the future may no longer stand and a diverse set of potential future scenarios is unfolding.

In the midst of these circumstances, the New Horizons Foundation commissioned a study entitled [The Future for Union Sheet Metal Construction](#). The 24-month long study was comprised of a series of “future focus groups” with SMWIA and SMACNA leaders from all around the country, interviews with construction industry experts, and extensive research into social and technological trends.

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## The Myths

The study debunked seven myths about the future of the union sheet metal industry. Understanding these myths as well as the realities and forecasts for them will allow SMWIA and SMACNA leaders to make more informed decisions regarding the future of the industry. The seven myths are as follows:

**Myth #1—All union sheet metal construction will remain “locally” controlled**—Marketplace forces are creating a more global society; geography may no longer be the appropriate organizing method for creating standards, work processes, contracting, and labor agreements.

**Myth #2—Unions will continue to have a significant influence in the marketplace and society**—Union membership and influence are at a 100-year low; aggressive efforts to organize the market and articulate the union advantages on issues such as wages, health benefits, and retirement will be vital.

**Myth #3—The SMWIA and SMACNA contractors have an adversarial relationship**—SMWIA and SMACNA currently enjoy a strong working partnership especially at the national level; any major differences must be resolved and a joint effort to aggressively pursue growth and organizing the market must become both organizations' #1 priority.

## The Future for Union Sheet Metal Construction Executive Summary

**Myth #4—Union sheet metal construction will always have a training advantage over non-union sheet metal construction**—New, dynamic, on-the-job training techniques are producing a more flexible and valuable sheet metal worker; the ability to train and retrain quickly on the job site (historically not a strength of union sheet metal training) is a must.

**Myth #5—Employees will always be more loyal to the union than the employer**—Over the last 20 years, many sheet metal workers have worked hand-in-hand with contractors to grow thriving businesses; in an effort to keep the best workers, contractors will need to create a “company culture” that appeals to sheet metal workers.

**Myth #6—Union labor agreements will always have their pay scale based upon seniority not tasks or skills**—Technology is changing the materials, methods, and needed knowledge so rapidly that “experience” is not as large of an advantage as it once was; technologies such as personal digital assistants and wireless networking will automate time and task tracking to allow for a variable compensation scale.

## The Future for Union Sheet Metal Construction Executive Summary

Myth #7—Both SMWIA and SMACNA contractors will continue to share a common vision for the growth of the industry—There are large areas of disagreement about what aspects of growth (e.g. market share, man-hours, size of the labor pool) are most important; a widely held commitment to organizing the market will serve as a unifying rallying call for the entire industry.