SMACNA and SMART battle infection with expertise and cooperation ...
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Labor-Management Partnerships Key to Seizing Work Opportunities and Achieving Industry Goals

When we hear the frequent references to COVID-19 or coronavirus, it is probably just human nature that leads us to focus on the significant negative consequences the pandemic has had on our health, social lives, businesses, and the economy. We are fortunate, however, to be stakeholders in an industry with leaders, innovators, and partners who can acknowledge the challenges but focus their efforts on capturing the opportunities that have arisen from an unforeseen and unfortunate situation.

The article on page 4 explains how and why SMACNA contractors, SMART Locals, and members found themselves “On the Front Lines” helping hospitals mitigate the spread of pathogens and bacteria to protect healthcare workers and the public. Local 103’s Business Manager, John Carter may have put it best when he said: “As an industry, we are the lungs of a building.” He noted that the sheet metal industry has always strived to provide customers with the cleanest and safest atmosphere possible, so it makes sense that our expertise was in demand when the pandemic hit.

This month’s “My Journey” feature on page 7 details Daisey Serrano’s journey that led her to an apprenticeship in the sheet metal industry. Daisey encourages other young women—who are under-represented in the construction industry—to consider the trades when seeking good-paying and fulfilling careers. Daisey’s story was so inspirational and compelling, we feature a more in-depth article on page 10 that appeared first in the Long Beach Post and describes how Daisey’s interest in welding and hard work helped her her life around after a tough start.

Recruiting new talent is critical to the long-term success of any industry, sheet metal included. “The Social Recruitment Landscape” (page 8) provides valuable insight into SMACNA Mid-Atlantic’s efforts to identify the right social media and digital platforms to enhance traditional recruiting methods in the Washington DC, Virginia, and Maryland markets. The goal is to leverage these platforms to distinguish signatory contractors and Locals from other employers and training centers that are competing for the very best applicants. Read about the area’s successful campaign encouraging potential recruits to “Choose Bigger” career opportunities and about how the support of Local 100’s JATC training coordinator contributes to the success of all local recruiting initiatives.

SMART and SMACNA National leaders know that labor-management partnerships thrive when each partner invests the time to understand the critical issues and challenges their respective partners face. SMART leadership participated in SMACNA’s Mid-October Edge Conference to learn SMACNA contractors’ views and industry experiences and to share labor’s vision and goals with more than 2,000 contractor and chapter registrants. Read “Cutting Edge” on page 15 to learn how SMART believes labor and management at the National and local levels can work together to position ourselves as the “go-to” industry for indoor air quality solutions.

One of the sheet metal industry’s priorities that we cover regularly in Partners In Progress is the critical need to recruit our future workforce. A great way to promote your local apprenticeship opportunities is to participate in National Apprentice Week (NAW), Nov. 8 to 14, 2020. Go to apprenticeship.gov/national-apprenticeship-week and showcase your local area’s apprenticeship programs, facilities, and apprentices. And don’t forget to reach out to editor@pinpmagazine.org to share information on how your local area celebrated NAW, so that your program, efforts, and apprentices can be recognized in a future edition of Partners In Progress.

SMART and SMACNA share an important commitment to working together to build diverse workforces. “Heels to Hardhats” (page 12) summarizes important presentations and discussions from the August 2020 Women in Construction Conference. Presenters and attendees of that meeting—including SMACNA National President and CEO of Allied Mechanical, Angie Simon—affirmed that while women have made strides in the construction industry, more work remains to enhance female participation and ensure equality with male employees. Angie Simon provides her perspective on how women can advocate for other women in their organization and industry.

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artner recruitment and referral campaign from Partners in Progress to find out why sheet metal works say, “My Job is My Gym!” Visit facebook.com/IndustrialAthleteOfficial and instagram.com/industrialathleteofficial/ to learn more, and tag your photos with #mjmg for the chance to win $100 from Amazon each month.
When the first case of COVID-19 was announced in the United States back in January, hospitals were quick to respond. While many of the 6,000-plus hospitals across the country were prepared for an outbreak, having practiced several “just-in-case” scenarios, they reached out to their partners and trusted experts to help further mitigate the spread of pathogens and bacteria. On the top of that list of experts were SMACNA contractors and SMART Locals.

It’s hardly surprising, considering the signatory sheet metal industry has built great relationships with the healthcare sector over the years; however, the public was suddenly made aware of the role that this often silent industry has in cleaning up the air in hospitals, helping to contain and prevent the spread of any virus.

“As an industry, we are the lungs of a building,” says Local 103 Business Manager John Carter. “It’s what we do. We’ve always focused on getting the cleanest and safest atmosphere possible. We are trained for that, so it didn’t surprise us that our expertise was sought when the pandemic hit.”

If anything, it was more of a surprise to the public—and even the industry’s customer base—because the spotlight was on how air-conditioning could help prevent the spread of coronavirus.

“Hospitals needed data, and fast,” Carter says. “Fortunately, many of our members already had relationships with their healthcare clients, and they have been very busy.”
Over the summer, it was believed that with a highly infectious disease like COVID-19, negative ventilation was essential to keeping the air inside a room from seeping into the surrounding areas. HVAC experts were called upon to flip rooms from being positively pressurized to negatively pressurized.

However, part of SMART’s and SMACNA’s collective expertise is keeping on top of developments and ensuring the data they provide is the most up-to-date. When new evidence came to light suggesting negative pressure may not, in fact, be the best option, the industry was quick to react.

“It allowed me to prevent any misinformation,” Roche says. “Being able to communicate information straight from the healthcare sector to our members has been essential. While our members were already set up and unknowingly prepared, having already done the training and being familiar with these systems, being at the table allowed us to get greater insight and keep updated on changes.”

The industry’s role in helping to control the disease in hospitals has made front page news. ASHRAE has even created an epidemic task force to help address the challenges of the current pandemic as they relate to how HVAC systems affect disease transmission in public and private environments, including healthcare facilities. The data the industry is gathering will help shape the future of HVAC design in hospitals.

This is where the industry has come into its own. SMACNA member Energy Balance & Integration LLC (EB&I) in New Mexico is just one of thousands of signatory shops with experience, skills, insight, and data that has been invaluable during the pandemic.

Having built up a reputation as certified healthcare testing and balancing specialists prior to the pandemic, the team at SMACNA Western-Washington’s MacDonald-Miller had already banked the trust of hospitals in the Pacific Northwest. They were the obvious go-to when it came to locking down the air supply in hospital rooms and wards.

Right from the start of the pandemic, phones were ringing off the hook for SMACNA contractors, proving that reputation really is everything. Matthew Sano, Local 19 signatory contractor and president of Fisher Balancing in New Jersey, says the company had historical relationships with healthcare facilities and knowledge of the systems within these buildings. This enabled Fisher Balancing’s nine-member field team to complete the work in a frantic pandemic timeline.

SMACNA contractors and SMART Locals haven’t just been on the frontlines when it comes to helping flip hospitals, however. They have also had a front row seat on healthcare and state boards focused on pandemic solutions, providing input and helping make decisions.

As a case in point, Dave Roche, business manager at Local 40 in Connecticut, has been part of the Governor’s task force to reopen Connecticut. He was, in fact, the only labor person from any industry on the advisory council.

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The company has been working with five major hospitals in the state of New Mexico on testing and balancing to provide audit reports and pressure gradient setting, life safety testing, room tightness testing, duct leakage testing, and troubleshooting of systems.

“We set ourselves up in niche hospital work prior to the pandemic, so when the pandemic hit we were fully prepared to step up,” says Tony Kocurek, owner of EB&I. “It wasn’t that much of a shift, aside from the feeling of panic you get, like you are entering a burning building.”

He adds that education was key. Not so much self-education and keeping abreast of changes, but educating the customers who would approach the experts with the buzzwords, but not fully understand what they meant.

And while Landberg’s team had the experience to deal with the situation, Landberg says they are learning new lessons every
day. He adds that information sharing has been essential, not just with the Local and the regional rep for service and TABB, Steve Musser, but also across the entire industry.

“We have learned a lot and we continue to review new products to back up any claims made,” Landberg says. “I partner with other contractors and collaborate to ensure we all have the correct information. Then we are comparing apples to apples. The Harborview Medical Center is the only hospital we haven’t done in our region, and I would love to meet up with those guys and share notes. Transparency is key to ensuring a successful and healthy outcome for all.”

Local 19’s Gary Masino agrees that the collaboration has set SMART and SMACNA apart during this time. “We are fortunate to have an industry that is willing to adapt, because new information is coming out every day,” he says. “I would say labor and management relations have become even stronger during the pandemic. We have always taken care of each other, but now we have proven that during challenging times those relationships come into their own.”

This willingness to adapt is compounded by the high number of innovators in the industry who jumped in to help safeguard staff and patients in hospitals. Chris Schaff, owner of SMACNA member Air Controls in Montana, came up with a new purification system that spanned the gap between the massive industrial units and the small office space units. The units have been promoted with the help of Local 103’s Carter, who Schaff credits for having supplied the company with the highly-qualified and experienced craftspeople who provided the expertise to come up with this new solution and bring it to market.

“The more we learned about how this virus spreads, the more we knew air quality was a necessity, and we began the initial examination with ways to implement improvement,” Schaff says. “The HVAC industry was already utilizing HEPA filters and ultraviolet lights to improve air quality and lower air pollution, VOCs, pet dander, and other airborne or surface contaminants. Additional exploration led us to use ultraviolet germicidal irradiation (UV-C) lights in the healthcare industry. We found that UV-C lights are highly effective at inactivating the DNA of bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens, thus destroying their ability to multiply and spread disease.”

After intense research, Schaff and his team designed the first prototype of the TG-series air purifiers at the end of March. By mid-April, it was in full production. The TG-series air purifiers offer purification and decontamination for 200 to 5000 square feet and come in four portable and quiet models that are ideal for hospitals.

Innovations like these are being explored by SMACNA and SMART across the country. Local 19, for example, has been researching a new dehumidifier system that sprays mist that attaches itself to the virus, but as Masino says, “These are still early days and tests need to be done to back up the data.”

The success and respect that the industry has built over the years has truly shone, and the skills and training have truly come into their own during the pandemic by helping hospitals reach their goals, and fast. It may not be business as usual, but it’s also not all that different.

“It’s what our industry prides itself on, and we have been working together the entire time while our guys are in the thick of it,” Musser says. “Knowing that someone has your back is more important than ever, and I honestly believe that has set us apart from non-union members.”

Natalie is an award-winning writer who has worked in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, the United States, and Canada. She has more than 23 years experience as a journalist, editor, and brand builder, specializing in construction and transportation. When she’s not writing, you will likely find her snowboarding, mountain biking, or climbing mountains with her rescue dog.
DAISEY SERRANO: MY JOURNEY
Welder and third-year apprentice Local 105
Weiss Sheet Metal

When I was going to Long Beach City College, I wanted to learn welding. There was no association for welding, but there was one for sheet metal. I got a job as a student-worker at Weiss. My boss there used to work at Local 105’s JATC. He teaches at LBCC and so took us on a field trip to the Local.

I like that the sheet metal industry has so many options. There is architectural, air-conditioning, welding, TABB, detailing, AutoCAD—there are a lot of things you can do depending on what route you want to go. When I first started welding I just wanted to do that, but people encouraged me to try everything and be a jack of all trades. They said I should get my feet wet and try to imagine how I wanted to see myself in the future. I did some air-conditioning in the beginning and then expansion joints, and now I am into architectural.

Architectural is hard work. It is only 15% of the whole union, so it is hard, and you are on the roof a lot of the time. I enjoy it because you learn more on the construction side, and you learn how all the trades come together. Everyone has a job, and we learn how the other trades, like roofers and electricians, do their work and fit into the whole process.

The sheet metal industry is something stable and consistent. Weiss Sheet Metal is like a big family, not too big and not too small. They like to keep the same workers and do a lot for us, like Christmas parties and bonuses. I get to work with a journey and they lead and tell their story and encourage me.

Even if I were to get laid off from there, I would be able to find work. I am comfortable now because I love my company, but if that happened, I would pursue welding or AutoCAD. The goal is to get all the knowledge I can as a tradeswoman and then work at something where I can work smarter rather than harder, because it is hard on your body.

Any trade is the perfect opportunity for people who don’t want to go to school or work minimum wage jobs. I have been incarcerated so where would I get a good paying job with health insurance and benefits? After all the obstacles I faced, I feel like I beat the odds. People thought I wouldn’t make it, and I feel successful going beyond that. I stay motivated because I can see my success in action.

If I could give advice to young women thinking about the trades, it would be to go for it. Even if you don’t get in at first, keep trying. There are resources to help you study and when you feel like everyone is giving you silly little jobs like picking up garbage or you are sent to get the duct stretcher, which doesn’t exist, don’t worry. We all go through it, and it is part of getting to know the job and the group. One day you’ll be doing that, too. Don’t be uptight because you are in a man’s trade. Just stick through it and be cool. You won’t regret it. If I knew at 18 what I know now about this industry, I definitely would have done it then and my past would have been very different.

To learn more about a career in the sheet metal trade, visit sheetmetal-iti.org •
Recruiting new talent is critical for the long-term success of any industry, and the sheet metal sector is no exception. However, finding the right talent through an efficient recruiting process is also one of the most difficult challenges any organization can undertake.

The reason is simple: in today’s digital realm, employment opportunities are literally at any candidate’s fingertips, meaning potential employers on the lookout for new blood must go the extra mile in distinguishing themselves from the pack, and training centers have competition battling for clicks.

“Establishing a presence on social media and other digital platforms is a must for any recruiter, but they have to be the right platforms,” says Kurt Snyder, marketing and communications director for SMACNA Mid-Atlantic. He collaborates with SMART Local 100 and JATC representatives to bring quality recruits into the local apprenticeship program.

Snyder adds that forging old-fashioned, face-to-face relationships cannot be ignored, either. “The key is to develop and balance both strategies,” he says. “Establishing connections with government and education officials is just as important as leveraging Indeed or other websites.”

Snyder, who was previously an independent consultant and also spent 11 years in the United States Navy as an engineering officer and program manager, was hired by SMACNA Mid-Atlantic in 2019.

“SMACNA Mid-Atlantic is a non-profit association representing Local 100 signatory contractors,” he says. “It approached the Local’s leadership with the offer to bring the Local’s recruitment program in line with the latest digital marketing trends. The main goal was to attract would-be sheet metal workers who exhibited the appropriate skill levels, and to avoid those who did not.”

Snyder ultimately selected a host of different platforms, which, combined with traditional recruiting methods, helped...
In no particular order, Snyder cites Indeed, SlickText, Canva, and Choose Bigger as worthy tools and as being the most effective.

“Indeed is effective, partly because it’s widely known and can be narrowed down to specific jobs and locations, which improves our chances of receiving good applications from job seekers,” he says.

SlickText is a cloud-based SMS marketing solution for organizations of all sizes. Its primary features include mass text messaging, text message scheduling, auto-replies, picture messaging, two-way text messaging, email captures, analytics, and reporting. “I subscribe to it because younger generations tend to ignore email messages, but they open text messages immediately,” Snyder says. “It’s a good communication tool.”

Canva is a graphic design platform that allows users to create social media graphics, presentations, posters, documents, and other visual content. “I use it mainly for the graphics and fonts,” Snyder explains. “This is a great tool for anyone who lacks a marketing or graphic design background but wishes to produce awesome, eye-catching content intended to to attract new recruits.”

Choose Bigger is the main recruitment website that SMACNA Mid-Atlantic and SMACNA and SMART groups in Wisconsin, California, and Colorado use. “The platform enables us to showcase what we do and what we can offer with video and text, dynamic graphics, and direct linkage to a pre-apprentice application process,” Snyder says.

During Snyder’s efforts to update the local recruitment program, he also identified less effective platforms. “A lot of forums that are universally known are rapidly becoming obsolete,” he says. “Email is lost on people under 30. Instagram is still popular, but you need to post three or more times a day, seven days a week, to get responses.”

What about social media’s best known platform, Facebook? “In general, nobody goes there anymore for industry information,” Snyder says. “However, it’s still a good venue for informational videos, as long as they’re popular enough to be shared, which is the key to achieving Facebook success.

“The trouble is, so many of these videos are ruined by shaky images and bad audio. My advice to marketers is to buy a good lavalier microphone—they cost under $100—and a tripod. Have your presenter stand in front of a compelling background, and keep the video under 90 seconds in length. These elements alone will separate you from the competition and get you noticed.”

Snyder calls Facebook’s cousin Google, “More preferable for targeted marketing,” but he says it is necessary to spend at least $50 per day to maintain an effective marketing campaign, so the solution is definitely not for everyone.

The effectiveness of digital marketing aside, one of the biggest ingredients of Snyder’s campaigns and networks is local and state governments.

“They have adult workforce programs that I did not even know about, and I’m convinced they will turn the current windmill pace of operations into a power plant of recruitment,” he says.

Prior to Snyder being retained as SMACNA Mid-Atlantic’s marketing and communications manager, the association forged relationships with regional high schools and trade schools. Last year, Snyder capitalized on those relationships by conducting a series of tours with principals, politicians, and recruitment officials from Local 100.

“They saw first hand what we offer,” he says. “We also conducted tours with young students, because nothing can replace seeing for oneself what a trade is all about.”

Snyder’s goal in the immediate future is to get some schools certified as direct entry programs, meaning that if students attending these schools meet specific qualifications, they are recommended directly to Local 100. “This is happening in the mechanical contractors realm, so we need to redouble our efforts,” he says.

Snyder won’t deny that he has encountered his fair share of challenges in his efforts to update the recruitment program, but he strongly believes that developing an aggressive presence in specific areas of the social media realm while maintaining a physical presence yields impressive results.

“On that score, I’m grateful for the support of Local 100’s training coordinator who exchanges information with me several times per month to determine what is being overlooked, trends, industry updates, and more,” he says.

Moving forward, Snyder plans to implement comprehensive tracing to accurately determine what platforms inspired new recruits to come to Local 100.

“That said, we’re creating opportunities for people who never knew our programs existed,” he says. “I’m very excited about the potential to expand our influence.”

Robin Brunet’s journalism has been published in over 150 magazines, newspapers, websites, and other media across Canada and the United States since 1982.
A NEW Future

How the Long Beach City College welding program and Local 105 helped one woman turn over a new leaf

Photos courtesy of Long Beach Post
Daisey Serrano never gave a thought to a career in welding. She had never suited up in coveralls or picked up a propane torch.

But when Serrano arrived on the Long Beach City College campus in 2017, she quickly fell into the school’s training program. LBCC offered a world of opportunity—on top of her classes, Serrano joined the welding club and began student work that allowed her to earn money.

Today, she credits LBCC with launching her career. Serrano, 30, works full-time as a welder, as a second-year apprentice in Local 105.

“If I would have known about this when I was 18 or 19, I would have done it right away,” Serrano said.

Instead, her path was more complicated. Born and raised in Long Beach, Serrano attended Long Beach Unified School District schools and graduated from Lakewood High.

Once out of high school she fell into trouble. Police arrested Serrano on suspicion of breaking into cars in 2009, and apprehended her again in 2011 for possessing stolen property. Serrano was convicted of burglary and spent four years behind bars.

Upon her release, Serrano looked for a new direction for her and her young son. LBCC fit her needs. The college offered a flexible schedule, night classes, and immediate workplace training. There were resources for single mothers and instructors who helped Serrano navigate the application and interview process. Even being pregnant with her daughter when she began the program didn’t slow her down.

“I had all the odds fighting against me,” she said. “But the flexibility allowed me to choose my schedule.”

Her work is paying off now. Welders in California earn a mean hourly wage over $22 and a mean annual wage over $46,000, according to the US Department of Labor. Both figures are higher than the national average. The Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim metropolitan region has the third-highest population of welders in the country.

Welders are in high demand due to a strong economy and high rate of construction, said Tim Shoemaker, welding instructor at LBCC and former adviser to Serrano. Unions are “screaming for apprentices,” he said, and certified welders have a good chance of launching a stable career.

In this environment, LBCC recently expanded its Career Technical Education (CTE) program. It offers both certificates and degrees in focused trades such as construction, fashion, and culinary arts.

Students can earn a newly-created Associate of Science Degree in welding and transfer to a four-year university. Or, like Serrano did, they can get a Certificate of Achievement in welding and enter the workforce.

Shoemaker estimates that LBCC now sends 20 to 25 more students into apprenticeships than it did in years past. He emphasized the value in trade programs like CTE, noting that they can lead to well-paying middle class jobs without the need for a four-year degree.

The process is designed to help people like Serrano, he said. “She picked up the welding really quick,” he said. “The welding shop is probably 90% male, and I think she was a little bit shy at first. But she’s one of those people that has a really good attention span.”

The school hired Serrano as a student-worker, and she impressed Shoemaker with her punctuality and commitment to following through until she had finished a project.

When it was time to explore the workforce, Serrano continued to show initiative. She took advantage of advice from her instructors and earned her Los Angeles City license in a year-and-a-half. Serrano also passed a written test before coming to Shoemaker to request a letter of recommendation for an in-person interview with the union.

“When you see that, you know you’ve got someone that’s ambitious,” Shoemaker said. “We get a lot of students that have never worked before and have no idea what it’s like. Her time incarcerated probably established some regimen in her life.”

With LBCC in the rearview, Serrano is focused on her mission to build a career. She is in the third year of a five-year apprenticeship. Once the apprentice period is complete, Serrano could train to become a foreman or project manager.

Sometimes, it even surprises Serrano to consider how far she’s come.

“I didn’t know anything about how to go about it,” she said. “I wanted something better for myself and my family. And I found it.”

Reprinted with permission from Long Beach Post: lbpost.com/ads/how-the-lbcc-welding-program-helped-lb-native-turn-a-new-leaf
Women have made great strides in pursuing careers and leadership roles in construction. But, there’s more that can be done to boost their numbers in the industry and ensure they maintain an even footing with male colleagues, according to presenters and attendees at the Groundbreaking Women in Construction conference, held Aug. 24 to 27.

Two senior leaders of Target Corp.’s construction program opened the conference, telling attendees that they are using size, scale, and resources to advance social justice and racial equity both inside and outside of the retail giant. “We don’t have all the answers nor have we asked all the right questions,” said Amber Koehler, senior director of construction. “What we do know is that we are in this together and that doing better is a priority.”

Stephen Makredes, vice president of construction at Target, set the drive for diversity against a backdrop of the firm’s $7-billion program to “modernize every aspect of its business.” By the end of this year, the corporation will have remodeled more than 850 stores since the program launched in 2017 and engaged more than 500 architectural and engineering consultants, he said.

Makredes made his remarks to more than 1,000 registrants—a record for the key industry talent management and networking event that began in 2003 and is organized by Engineering News-Record (ENR) in partnership with construction law firm Peckar & Abramson.

“We know that we make the best decisions when we involve our communities, our teams, and partners that represent those
“What if our stores were built by those who shop in them?” That would mean 75% of the construction team would be women, he added, noting that they currently hold less than 10% of industry jobs.

In a drive to build more diverse teams, Target and other retail industry leaders supported formation of a workforce development company called ConstructReac to focus on creating opportunities through construction with a particular emphasis on women and other under-represented groups, Makredes said. The effort uses Target jobsites to introduce students, parents, and school guidance counselors to the industry.

Seat at the Table

Koehler shared her personal journey as a woman in construction. “I have learned that my development requires a fleet of folks who are genuinely interested in giving me sound guidance,” she says. “I have found it helpful to think of my supporters as my own personal board of directors. You can create a board that works for you. I like to think of a board that has five key roles: a coach, a mentor, a sponsor, your leader, and a reverse mentor.”

GWIC presenters also shared strategies for women seeking leadership through service on boards of directors, both in for-profit and non-profit organizations. Women can have an advantage as directors in a male-dominated industry because, “we are different and have a better understanding of culture and leadership skills,” says Karen Colonias, CEO of industry supplier Simpson Strong-Tie, whose own board is 50% women. That is key for directors who are tasked with choosing a company’s next CEO and other top executives.

With evidence clear on bottom-line advantages, “gender diversity really matters” for industry firms and their clients, says Jacqueline Hinman, former chair of industry giant CH2M that now is part of Jacobs. Now serving on the boards of AECOM and of two major industrial corporations, she noted that because women’s construction sector work experiences differ from those of their male peers, women have expanded views of corporate performance and impact.

Hinman pointed out that boards need diverse perspectives based not only on a director’s personal characteristics, such as gender and race, but also on a levels of technology and business acumen. “All of those voices bring a total viewpoint,” Hinman said.

Danielle Dy Buncio, CEO of virtual design and construction technology firm VIATechnik, who also is director of two contractors, added that a board also must show its willingness to be inclusive, ensuring that all members are listening to diverse points of view and that those selected for corporate service, particularly women and people of color, “feel comfortable bringing forward their perspectives when there’s no overlap in the rest of the room.”

Experts also shared insights on strategies for women to gain equity in compensation and the value to themselves and their employers of being “fierce” negotiators.

A key conference focus was the need to boost employee engagement to keep female and male professionals from leaving the industry, causing negative effects for company innovation, productivity, and financials, according to noted organizational behavior researcher, Romila Singh.

Other speakers addressed the concept of allyship—women assisting upward career movement for their peers. “The process of becoming an ally does not happen overnight,” said Jessica Ostoyich, project executive for Mortenson. “It’s a journey. You have to listen, you have to put yourselves in their shoes.”

Ostoyich and Angie Simon, SMACNA president and CEO of Western Allied Mechanical, said they advocate for other women in their organization and make sure there are training opportunities for them. They also stressed the importance of eliminating gendered language, with Simon noting she’s on a mission to eliminate the term “manhours.”

Ostoyich said women have to be extra prepared to demonstrate on-the-job proficiency. “You have an opportunity to show these guys,” Simon said, “but you do need to work a little harder.”
Although Simon said she was initially resistant to join industry networking groups for women, she realized that there was value in having those connections outside of her own company.

“You have to pick your battles,” said Simon. “And you have to pick your timing.”

Diversity Spectrum

Presenters also explored how issues of unconscious bias can affect workplace interactions and even dissuade job candidates from considering offers.

Another group of women leaders examined how varied backgrounds—ethnic, racial, experiential, cultural or other—influence leadership and mentoring approaches.

LaToya Thompson, a fire sprinkler specialist for Hilti North America, said that as a Black woman on the jobsite, it can sometimes be a hurdle to earn the respect of workers from older generations. “My challenge is how do I contribute to their change management?” she said. One way is by reinforcing that she’s among “the new faces of construction,” Thompson said.

Thompson, also public relations director for Women in Construction Operations (WiOPS), said she often hears from people of color that it’s exhausting to have to “be the ones accountable” for propelling change and diversification in the industry. “But for someone like myself, I’m willing to bring it on, and I’m willing to teach,” she added.

Jackie Richter, president of two specialty contracting firms, Heels and Hardhats and Endurance Utility Corp., both built from the ground up with diversity as a central component, was an early pioneer in getting certified as a trans woman-owned disadvantaged business enterprise by the Illinois Dept. of Transportation and the US Department of Transportation.

“We were the star pupils of diversity because we understood it,” she said. “It was a culture that we built, how we hired people, and who we bought from. When we approach a new customer and talk about diversity, we all represent a part of the community that these businesses do business with.”

After building two successful companies, Richter is looking to pay it forward through mentoring not only other contractors, but clients as well, to help them develop better diversity programs. “My biggest reward is the legacy I leave when I’m done in this industry,” she said. “It’s the changes we have made to make someone else’s life better. We have to be driven and we have to take ownership in what we believe in to make that change.”

Menzer Pehlivan, a geotechnical engineer at Jacobs, advised that cultural differences should be considered when working in a diverse team.

“Culture has a significant influence on how it shapes the way we interact with each other and how we behave,” she said. “It goes from how you communicate with each other to how you form relations. If you aren’t really understanding these different layers of diversity, the way you start perceiving others can lead to significant miscommunications and misunderstandings.”

One conference attendee wrote in the virtual chat box that the panelists’ experiences and perspectives were “truly inspiring and definitely need to be shared.”

She added, “Thank you for reminding us that we are important contributors to the industry.”

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Labor-management partnerships are most effective when each partner invests the time to understand the most critical issues and concerns their respective partners face. That is precisely why SMART invites SMACNA leaders to attend their business agents’ conferences and conventions and why SMART leaders participated in SMACNA’s first ever Edge Conference held in October.

The pandemic may have led SMACNA to cancel its annual convention and trade show, but it didn’t stop SMACNA from re-grouping and delivering to its members the latest information on industry trends, technology, and business development during the virtual Edge Conference. SMART leaders took full advantage of SMACNA’s invitation to attend the Edge’s educational programs, round tables, and trade show, and to share their industry views and priorities with contractor participants.

During the program’s Labor Update, SMART General President, Joseph Sellers, Jr. stressed that while there have been few opportunities for in-person meetings since the February 2020 Partners in Progress Conference, “SMART and SMACNA must continue to connect at the national and
local levels to share expertise to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus, to improve indoor air quality (IAQ), and to improve the quality of life for ourselves, our families, colleagues, and North America.”

Sellers explained, “If SMACNA and SMART work collaboratively at all levels, we can establish ourselves as the ‘go-to industry’ for IAQ solutions, to decrease the spread of air-borne pathogens, decrease carbon emissions, and increase energy savings.”

“Labor and management must work together to prepare JATCs and the iTi on evolving skillsets and processes to meet new challenges and opportunities,” says SMART General Secretary-Treasurer Joe Powell. “If we are not more nimble and able to adapt, technology will continue to narrow the gap between us and our competitors.”

SMART General Secretary-Treasurer Joe Powell focused his remarks on the impact of technology on the sheet metal industry. “Technical advances and the rapidly changing reality of the world we are in will require a mega-shift in training now and in the coming years,” Powell said. “Labor and management must work together to prepare JATCs and the iTi on evolving skillsets and processes to meet new challenges and opportunities. If we are not more nimble and able to adapt, technology will continue to narrow the gap between us and our competitors.”

Powell stressed that while the pandemic may have sidelined much of the United States and Canada, there are still tremendous opportunities to take the lead in ensuring society’s greatest needs are met, including the safety of our children.

“Schools will not be safe for our children until skilled and knowledgeable sheet metal workers and contractors are able to ensure the quality of the air is safe for them to return,” he said. “This is not just a societal need or a once-in-a-life-time opportunity. It is possibly the greatest calling our industry has ever faced.”

Donna Silverman, SMART assistant to the general president and special counsel, discussed SMART’s efforts to increase the diversity of its membership.

“SMART looks forward to working with SMACNA and other building trade unions and contractor associations to increase diversity and improve retention of under-represented communities, including people of color and women,” she said.

Mike Coleman, SMART assistant to the general president and labor co-chair of the SMACNA-SMART Best Practices Market Expansion Task Force, told participants that SMACNA and SMART’s futures are interdependent.

“We are responsible for each other’s successes,” Coleman said. “That interdependence is evident at the national level, just as it was with the partnership that existed between SMART Local 33 and SMACNA chapters in Ohio and West Virginia.”

Coleman added, “Simply put, we are all in this together. Partners in Progress is not just a slogan. It is a joint mission that will succeed because our individual characteristics are strong—skilled workers and quality employers working together.”

Jason Watson, SMACNA’s newly appointed executive director of labor relations, told Partners in Progress, “SMACNA greatly appreciates that SMART’s top leadership makes it a priority to participate in important SMACNA meetings like the Edge Conference and the Annual Convention. SMART has always expressed an interest in hearing first-hand the experiences and concerns of SMACNA contractors and has been candid in sharing their industry views and plans with our members.”

Learn more about the Edge Conference and log in to view sessions at smacna.org/annualconvention.
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