SMACNA and SMART reach out to members during this perfect storm ...
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July 2020 - Volume 14, Number 7

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Care, Compassion, Community

If asked to list the first three words that come to mind beginning with the letter “C” in 2020, those words would likely be COVID, coronavirus, and curve. That makes sense given the deluge of news reports, press conferences, social media posts, studies, and statistics we have experienced since the pandemic took over the world stage.

In review of the articles in this edition of Partners in Progress, some other words beginning with the third letter of the alphabet describe the sheet metal industry strengths and standards that posture SMACNA and SMART to proactively respond to challenges or adversity. Those words are care, compassion, and community.

Nowhere is the caring and compassion in our industry better exemplified than in SMART and SMACNA’s efforts to help our workforce address the “Perfect Storm” of stressors presented by COVID-19—economic insecurity, mental health issues, and social isolation. Ben Cort, who works with SMART on SMART MAP (Members’ Assistance Program), notes in the story beginning on page 4 that every contributing factor you might imagine that could increase suicide, mental health disorders and substance abuse is happening now.

When COVID-19 reared its head, SMART did not sit back and wait for members to call and ask for help. They were far more proactive at the national and local levels. They began reaching out to members asking if they were okay, whether they were working, how they were coping, and advising of industry support services. They developed a presentation titled, “Managing Stress and Practicing Self Care”, which they have presented to all business managers in North America and are now delivering to smaller groups of members.

SMART and SMACNA have always done an outstanding job of caring for their members but their efforts do not stop there. The story in page 10 describes how Zahner, a company that is known world-wide for its artistic architectural sheet metal expertise, worked with Local 68 to safely reopen its temporarily closed facility to fabricate face shields for medical professionals caring for COVID-19 patients. Local 68 also stepped up to donate time and materials to make metal nose strips for masks distributed throughout the Southwest and Gulf Coast regions.

While providing for the safety and well being of our members during the pandemic is the most critical issue facing our industry, SMACNA and SMART are also looking beyond the current situation to make sure that as retirements reach record levels, our industry is positioned to flourish going forward.

An overview of the technology and processes our future workforce will use is provided on page 12 to ensure contractors and JATCs are positioned to take advantage of these innovations.

In “Adversity Sharpens the Edge”, starting on page 13, Mark Breslin reminds us that the time to bring empathy, understanding, and wisdom to our leadership is when we are facing adversity or uncertainty. He explains that the business world is built on the care of the people within it and for those people to withstand adversity, they must see that their leaders really care.

On this edition’s My Journey page (9) we took a slightly different approach. Rather than showcase an apprentice’s journey into sheet metal, we introduce the first in a series of articles about individuals who volunteer their time and talent on the Best Practices Market Expansion Task Force. Their mission is to help Locals and SMACNA chapters work together to excel in growing work opportunities in their markets. A conversation with Local 49 Business Manager, Vince Alvarado is featured.

We tell these stories to engage and inspire current and future members of the sheet metal industry. We aim for a variety of stories so readers can see that, in our industry, anything is possible. If you know an apprentice, sheet metal worker, or other industry member with a story that must be told, please reach out to press@pinpmagazine.org and we will follow up.

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With the COVID-19 pandemic enveloping the globe, the construction industry is facing a perfect storm for mental health issues. In addition to the economic insecurity, people are at home more than usual and feeling isolated because they’re unable to visit family and friends.

“Every contributing factor you might imagine that would amplify suicidality, mental health disorders, and substance abuse is happening right now,” says Mental Health Consultant, Ben Cort. “The construction industry is already at higher risk than other industries, so it’s important to be aware of the risks and to know how to get help.”

SMART’s Director of Education, Chris Carlough says that the union took action right away. “One of the things that our union—both nationally and at the local level—started doing in the beginning of the lockdown and stay at home order was reach out to the workforce,” he says. “We just started calling our members, asking them whether they were okay, whether they were working, what they were doing to support themselves, and letting them know about support services.”

Carlough and Cort developed a presentation called, “Managing Stress, Practicing Self Care” that they now present via Zoom. “It talks a little bit about how to handle this overwhelming stress that we’re facing in the United States and Canada and what stress does,” Carlough says. “We talk about the stress hormone cortisol and what raises it, and the physical implications of that. We talk about the practices that are used to reduce it—everything from getting the right amount of sleep, to diet, exercise, meditation, laughter, connection, and music. We talk about all of the things that we know help us feel a little less depressed and anxious, and we describe the other resources we have.”

Approximately 200 business managers around the United States and Canada took part in the first presentation, but Carlough and Cort have since been working with smaller groups of 20–25. After a PowerPoint presentation, they go into gallery view and start talking, asking open-ended questions like: How are you? How are you handling the stress? What are you doing? What kind of supports do you need?

“If you’re not taking care of your mental health, somebody that really needs help is going to call on you, and you’re not going to be strong enough.”
—Chris Carlough, SMART’s Director of Education
Carlough says they tell participants, “This presentation is for you to know and to learn, but most importantly, it’s for you to pass along. You’re the lifeguard that has to be strong enough to swim for two. And if you’re not taking care of your mental health, somebody is going to call on you that really needs help, and you’re not going to be strong enough.”

They follow up by emailing the presentation to participants for use within their Locals, with members, or in their businesses.

The Sheet Metal Occupational Health Institute Trust (SMOHIT) has tackled COVID-related stress head-on by creating an awareness and job site protection presentation using information from the Center for Disease Control and World Health Organization. SMOHIT Administrator Randy Krocka explains, “It’s a 93-slide PowerPoint presentation that members can review at home, and they receive a certificate of completion at the end. Participants can do it as a class and members, especially apprentices, can use it to get their hours in.”

SMOHIT has also made efforts to ease members’ stress around catching or passing on the virus by sending all members across the United States and Canada a cloth mask with filter, plus a five-ounce bottle of hand sanitizer. They’ve also continued with their regular eblasts, which had seen an uptick in readership, and they added a COVID-19 resource section on the SMART website (see smohit.org/covid-19-information/).

Kevin Jones, VP of sales at Richards Sheet Metal in Ogden, Utah, is a SMOHIT trustee. He notes that the organization’s helpline is being used more than ever. Though usage dipped at the beginning of the crisis to an average of a half call a day, it has now tripled. “More people have been using it, and more people have been referring people to use it,” Jones says.

He is optimistic about training SMOHIT is providing to ensure each Local has a liaison trained to recognize warning signs for mental health issues. “Members at each Local will be able to contact their liaison to discuss mental health or substance abuse concerns as they arise,” Jones says. “If members feel comfortable, they can discuss the issue in detail with the liaison, or the liaison will provide the appropriate outside resources the member can then pursue.”

SMACNA’s Director, Market Sectors and Safety, Mike McCullion says SMACNA joined the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention (CIASP) as a stakeholder, and he notes that the positive relationship between SMART and SMACNA means they’ve been able to effectively tackle the challenges of COVID-19 together.
“We’re fortunate to have good labor-management relationships,” he says. “SMACNA has been distributing a number of COVID-19-related resources to help keep workers safe and healthy on and off the job. Distributing the resources so we provide a constant, consistent message to both workers and contractors is a big part of that relationship.”

The combined effort to help members get home safely at the end of each work day also applies to providing members with the tools and support they need to address mental health and substance abuse issues. “It’s important that both SMACNA and SMART provide workers with everything both organizations make available so members feel adequately resourced to make the right personal decisions.”

Throughout COVID-19 and beyond, a strong labor-management partnership will be there to support members through any mental health storm that may arise.

Krocka agrees. “When labor and management are on the same page, members and contractors listen that much more intently, rather than thinking we are divided or that one party is trying to push in a different direction,” he says. “We are on the same path, and we’re all in this together to do what we can to be the best in our industry and to have a safe and healthy environment.”

Throughout COVID-19 and beyond, a strong labor-management partnership will be there to support members through any mental health storm that may arise. The key, Cort says, is to just reach out. “Whether it’s to one of the help lines or to a fellow member of the Local or to a contractor or workmate, reach out. Help is available.”

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VINCE ALVARADO: MY JOURNEY

Business Manager/Financial Secretary Treasurer, Local 49
Member of the Best Practices Market Expansion Task Force

I am a third-generation union sheet metal worker from El Paso, Texas, so you can say sheet metal work is in my blood. I was elected Business Manager/FST of Local 49 in 2010, after 22 years of leadership roles in the craft and a successful six years as Local 49 organizer and training coordinator. I also serve on the Board of Trustees of both the Local 49 Health Plan and Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee.

I am now in my fourth term as manager, and I am passionate about preserving the rights of all working men and women. I serve on several state committees, including the New Mexico Construction Industries Commission, NM Workforce Development Board, and the NM Legislative Council State Jobs Council. I am also currently serving as the president of the NM State Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO.

In 2016, I was appointed to the National Best Practices Market Expansion Task Force, and I firmly believe that building strong labor-management relationships is important because when we both pull in the same direction we can move the bar, instead of playing tug of war!

I worked hard to defeat Right to Work Legislation and restore sheet metal prevailing wages in the last three NM Legislative sessions, and to help get ground-breaking Fire Life Safety legislation passed. I also received the honor of being affirmed as one of New Mexico’s five 2020 Presidential Electoral College Electors by the Democratic Party of New Mexico.

While managing a territory as large as Local 49 keeps me busy and on the road quite a bit, traveling the state of New Mexico and the El Paso and Amarillo/Lubbock areas of west Texas, I still find time to spend with my family in El Paso and Dallas, Texas, and to get in the occasional round of golf.

There are ups and downs in the economy and that affects our industry, but opportunities are endless in this trade. It is up to you to be prepared so when the opportunity opens, you are there to take it and run. ▪
Hiring To Retire

As Baby Boomers get ready to retire, the industry is changing its approach to attract and retain the leaders of tomorrow.

By / Natalie Bruckner
Baby Boomers. The generation born between 1944 and 1964 are the very people that helped build the country we know today. As this generation looks retirement in the eye, the sheet metal industry, like many other trades, is facing one of it’s biggest challenges: the silver tsunami.

In the next five to 10 years, around 50% of the sheet metal workforce is expected to be eligible for retirement. So, who exactly is going to step into their well-worn shoes?

“It’s a challenge we are already facing,” says Keith Johansen, owner of SMACNA contracting business Johansen Mechanical, Inc. (JMI) and Local 66 member. “We have had quite a few people retire in the past couple of years and while my business partner Derek and I have a way to go, it’s still something we think about. Learning to be a leader in business doesn’t happen overnight.”

It’s a challenge shared across the country. Kevin Gill, owner and president of McCusker-Gill Inc., a sheet metal contractor based in Hingham, Massachusetts, says that many people who have been integral to the success of his company are now close to retirement. “We have been investing in a lot of resources to tackle this, starting with the apprenticeship program,” he says. “We want to develop the next generation of leaders within the next five to 10 years.”

SMACNA and SMART have been working together on strategies to attract the next wave of sheet metal workers, and ways in which to keep them. There is an understanding that the same old, same old no longer works, and yet the foundations on which this industry was built are still as solid as ever and, in fact, what the younger generation is searching for.

Case in point: According to an “Our Great Place To Work” survey, Millennials are 11 times more likely to stay with an organization for the long haul if they are making a positive impact on the world. This is something the sheet metal industry does well. The symbiotic relationship between unions and the community has existed since unions began.

Both Gill and Johansen know this. They firmly believe in supporting local charitable causes, as do SMACNA chapters and SMART Locals across the country, as demonstrated by the strong reputations that have been established in the communities where they live and work.

This support network is also something the younger generation seeks within a company, and again, something that the industry does very well.

“Today, as it was back in the day, our role is to understand our members’ needs beyond the job site,” Local 66’s Business Manager, Tim Carter says. “The lines between work and personal life blur in our industry. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a member miss their house payments or be out of work for several years. It’s not unusual for our members to set aside up to $6,000 for someone if they are in trouble. Members have a propensity to be sympathetic.”

Gill agrees, saying that in his company they treat everyone like part of the family—a family of around 220 union sheet
metal workers, in his case. “Life happens,” he says. “Whether it’s a surgery or somebody with cancer or even having a new baby, we will do whatever we can to help people get through struggles. Our philosophy is to do the right thing and in return that breeds a loyalty to the company.”

According to Local 80’s JATC Training Director, Matt O’Rourke, this attitude is essential in retention. Millennials are three times more likely than their older peers to jump ship, and if a job lacks growth opportunities and avenues for leadership development, 67% of millennials will consider leaving that position. This job hopping is costing the economy an estimated $30 billion a year.

“The younger generation feel they have the right to ask questions, and my job is to answer them,” O’Rourke says. “Yes, they sometimes have premature ideas of what they want to do, and it is our job to guide them and set boundaries. It’s about them feeling like their needs are being considered.”

While many may believe this younger generation needs to be hand-held, O’Rourke explains, “They feel they are entitled to fair treatment, something that past generations no doubt felt, but weren’t as vocal about.”

Understanding the new workforce has paid off for Local 80’s training center. When the apprentices were laid off in April this year due to COVID-19 and ended up making more money on unemployment than they would working a 40-hour week, 94% of them still returned to work the first chance they got.

Gill is another example of how this attitude pays off. His company has a 100% retention rate with its office employees, and about 90% with the field employees. “We really believe that high morale among our employees is critical to our success,” he says. “We compensate them well, and we pay them holidays and vacation. We also hold foreperson meetings at our headquarters a couple times a year where it’s an open forum to talk and collaborate. There’s a lot of friendships in our company that have come from this.”

So if the industry ticks so many boxes when it comes to offering what the younger generation are looking for, why is it such a challenge to attract them in the first place?

One reason could be the way in which the industry is relaying that message. “We are still working to get the message out there,” says Mark Saba, executive director SMACNA Metropolitan Detroit Chapter. “We also have to understand that the message we had 30-40 years ago isn’t the message we should be sending today. Contractors and Locals are partners in the same business. We need to continue using social media to our advantage. We used to advertise in the paper, but who reads the paper these days? Today, there are different and more effective ways to connect and engage with our audience.”

Charlene Zezawa, administrator at SMACNA Detroit, says their chapter and union partner have several effective programs to promote the industry to new and experienced workers. Detroit has seen much success with a new apprentice outreach program developed by a jointly-funded organization called Management and Unions Serving Together (MUST). MUST Careers utilizes social media and training center open houses to connect people to apprenticeship opportunities within the unionized construction trades.

Zezawa adds that SMACNA Detroit also hosts foreman/leadership training for the union members, providing an opportunity for seasoned journeypersons to sit with new apprentices who are both spending time with a professional leadership trainer. In this atmosphere, the importance of mentorship can flourish.

The first step, however, is in have receptive attitudes. “Some unions have had boundaries that they now must step outside of,” Zezawa says. “The foundation of what we do will never change, but you build on that and keep your doors open for new ways to do things. If we are open-minded, our unions will thrive.”

Saba agrees that what may have worked in the past may not be productive today. “In five to 10 years from now the industry will be very different. It’s exciting times for the industry with the expansion of technology, and as long as we adjust to a new way of thinking, we will succeed.”

Carter is also excited about how this simple change in attitude and messaging will see a bright future for the industry. “With the modern labor movement, we negotiate wages and we take care of health care, and that’s okay. We should be doing that. But then there are other things that have come up because of the demographic, like daycare, for example, which we need to navigate. We have to remember that Millennials are not tied to the structure that I inherited from my parents, so they challenge the so-called status quo—and so they should, and so should we.”

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.
With advanced fabrication equipment in its Missouri and Texas facilities and with dozens of sheet metal workers operating at the top of their game, Zahner consistently lives up to its international reputation for being “the intersection of art and architecture”—as projects such as Kauffman Center, Miu Miu Aoyama, and Harim Tower demonstrate.

But although Zahner pushes the envelope of sheet metal’s design capabilities, a small project that took only a few weeks to complete is having a massive impact of a different kind: keeping people safe. Specifically, Zahner joined forces with architects HKS to create personal protection equipment (PPE) for medical professionals and health care staff caring for COVID-19 patients.

Robert Zahner, senior vice president of the 124-year-old metal engineering and fabrication firm, says of the collaboration, “We jumped at the opportunity in April when HKS asked if we could participate in making PPE. It was a good cause, and we had already established a great relationship with the architects, having worked together on the SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles and Pacific Plaza Pavilion Park in downtown Dallas.”

Heath May, director of LINE, and Cory Brugger, chief technology officer for HKS, led the volunteer effort with Make4Covid, a coalition of professionals whose aim is to design, manufacture, and distribute essential equipment for health care workers and first responders. Noting that his relationship with Zahner is founded on trust and a shared sense of purpose, May says, “It was easy to pick up the phone and ask if they would be interested in partnering with us.”

The task was to create 2,500 face shields, a task that would require ingenuity, given people’s pandemic-related working arrangements. “Our engineers were working from home and our Grand Prairie, Texas, plant was temporarily shuttered,” Zahner says. “That meant our first priority was to get everything up and running in a safe and responsible manner.”

The company hired nurses to take the temperatures of staff and address any concerns, and hand wash stations were set up throughout the facility. “Maintaining social distancing wasn’t a problem since the breaks between our shears, punches, and other equipment are 10 feet apart,” Zahner says.

He adds, “Our staff uniformly bought into the importance of maintaining safety during this project. They understood that all it would take is one person to be lackadaisical to put everyone at risk, and as a result we maintained a COVID-free workplace.”

This does not surprise Local 68’s Business Manager, Calvin Young. “I’ve dealt with Zahner since 2007 and they’re one of the oldest and most experienced architectural contractors in our organization, very dedicated to safety as well as project excellence,” he says. “This was a special, much needed undertaking, especially in this part of the country where so many new infections are being reported.”

Zahner, who was an original member of the SMACNA-
Small Project with a Big Impact

SMART Best Practices Market Expansion Task Force, appreciates Young’s remarks. “Calvin is very supportive of what we do, but it must be stated that Local 68 is full of good, responsible, and conscientious members.”

While Zahner donated its labor and fabrication facility, HKS’s Chicago office set up a GoFundMe page and raised over $5,000 for material purchase and shipping costs.

The face shields, whose design was vetted through a medical advisory board, were made from durable but flexible PETG plastic (the preferred material for PPE) and punched in Grand Prairie. They were then augmented with headbands created from HKS’s 3D printers and laser cutters.

Because the shields weren’t FDA-approved, great care was taken to make the products as safe as possible to use. Any staff handling the PPE was masked and gloved. Each shield was disinfected, bagged in groups of two and dated (to prevent cross contamination), sealed, and then left alone for several days to ensure that any contamination died off before being shipped.

The shields were ultimately delivered to dozens of health care systems and frontline medical providers across the United States and in Mexico. Because each kit contains two shields, workers can swap out one for cleaning or if one gets scratched or damaged.

Although the benefit of the shields to the medical community is incalculable, the project was also a welcome break from the norm for Zahner staff, as well as a distraction from the effects of the government-imposed lockdowns.

“We lost about 40% of our volume in the early days of the lockdowns and only recently have things started to get back to normal,” Zahner says. “Ironically, since more and more of our work has been spread throughout the country or internationally over the past decades, we’re quite used to working remotely—but it was still fulfilling to have people come back and open up our plants.”

This wasn’t the only volunteer effort in this region geared towards helping COVID care workers. “Local 68 purchased five sheets of 030 aluminum that our office staff sheared up into one quarter inch and three-inch-long strips for face masks that were being sewn together and shipped all over Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and New Mexico,” Young says. “Locals 54, 67, 68, and 214, which make up the Southwest Gulf Coast Regional Council, each did the same thing.”

Even though effective treatments for the disease are already in use and vaccines will likely roll out in the New Year, health professionals think it will be a while before COVID-19 is fully behind us—which begs the question, if more PPE is required, will HKS, Zahner, and Local 68 continue their partnership?

“We’re on board,” Zahner says. “We were proud to join the effort with Local 68, HKS, and Make4Covid, and we’re ready to go again if and when the need arises.”

Robin Brunet’s journalism has been published in over 150 magazines, newspapers, websites, and other media across Canada and the United States since 1982. He is also the best-selling author of two books: Red Robinson: The Last Deejay and Let’s Get Frank, as well as the upcoming The Last Broadcast.
Construction has been one of the slowest industries to adopt technology. That’s partly cultural—folks in the industry like to solve problems with their own ingenuity. Many firms are still family owned, and there’s still a lot reverence for tradition. Finally, this is an industry with thin margins, where the first funding priorities are equipment and personnel.

But, it’s also partly because there hasn’t been a lot of technology built to meet the needs of the industry. Before smart phones, it was hard to bring technology to the field. Even then, you had to have a good Wi-Fi connection, which wasn’t consistently available, or an expensive data plan. And, a lot of early field capture technology was based on someone having to manually input data into a device. That was a non-starter; having superintendents manually entering data didn’t really provide much in the way of productivity gains and made for a lot of unhappy superintendents.

Now all that is changing. Founders are aging out of the industry, creating an opportunity for younger generations
to apply technology with less resistance. Project owners are requiring the use of different technologies as a condition of funding. And, there is an increasing number of great solutions specifically designed for the industry. Connectivity and computing power have increased dramatically, making mobile applications a lot more reliable, robust, and user-friendly. Cameras, drones, GPS, and RFID technology are making it easy to capture data without human intervention.

As more technology comes into play, the industry is finally waking up to the impact it can have on bottom line profitability. Here are some of the technology opportunities construction companies should have on their radar:

1. **AR and VR**
   
   Whether it’s on a computer screen or through a headset, augmented and virtual reality are taking the output of BIM software and creating virtual models of a structure subcontractors can walk through before it’s even built, allowing them to collaborate and spot potential issues in a virtual environment.

   For example, an electrical contractor could walk through the schematic of what the mechanical contractor would have built so they can say, “Okay, I see that there’s going to be a standpipe here, so we’ll run our conduit right next to it.” That leads to less rework and fewer scheduling delays. AR can also be used to help train workers in a more effective and cost-efficient manner.

2. **AI: Not yet**

   Artificial intelligence could potentially have a big impact on the industry, but probably not for quite few years. One immediate application is job site safety. There are already rudimentary tools that can analyze video from jobsite cameras and spot hazards. They can also determine from workers’ movements whether or not they’re accessing a scaffold or carrying materials up a flight of stairs correctly.

   Eventually, AI could be used to help improve project scheduling by learning from data from past projects and flagging issues that could lead to delays. It could analyze the performance of buildings over time and offer materials recommendations. But AI needs relevant data to learn from, so the industry needs to digitize first.

3. **Internet of Things**

   If you look at industries that are starting to see some success with AI, such as healthcare and manufacturing, everything is happening more or less in one place. That makes it easier to put sensors on a machine or robot and capture data. It’s a bit more of a challenge when you have multiple job sites and a lot of movable equipment, so taking data capture out of the hands of individuals and automating it, and storing data in a centralized place where it can be managed is the frontier right now.

4. **Back office efficiency**

   Most firms are using some sort of automated accounting platform, but there are still gaps that need to be filled.

   Invoice routing and approval is a big one. People are literally having the back office scan invoices and then email out invoice images to the project superintendent. Invoice images are “digital paper,” meaning they’re not actual digital artifacts. Any data that’s on them has to be manually entered, and the whole routing and approval process is manual, as well.

   Then there’s the payment process itself. Solutions built to handle procure to pay actually only handle procure to invoice approval, so then you need a payment’s automation solution on top of that. The good news is that automating payments is pretty easy to do, and it doesn’t depend on automating the invoice workflow, which is a much bigger project.

5. **Business intelligence**

   Most ERP systems offer tons of reports, but people want to combine that with data from other sources. They want to be able to look at the data three-dimensionally and be able to drill into it. ERP systems don’t have that kind of capability, and as the amount of data companies have access to grows, so does the need to have a business intelligence platform to pull it together and generate analyses and models.

   There are a lot of challenges to overcome before construction becomes a fully digitized industry. It’s still hard to deploy technology organization wide when you have workers on multiple job sites. Do you pull everyone off the job to come in for training? Probably not. Adoption can move pretty slowly, with some workers using the technology and others holding to traditional practices, resulting in the industry overall heading in the right direction of the benefits, even if it’s not happening at a rapid pace.

   Jason Krankota is VP of Construction Sales, West Region at Nvoicepay. His expertise in construction business technology spans 20 years, with 10+ years focused on corporate payments, accounts payable, and expense management solutions.

**There are a lot of challenges to overcome before construction becomes a fully digitized industry. It’s still hard to deploy technology organization wide when you have workers on multiple job sites. Do you pull everyone off the job to come in for training? Probably not.**
At the time of this writing, our country and industry are confronting major adversity. The words “uncharted territory” have been overused but convey the uncertainty of profound change and challenge. But adversity always has a purpose—and I am sure you can even see that in your personal lives, as well. On the back end of any major problem, issue, setback, or challenge—upon thoughtful or strategic reflection, we can see how it becomes a platform for perspective and progress.

I have been witness to a lot of turmoil in this industry, starting when I was a kid. My union carpenter turned contractor dad had 150 guys in the field, an El Camino, a summer house in Twain Harte, and my sisters and I lacked for nothing. Then came the 1975-76 economic crisis. Interest rates went to 16%. No one paid. Lines of credit were non-existent, and very quickly our family’s economic world crashed down taking with it my dad’s company. Our family endured some hard times. But we all came back stronger, wiser, and more successful than ever.

In the 80s I was looking for a job in a recession. None of my friends could find one. The promise of college = opportunity seemed impossible. Then, I got a job interview at United Contractors. They got 110 resumes and seven finalists. Hunger breeds desire. They saw that edge and hired me. I guess now, as CEO, it kinda worked out.

In several more down cycles I saw the industry struggle, but the edge created by adversity really showed in the 2008 financial crisis. Remarkably, few contractors I know went under compared to what I had seen in other less brutal circumstances. Why? Because the adversity lessons that they had in hand helped them to see what needed to be done. And wiser, shrewder, and more pro-actively, they again thrived.

Now again, we face adversity and uncertainty. The key for leaders is not to be reactive and to stop and remember that this is a moment to bring empathy, understanding, and wisdom to our leadership. The business world is built on the care of the people within it. And for them to withstand adversity, they have to see and feel that you really care. Those that make this their priority will not only sharpen their edge, but obtain a competitive one in the aftermath of these challenges.

They say the Chinese symbols for chaos and opportunity are the same. I’ll have to take their word for it. But there is some irony in that and practical application for us. Perhaps the issue at hand will resolve sooner than later, but the inevitability of a recession seems apparent. Perhaps there will be a significant industry contraction—or, conversely, the next step to recovery may be massive infusions into infrastructure. What I do know is this: no one would be in our business if they were not equipped to deal with adversity. No one who accepts the level of risk that our business has lacks the ability to strategically address profound change.

As leaders at the center of the storm, counted upon for navigation by those who depend upon us, we have the greatest opportunity to sharpen our edge. I tell my staff that how we respond at this moment is our legacy opportunity. Watching my dad sell that El Camino gave me a sobering look at the limits of our control in this life. But what we all have within our grasp is how we respond to it. And I encourage us all to embrace adversity as a whetstone to our edge and our capabilities, not only for ourselves, but for everyone we lead and care about.

Mark Breslin is an author, speaker, CEO, and influencer at the highest levels of business in North America. He has spent decades advising CEOs and senior leaders in business, government, labor, and non-profit arenas in both the United States and Canada. His five bestselling books have sold hundreds of thousands of copies and have improved leadership, accountability, profitability, innovation, and engagement for organizations and individuals. See his work at www.breslin.biz
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