



by Marcia Gruver

Gathering forces

Enough, say owners. It's time to know

- 1.) just exactly what labor demands we're facing and**
- 2.) how to attract the people we need.**

You could blame it on Katrina. After the hurricane left the Gulf Coast in shambles, Business Roundtable member companies and others ponied up \$5 million in cash and in-kind contributions to get workers available for the reconstruction effort. The Business Roundtable formed the Gulf Coast Workforce Development Initiative four months after the storm.

Scheduled to end December 2009, the Gulf Coast initiative has to date put more than 18,000 people through two- to four-week construction introduction training programs (see sidebar below). But a national initiative was needed. That initiative would have to include both the union and non-union sectors, address supply and demand issues and finally figure out just what makes people choose construction.

So the Construction Users Roundtable, an offshoot of the Business Roundtable's construction committee, re-opened its dormant Construction Workforce Development Center, formed in the mid-90s to address a specific regional issue. Now a separate legal entity from CURT, CWDC is about to unveil a two-pronged approach to construction workforce development it hopes will be "the glue that links everything

Footprints in the sand

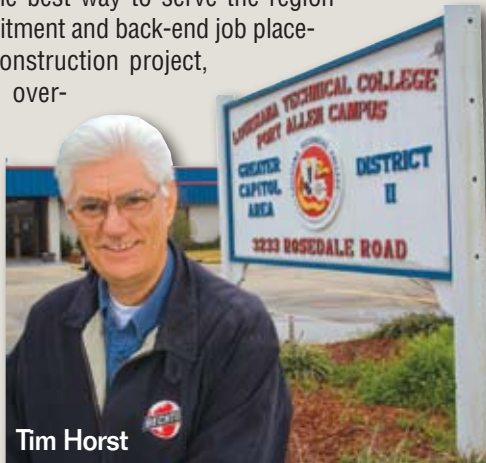
The challenge is daunting: recruit and train 20,000 new entrants into construction in the Gulf Coast region by the end of 2009. Spearheaded by the Business Roundtable, the public-private partnership Gulf Coast Workforce Initiative is headed by Tim Horst, a now-retired executive on loan from Bechtel Group.

The initiative concluded the best way to serve the region was to provide front-end recruitment and back-end job placement. "We treated it like a construction project, with a schedule, budget and oversight," Horst says. First up: the "I'm GREAT" marketing program, which stands for "Get Rewarded for Education and Advancement Training," designed to draw attention to the free training. The campaign used all media resources: newspaper, magazines, TV and radio ads and job fairs, but

found the most popular avenue was word of mouth. "People told us they heard about it from a relative," Horst says.

After contacting a 24/7 call center, respondents are connected with a local training partner, typically a community college. If he or she takes the two- to four-week introduction to construction class, then the initiative works to get them placed in construction. "We're looking to place people into their first jobs in the industry," Horst says. "Once they become confident they like construction, they can work with their employer to use one of the many ongoing training programs available."

In addition to contributions by Business Roundtable member companies, the effort required several public grants to fund the estimated \$1,250 per student training cost. Through July, the effort had logged 18,967 training completions, and had a current enrollment of 2,120. The U.S. Department of Labor tracks course graduates, and is finding approximately 60 percent of the trainees end



Tim Horst

together,” says executive director Daniel Groves.

Labor supply and demand forecasting: In the United States, this is currently done on a fragmented, regional approach; CWDC wants to create a common, national methodology for measuring need. The goal is pragmatic: if a large utility, for example, wants to start a project in Lafayette, Indiana, that requires 1,000 workers, are there 1,000 workers in the specific trades needed in that area? By early November, CWDC will be rolling out a free, pilot web-based program that allows owners to input and extract data to forecast such labor needs. (Some broad data segments will be available to the public.) CWDC is modeling the program after Canada’s Construction Sector Council website, www.constructionforecasts.ca, and hopes to eventually include government infrastructure projects in the demand picture. The CWDC website, www.cwdcforecasting.com, is scheduled to be fully operational by mid-2009.

Workforce marketing and recruiting: “There has to be a sig-

nificant change in how people view construction,” Groves says. CWDC plans to pinpoint three groups with a compelling construction recruitment message:

- Current workers who may be underemployed, unemployed, displaced or looking for a better opportunity.
- Those preparing for the workforce, from K-12 to post-high school.
- Influencers, including parents and guidance counselors.

“We know each group needs vastly different approaches,” Groves comments. But what works? Research now being conducted will serve as the basis for a pilot program in Alabama, due to be unveiled by the end of January. The statewide effort, done in cooperation with the Alabama Workforce Development Initiative (comprising state Associated Builders and Contractors and Associated General Contractors of America chapters plus organized labor), will not come cheap. Groves says it will cost “\$1 million minimum.” Although CWDC is relying on indus-

try contributions to start, 90 percent of the eventual funding mechanism calls for an owner-required cents-per-hour funding agreement. Owners would require all contractors bidding on a project to include this cost in their bids. “Owners were the drivers of safety,” Groves says, “and we view this as a similar effort.”

CWDC’s plans are ambitious: Once the Alabama pilot is proved, plans are to radiate the program out to neighboring states, and become national within a year, with an anticipated life expectancy of around five to eight years. The timing, however, depends on how strong a grassroots network is built: this will require thousands of volunteers – for example, a retired pipefitter who’s willing to explain his former job to a teenager.

What isn’t included in CWDC’s plans is training – an area where the group felt there was no need to reinvent the wheel. “There are a lot of training programs out there, whether union or non-union, doing a splendid job,” Groves says. “Our job is to get people into the pipeline.”



Gulf Coast Workforce Development Initiative

I'M GREAT.

Get Rewarded for Education and Advancement Training

Students take advantage of the free training offered at Louisiana Technical College's Port Allen Campus.

up working in construction 90 days after their training. Even at a 60-percent initial return, the program should go over its goal, assuming it continues to recruit at the same levels.

Lessons learned? “We’re looking to leave footprints in the sand,” Horst says. “We can accomplish so much more with

a single recruitment campaign. A great example is the independent milk producers who got together for the ‘Got Milk?’ campaign. We can find an avenue for collaboration and do the same thing.”

For more information, visit www.imgreat.org.