



Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion In Construction



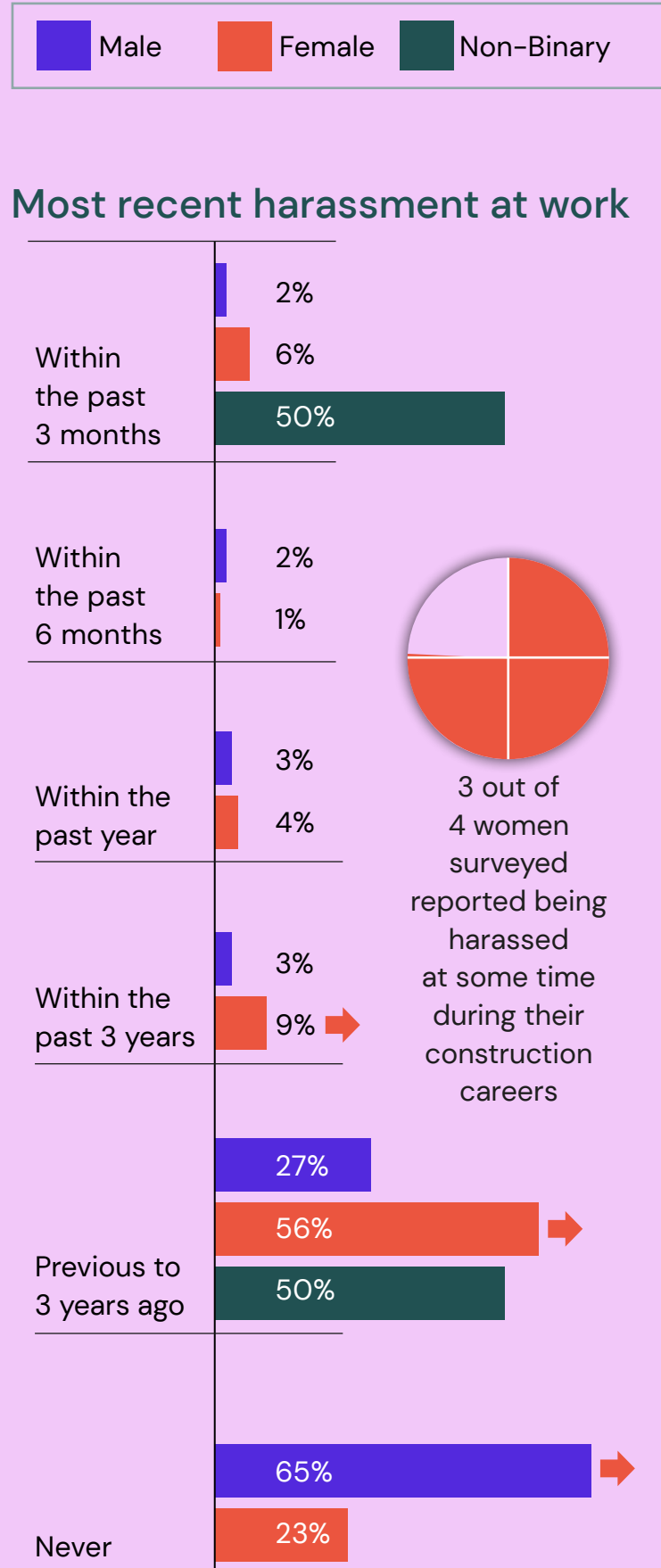
Workforce shortages across the construction industry provide new urgency to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yet a survey of construction professionals suggests the industry may have challenges attracting or retaining talent from historically underrepresented populations.

Conducted in the spring of 2022, the [survey](#) was sent to readers of SmartBrief’s newsletter for members of the Associated General Contractors of America. It was sponsored by Bridgit, the leader in workforce management tools built specifically for construction.

Survey analysis suggests that the construction industry has, at the very least, an image problem and possibly more substantial issues to address when it comes to DEI. For example, 3 out of 4 women surveyed reported being harassed at some time during their construction careers. Ten percent of women said they don’t feel safe at work from physical, verbal, or sexual harassment.

Joe Little, owner of construction consultancy Dunamoo, wasn’t surprised by many of the survey results, especially that the workforce is largely white, male and heterosexual.

“I still don’t see LGBTQ people that are truly out at work. I have yet to be at a company that recognizes Pride Month in any way,” Little said. “I’ve only seen one female executive on the construction operations of a company in 20-plus years where



The US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates:



89% of construction workers are **men**



88% are **white**, & 6% are **Black** or **African American**

I worked. What I have seen is a highly qualified female get passed over for a promotion, while a male was hired from the outside.”

Discrimination against underrepresented populations is most evident in construction when it comes to job promotion, hiring practices, compensation, and the availability of appropriate personal protective equipment, said many surveyed professionals, though not all agreed.

What problem?

If making workplaces more inclusive requires an understanding that there is a problem, efforts to raise the industry’s DEI may face resistance.

More than a third of men surveyed believe no discrimination exists in the industry, and 41% said there is no glass ceiling at their firm for people from historically underrepresented populations. When asked why some people might feel excluded from the industry, a quarter of men instead said there is no exclusion.

Demographics of those who took the survey might suggest otherwise. Survey respondents overwhelmingly identified as white (76%), and 57% were men, who were most likely to hold the highest level jobs. Official industry figures paint an even less diverse picture. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics [estimates](#) 89% of construction workers are men, 88% are white, and 6% are Black or African American. Of women laborers, only a fraction are part of the craft workforce.

Fewer statistics exist for construction workers who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, though 4% of those surveyed did, and there is [anecdotal evidence](#) they are part of the

workforce and may be ostracized. One reason it's difficult to determine how many work in construction is because workers' sexual orientation may not be apparent. [One study](#) estimates that, across industries, 46% of LGBTQ+ members keep their orientation private in the workplace.

Labor shortages and DEI

Making the industry more enticing to, say, gay people or people of color, may be vital to winning and keeping projects on schedule in the next decade amid labor shortages. Reasons for the shortage vary but include an aging construction workforce; more opportunities in other sectors; a pipeline of government-led construction projects unprecedented in more than a generation; and difficulties attracting a new generation of construction professionals, especially with specialized skills.

A shortage of workers was the second-leading cause of project delays in 2021, according to a [survey](#) by the AGC, with 61% of firms blaming labor shortages for delays. Three-fourths of those surveyed by AGC blamed materials shortages. Most firms — 88% — reported project delays last year.

This year alone, the industry needs an additional 650,000 workers, on top of normal hiring practices, to meet the nation's construction demands, according to the Associated Builders and Contractors. Next year, the industry needs to hire almost as many.

"The workforce shortage is the most acute challenge facing the construction industry,"



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Retaining talent

It begins by looking inward. Firms must assess their work culture on-site and throughout their organizations, and that starts by looking at their workforce data. What is the representation of men versus women on the payroll, and how long are their tenures? What training does each have, and what is their seniority? Does project selection match workers' abilities, and do their careers show progression? If possible, compare the data historically to help identify long-term patterns. A workforce-management tool such as Bridgit Bench can quickly identify trends in the data and provide a snapshot of the current workforce.

Without looking at the data, it may be difficult to pinpoint any problem, as well as an appropriate solution. Benchmarks, such as those created by AECOM, are one way to measure results. Last year, the engineering firm [set the goal](#) to have women make up 20% or more of its senior leadership and at least 35% of its workforce. Public statements like that can do a lot to make a place sound welcoming to a target audience. More than a quarter of women surveyed by SmartBrief said they left a job due to a lack of DEI. Top reasons cited for leaving were discriminatory career advancement, a lack of representation and/or opportunities, and physical or verbal harassment.

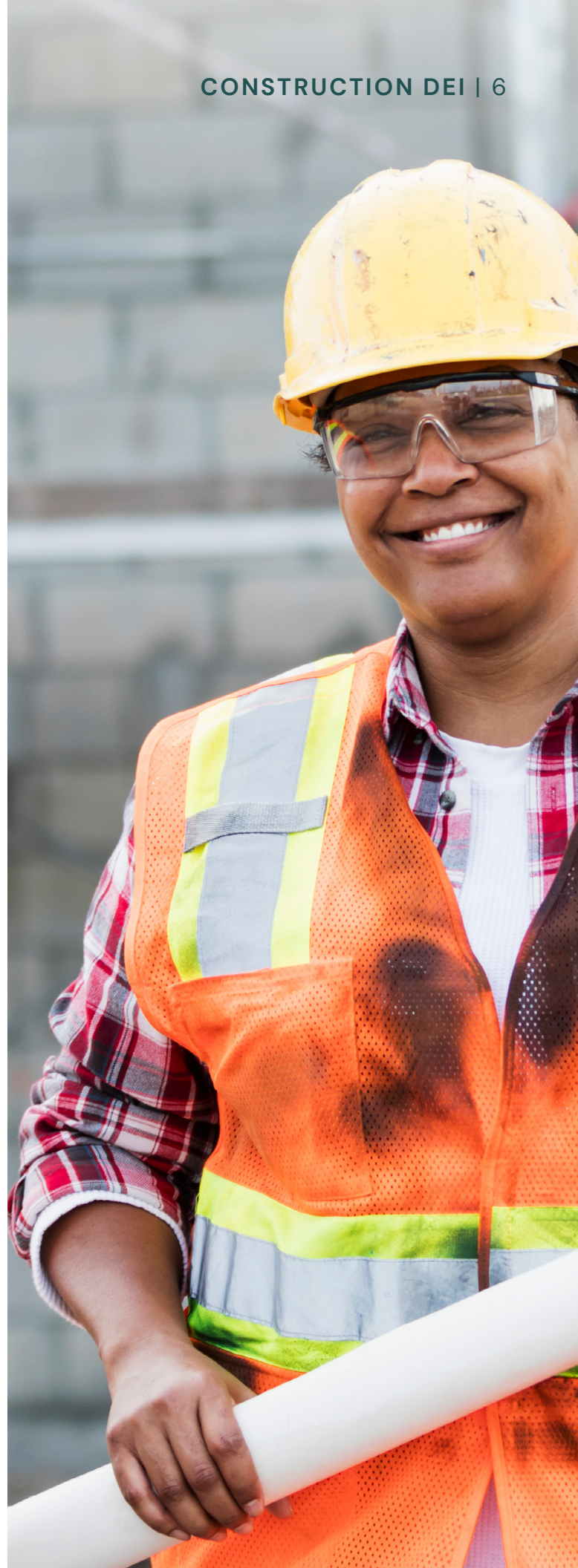
Once data is assembled and analyzed, consider what might make a workplace more welcoming.

Quick solutions include ensuring each person has the tools necessary to do a given job. It can be as simple as making sure women have fairly priced personal protective equipment that fits a female body. The demands of new mothers also should be considered. After the child is born, is there a private place at work where a woman can pump? Before the child is born, do female employees know what to expect from their employers with respect to leave?

About a fourth of women surveyed said they lost job opportunities due to pregnancy. Greater transparency regarding policies for women who become pregnant might help communicate to women that they can build a career in construction. For example, does the firm allow a pregnant employee to decide when to stop working? Most women and nonbinary survey respondents said it should be up to the woman.

Clear, fair policies spelling out job and workplace expectations help define corporate culture. Anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, for example, explain what won't be tolerated in the workplace. A workplace that allows all people to feel emotionally safe may have the additional benefit of encouraging innovation. Inversely, largely homogenous workforces can have the opposite effect, Little said.

Encouraging the acceptance of DEI policies may require training programs, which are offered by several organizations such as the AGC. In the spring of 2020, the trade association launched its [Culture of Care](#) initiative nationwide, providing guidance to construction managers working to build inclusive workplaces.



Attracting talent

When it comes to retaining workers, the responsibility to create equitable workplaces is shared among laborers and team leaders, as well as human resource managers, who are often the first gatekeepers faced by potential employees. Training is available to better understand unconscious biases that may adversely influence hiring decisions, as well as appropriate hiring practices.

However, getting a more diverse pool of applicants may require an outreach campaign to raise awareness regarding construction jobs. Having a DEI strategy that can be shared with prospective employees can help alleviate hesitancy based on the fear of harassment or discrimination. Spell out what efforts have been taken to create a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment where each person has an equal chance to succeed in his, her, or their career.

Also important to communicate are the skill sets required for many of the jobs, which may not be widely understood. In the survey, when construction professionals were asked to speculate as to why people from some populations might not join or stay in the field of construction, the most popular answer was that they lacked interest in the industry or did not view construction as a career. The second most popular answer was that people lacked the education or training needed for the job. It's also possible that people are unaware of opportunities in construction or that they believe the industry is unwelcoming to them, survey respondents said.



Real change will require more than lip service, Little said, adding, “The construction industry is still in need of significant change regarding diversity.”

The easiest way to convince people that the industry is welcoming is to make it so. Workers should know their employers value their contributions – regardless of their sexual orientation, race or gender – as well as their physical safety and mental health. Supporting an inclusive work culture requires continuously examining data in regards to how members of the workforce are managed and hired.

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