

We Want You!

To Work in Iowa's Asphalt Industry

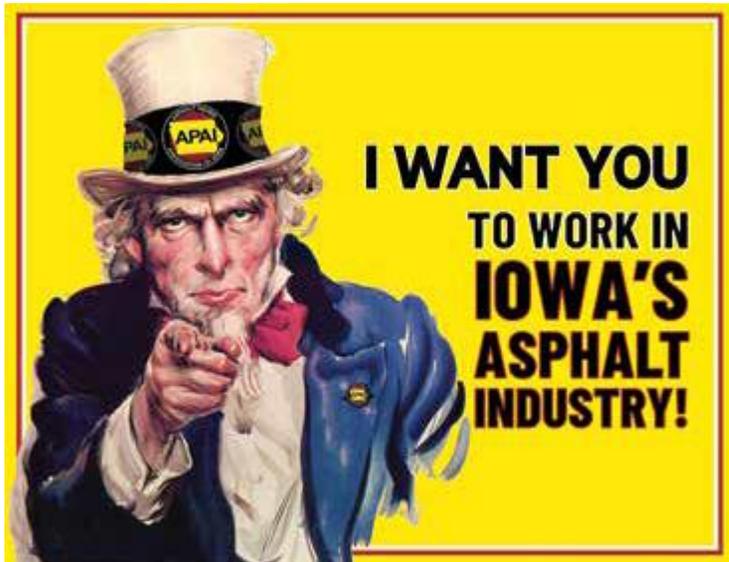
There is a great amount of work to be done in Iowa's Asphalt Industry and we are currently lacking the people to do it. The shortage of young people entering the skilled construction trades, coupled with an aging existing workforce, has left our industry in a perilous position. This situation, while challenging, is also an opportunity to redefine our industry, its principles, and the future of asphalt work over the next few decades. To define the problems and construct a solution, this article will briefly examine what brought us to this watershed moment, define specific steps that can lead us forward, and provide a long-term view of what the industry may look like in the future.

The Past

Iowa's asphalt contractors have proud tradition of quality and success. This tradition has been built on the hard work, and commitment to excellence, by the men and women who work in this industry. This

commitment has included long hours, extensive travel, and

nights and weekends spent working away from family and home. The reward for this commitment was a strong living wage, good health benefits and a winter lay-off with unemployment compensation.



During this same period, the emphasis on students attending college and achieving a secondary degree became indoctrinated in both our education system and our society. It was no longer socially acceptable for young men and women to “go to work” after high school. An unintended consequence of this push for secondary education was the creation of a social stigma around those who work

with their hands. The results of this policy was a lost generation of young people who chose not to enter the skilled trades and the resulting generational hole that exists in our workforce today.

The Present

The lack of people entering our industry is often dismissed with vague generalizations about “young people don’t want to work hard anymore.” Generationally, we are seeking to incorporate both the Millennials (born between 1984 and 1996) and Generation Z, born after 1997, into our industry. To accomplish this task, we may need to fundamentally change how we value our employees and their lives outside of work. According to multiple research studies Millennials are looking for work that is significant and meaningful to society, allows for collaboration in a “team” environment, allows them to stay connected to their social interactions and provides for a lifestyle that is flexible with time away from work. In addition, this generation is also much less gender-biased and is more accepting of all races and lifestyles.

These same studies have shown that money is not the number one motivating factor for these generations – the largest motivator is feeling a sense of accomplishment and being recognized for those accomplishments. These two generations have also seen the effects of going to college just “to get a degree.” The huge student loan debt that their friends and family members have incurred will provide additional impetus to look at skilled construction trades as a viable option.

If we are to attract these generations into our industry, how can we adjust our approach as employers to make Iowa’s asphalt industry more appealing?

1. Adopt an Improved Focus on Work / Life Balance.

The adoption of these initiatives by contractors to give more leave or flex time to their employees, along with allowing for more family time on weekends, will be the most difficult to achieve, but also the most beneficial to attracting new people to the industry and the most necessary to keep existing employees in our

industry. Today's worker wants a life outside of work, to see their kids' soccer games and be home at night with their family. The issue with this initiative is that Iowa asphalt contractors have approximately 100-120 working days, depending on weather, in the construction season to complete all of their work. To provide employees with opportunities to spend more quality time with their family, contractors will need to find even more employees to handle "flex" time, add more crews to work shorter weeks, or take less work to complete during a season. None of these options are appealing, albeit, all of them may be necessary.

2. Emphasize Team Building and Opportunities for Advancement in the Industry

The education system, with all of its faults, has done our industry a great service through teaching students the power of the "team". An Iowa asphalt company is built to be successful based on the quality of their team and their crews. These teams are a collection of individuals who work together collectively to achieve daily success. These daily affirmations of success through completing projects feeds into the Millennials' mindset. However, this generation will need more training than those that came before and will require a supervisor that is willing to answer the question "Why?" on a daily basis. For those new hires that make the cut, the opportunities to advance quickly in our industry are real. One only needs to look around our industry to see the number of foremen, project managers, superintendents and owners between the ages of 30-40. Iowa's asphalt industry is blessed with opportunities to advance quickly for those that are willing to work hard and focus on quality construction.

3. Direct Specific Efforts to Recruit Women and Minorities to our Industry

Iowa's asphalt industry has been progressive in welcoming minority workers, particularly Hispanic workers, to our paving crews and leadership roles. This commitment needs to continue and progress. Women have always been present in our industry, but recent trends have seen a strong rise in the numbers of women being hired by Iowa contractors. The newly formed Iowa Chapter of

“Women of Asphalt” has a focus on what can be accomplished when we all work *together as a team*.



The Future

The future of Iowa’s Asphalt Industry is uncertain, but one thing that is certain will be the eventual incorporation of autonomous trucks and construction equipment. The autonomous construction technology currently exists and is being tested world-wide to incorporate into daily operations. The future asphalt worker will need to be a smart, tech-savvy individual who wants to spend time in a fast-paced, opportunity-driven occupation. Imagine a project where none of the trucks or equipment is being directly operated but is being controlled off-site or through virtual reality operations. Our industry needs to begin preparing for this eventuality through industry-based training for our current employees and curriculum-based education for the next generation.



Conclusion

Iowa's asphalt contractors have much to be proud of. The successes they have achieved, both on a state and national level, is a testament to the quality of the people that work in this great industry. There are opportunities for both contractors to improve the quality of their employees' lives and to attract the next great generation of workers to this industry. Working asphalt construction is hard work. It is challenging work. It is rewarding work. We need to celebrate the diversity that our industry has achieved and work to make it stronger. The tradition of this industry is to focus on quality and a commitment to excellence. The next generation of Iowa's asphalt workers can, and with proper training, will bring that same level of commitment to maintain Iowa's asphalt contractors' designation as the "Best in the Nation."