



OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND FOR WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION



It's time to bulldoze some old, lingering notions about "Women in Construction." While the term once referenced females whose only roles included office paperwork and payroll functions at a construction office, times have changed.

Today, women are filling an ever-widening variety of significant roles in the booming construction industry, holding positions ranging from business owners, engineers, project managers and other leadership duties. "As everyone knows, construction during the past 15 years here in Denver has been explosive. It presents great opportunity for women," added Julie Walker, a longtime attorney whose litigation work includes construction matters.

Added Katie Hegarty of Adolfson and Peterson Construction, "Women are really good at construction and they enjoy it!"

The latest figures from Mortenson Construction reports 34 percent of

its workforce are women – more than triple the industry averages of 9.1 percent.

The growing number opportunities for "Women in Construction" and some of the challenges they face were topics for a Denver Business Journal Table of Experts discussion. The virtual roundtable event was hosted by Keith Dennis, publisher and market president of the Denver Business Journal.

The panelists included: Hegarty, senior project manager at Adolfson and Peterson Construction; Kathy Freeman, operating group safety director for Mortenson's Denver location; Walker, a litigation attorney at Ireland Stapleton Pryor & Pascoe, PC who has extensive experience handling construction-related matters; Brandelynn Livengood, co-owner and vice president of Pueblo-based construction company Latcon Corp.; and Teena Bergstrand, senior director of marketing strategy of

Saunders Construction. Bergstrand was a winner in the Denver Business Journal's 2022 "40 under 40" awards program.

DENNIS: With construction historically being a male-dominated industry, what advantages have you seen as a woman in that industry?

WALKER: Two things come to mind. One is that as more and more women become involved in construction, there are greater opportunities to interface with and work with other women. Many times in the past, I've been the only woman in the room. There is a natural draw to each other when there are other women in the room. The other advantage I see is that, often times, the woman in the room is underestimated. For me personally, I have found that gives me the opportunity to demonstrate competency and confidence, to advance opportunities



There is an immense potential for women in construction, especially in leadership roles, to work alongside our male counterparts.

- Katie Hegarty



MEET THE EXPERTS



PANELIST

TEENA BERGSTRAND

Saunders Construction

Teena is a senior director of marketing strategies with expertise in integrated marketing communications. Bergstrand's oversight in marketing includes six operating business units across multiple geographic markets and diverse business lines that include commercial real estate development, construction management, and one of the largest concrete builders in the state.



PANELIST

KATHY FREEMAN

Mortenson

Kathy is the Operating Group Safety Director at Mortenson Denver. With over 17 years of experience she provides management, training, and education, with a focus on compliance and practical site safety, working to keep employees, site personnel and the public safe.



PANELIST

KATIE HEGARTY

Adolfson & Peterson Construction

Katie is a senior project manager and began her career as a project engineer in the construction industry in 2008. She is involved in the Colorado State University Construction Management Department and is a member of the Northern Colorado AGC committee.



PANELIST

BRANDELYNN LIVENGOOD

Latcon Corp.

Brandi is the owner and vice president of Latcon she started with her father in 2013 and in 2020 opened an excavation division to serve the Pueblo and Denver markets. Brandi has focused on building a successful general construction and construction management company putting their focus on safety and quality control to deliver exceptional projects.



PANELIST

JULIE WALKER

Ireland Stapleton Pryor & Pascoe, PC

Julie is a litigation attorney and ADR professional with extensive experience as a trial attorney representing individuals and businesses in federal and state courts across the country. She has tried multiple jury and bench trials to verdict in Colorado and other jurisdictions and has handled complex litigation for all types of businesses in a variety of matters involving construction, professional liability, product liability, qui tam, financial services, complex torts, employment, and commercial litigation.

for other women by breaking down some of those barriers where – traditionally – men in the industry may have thought, “she’s not going to get it.”

HEGARTY: I think it’s an advantage because we’re needed. It’s critical for the future of construction. We think differently, we are high performers and are good at innovation and collaboration. The industry needs the differing perspectives.

BERGSTRAND: I’ve seen a lot more of a concerted effort during the past decade to recruit and develop women in construction. Oftentimes, I see our male counterparts rooting for us. There is an immense potential for women in construction, especially in leadership roles, to work alongside our male counterparts.

DENNIS: Why is it important to have female representation in the construction industry – in both office and front-line roles?

BERGSTRAND: Our industry is facing some challenges. There are workforce shortages, day-to-day economic

uncertainty, supply chain disruption and fast-changing technology advances. By bringing in a whole array of people, including women, you can get different perspectives and ideas. Women play a critical role in solving these big challenges.

FREEMAN: Representation of women in both craft and office roles is critical for several reasons. The first is that the future of our industry is dependent on creating a much larger pipeline of workers. Current construction workforce stats are pretty harrowing: our industry needs hundreds of thousands more craft workers to meet demand in the next year alone. Currently, more than a third of our industry is over the age of 50, and according to the National Center for Construction Education and Research, approximately a third of the workforce will retire by 2026. Women only make up about one tenth of the construction workforce. The solution is very clear: we need more women in construction-industry roles across the board.

Seeing that women are represented at more than triple the industry rate here at Mortenson helps when we’re recruiting and positively impacts

our policymaking, which helps us retain more women. We believe having a diversity of perspectives and experiences ultimately makes us stronger and more competitive as a company. Beyond our own team, we have a Workforce Utilization Goal for each project to ensure marginalized groups, women and veteran-owned businesses are given opportunities to grow. Mortenson pledged 15% of all subcontracts to small, minority- and women-owned businesses – a unique commitment in this industry, and a goal we have exceeded every year.

DENNIS: Where should the construction industry put its time and energy to help encourage women to pursue careers in this field?

FREEMAN: We must look at both the development of the workforce pipeline – expanding awareness among women and girls about the opportunities available for a real, fulfilling career in construction – while focusing on creating a welcoming work environment for everyone.

When it comes to expanding awareness, we invest in sponsorship

and leadership opportunities in programs like Transportation and Construction Girl, an organization that offers girls opportunities to learn about careers within this industry, and STEMblazers, a program focused on encouraging young women in pursuing advanced study of science, technology, engineering and math. Mortenson also offers career mapping for everyone on our team, which provides a clear professional development path to help team members meet their goals.

There are so many cultural and HR-related actions companies can implement that have few, if any, hard costs – actions that simply require a mindset shift. When it comes to creating a welcoming work environment, it’s not solely the job of women to advocate for one another. Anyone can become an ally, and it costs nothing to the organization. At Mortenson, we define allyship as leveraging one’s voice, advantage, and assets to benefit others. This can be as simple as advocating for the women (and others) you work with and recognizing their accomplishments.

HEGERTY: I’d say everywhere. It has been more of a focus for the past four



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– Kathy Freeman

or five years. I see a big need to reach at the middle school level to start interest when they are beginning to understand what they know and are good at. It would help to get them interested early. We've been reaching out to high schools and colleges for a long time. We've had a lot of success lately with hiring people directly out of high school for both the office and the field. I think that if we can start that interest at an earlier age prior to high school, we can have a larger group to speak with once they get to high school.

BERGSTRAND: I agree with Katie. There are studies that show young women start to lose interest in things like math and science at earlier ages. If we're able to pique their interest at that middle school age, I think we can get them to continue to engage. I think it's important for companies like Saunders to partner with non-profits and school districts, then provide time and money so we can equip educators with the tools they don't have to attract young people to our industry.

WALKER: I think that the more women

appear in the office roles and on the front lines, younger women and girls will see them and think, "Hey, construction isn't just a place for men." Hopefully, that will open more opportunities for young women and girls' thinking.

DENNIS: What challenges or barriers do women face, and how we overcome them?

HEGERTY: In construction, there's still a conception that someone has to work hard and long hours to succeed. While one of the things I like about being in construction is everyone's drive to work hard, hours have become more flexible. Most enjoy showing up to construction because it's not 8 to 5. However, we've got to be smart and focus on quality over quantity. I think the expectation that 60 hours a week isn't the right way to go about things. I think we can produce results working 45 hours a week. I think the expectation to work long, hard hours has happened for decades in construction. That has been a barrier for women.

FREEMAN: Within the construction industry, the biggest barrier is still representation. Women make up a small fraction of the construction workforce – both on the craft and office sides. If you cannot see someone who shares similarities to you in your company, it's hard to envision a future for yourself there. In some companies, women in office settings are still primarily in administrative roles. On a national level, five of the 12 leaders on Mortenson's board of directors are women. In our Salt Lake City location, women make up a majority of office leadership.

LIVENGOOD: I believe a few ways that our industry can support women in the field would be offering widespread recruiting strategies, diversifying our workforces, creating more custom fit roles, offering continued learning, maternity leave – I realize most health care allows for this, but this lets women know that we respect their choice to have a family and find balance with that and their work. Some of the barriers that I believe still exist, but I think they're getting better with



respect, underrepresentation and poor communication. We must do better in making the construction industry appeal to the women. With one of the lowest pay gaps around in the construction world for women, this makes for an excellent opportunity for women to thrive.

WALKER: There still is a generational shift occurring. Where baby boomers and X-ers came into the industry being told that they were going to have to work a lot of long hours to rise through the ranks, (mentality) is changing as younger generations progress. Hybrid work schedules and remote work are more accepted and acceptable. I think it will take some passage of time for more senior workforce to cycle off and the younger, more progressive generations to demonstrate that they no longer have to do it that way. Flexibility will become more of the normal, which will aid women in succeeding.

BERGSTRAND: There are still barriers that remain. The industry is incredibly fragmented with large, international companies to small, local family-owned companies. As a result, some firms' Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are further along than others. The industry made great strides in recent years hitting a high mark of 14% total employment and nearly 4% for field employment of women nationwide (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/11/11/hispanic-women-construction-trades/>). Obviously, this is nowhere near 50% representation, so the data shows barriers still exist.

DENNIS: What has changed most in the industry since you've been involved?

HEGERTY: When I graduated from college, women made up about four percent of the construction workforce. Now, we're up to 14 percent in the nation. I'd like it to be higher. I've experienced the senior generations of field management change and open up. They're now empowering women and helping us.

FREEMAN: Today, there are more companies like Mortenson that recognize the importance of setting aggressive, quantifiable goals to build the kind of workforce we're going to need for the future.

LIVENGOOD: Women in our industry are smart, brilliant, resourceful, skilled, and excellent leaders and I have seen more women join the industry in the last decade not just as office support roles but as project managers and field laborers to grow this industry and bring respect to it.

WALKER: As an attorney, I've seen a real shift in organizations trying to resolve conflicts without trying to get into a court



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– Teena Bergstrand

proceeding. I've seen more mediation and informal negotiations, which I think benefits women. I believe that women are better collaborators and negotiators; their inclination is to work out solutions rather than fighting about it. I think it will present opportunities for women to be in those problem-solving roles in both the construction industry and as lawyers on the outside. In addition, the focus on equity, diversity and inclusion has opened more opportunities for women to serve as mediators in particular with respect to construction-related matters.

DENNIS: How do you find balance in being an emerging leader and how do you implement that in your professional and personal goals?

LIVENGOOD: As a mother of six and an

owner of a busy construction company as well as supporting my husband's growing telecommunications company, balance is an everyday goal. I believe that a good routine that is centered around the ability to multitask and prioritize has been the most crucial piece of the puzzle to me and that rolls over into our personal lives and the goals I have set for myself there as well. I must remember that not everything will get done, and tomorrow is a new day.

HEGERTY: I use a multitude of various check-ins, so I don't go down the hole of saying yes to everything. I put a reminder in my phone once a month to determine if I've been accountable to myself. I have to ask myself if I'm also enjoying the things in life, as well. I went to a conference where the speaker said, "Manage energy, not time." I have that message pop up in my phone once a week.

WALKER: I think we have to acknowledge that balance is hard and it's only getting harder. I have two children, who are both out of college, so things are easier for me now. When they were younger, I was trying to balance a full-time career and wanting to be a good mother. One mentor pulled me aside and told me that I had years to excel in my professional career but my children were only going to be small for this one, short period of time – not to miss out on it. It was good advice. So, allow yourself to shift priorities a little bit when it feels overwhelming.

BERGSTRAND: I'd agree that balance is very hard in this industry. No day is ever the same, which is what I love about it. At Saunders, our leaders are often asking if we're spending time working in the business or on the business. As leaders, we need to spend time on the business and find that balance. For me, every year on New Year's Day, I write out a vision board, which includes personal

and professional goals. I also print it out and keep it in my notebook, so I can check in on it regularly and see if I'm meeting my goals. As an emerging leader, I think it's important to keep those goals in the forefront to see if I'm moving toward them, rather than getting sucked into the day-to-day activities.

DENNIS: Why do you think women thrive in construction?

LIVENGOOD: This is a great question and there are a ton of different answers. Women have been breaking down barriers in construction and slowly making their way to the industry every day. Women can bring a diverse and creative thought process to our field. It is an opportunity to set ourselves apart from the rest of the field and advance in our careers in multiple ways. As women we can invoke the change we want to see, by starting the conversations to change the mentality that has surrounded women in construction for so long. We are role models to the next generation of women coming up in the field and each year it can be better for them and that is what I focus on. I will gladly jump the hurdles now to provide an environment in the future that my daughters can work in confidently and boldly!

HEGERTY: Research shows women are better at transformational tasks while men are better at transactional tasks. When you are in a situation that's never been done before, women can come in and conquer those situations because they think and motivate differently. That's where women thrive and I think our leaders see that. Now that they're seeing that, they want more [women].

BERGSTRAND: I've really thrived in this industry because I've been good at managing several deadlines all at once. I



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– Brandi Livengood

also have a deep empathy for employees. I think that, in general, women do have an ability to multitask. That's important when you're managing several sub-contractors on a site. I also try to keep the big picture in mind – such as the new school we are building will help educate future generations.

WALKER: Collaboration and team building are one of the reasons why women excel. They are less focused on "How do I solve this problem," as opposed to "how can I solve this problem by incorporating other people as resources and ideas to get to the end goal?"

DENNIS: Is there a specific moment

when you knew that you wanted to pursue a career in the construction industry? Who or what was your biggest influence?

HEGERTY: This question makes me emotional in a good way. I didn't grow up in construction but I ended up with a degree in construction engineering because I liked math and science and I liked collaborating with people. My first project out of college was a stadium renovation for Iowa State University. I grew up about an hour away from there and I always had the Iowa State Cyclones in my heart. I had the opportunity to be both the field and the project engineer for the renovation, so I was involved with everything from start to finish. On the day when the stadium opened and the football team had their first game, I stood back and realized that I'd been involved with every part of the construction, from checking anchor bolts to seats and installations of every paper towel dispenser. That's when I realized that I could do this career. I go back there every year to attend a game and I'm proud the stadium still looks great 14 years later.

FREEMAN: About 10 years ago, I was teaching CPR and First Aid. I had trained a variety of companies, and after working with a group of construction workers, I saw a need for a more innovative approach to training that would more powerfully emphasize the importance of project safety. After that, I wanted to be more involved in construction and knew I could create an outside-the-box method to enhance not only preparedness for CPR and First Aid, but overall construction job site safety.



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LIVENGOOD: I don't know that there was honestly a moment, my dad has always been in the industry, he worked for HVAC companies my whole life, my mom worked with him in the office for 20 years. When we had the opportunity to start this company, I was working as a domestic violence advocate and I came on to project manager for a few small projects and then decided this is where I needed to be. My dad has always been an amazing leader, and my husband is the boldest man I know, starting his own company and growing it to the place it is now has been such a tremendous accomplishment to them both.

BERGSTRAND: I have degrees in political science and marketing. When I got out of school in 2004, I was looking for any job. My grandfather was a civil engineer who recommended me to a local geo-technical engineering company. When you're 20, you take any job you can get. I took the job and never looked back. I love this industry. It's really dynamic.

When you go see a project that's finished, there's a great sense of pride that happens. I don't know of anyone in construction that doesn't have that pride when they walk into a building when it's finished.

DENNIS: Are there any areas of growth you would like to see in the industry? How can the industry improve to be more inclusive?

WALKER: Inclusivity. I've seen a lot of efforts to increase awareness and offer or mandate training. At industry conferences, that appears a regular part of the agenda now. Here again, there is a generational gap between more junior folks who have a greater appreciation for diversity, equity and inclusion. It may take some time but it will happen.

DENNIS: What are your firms doing to address post-pandemic realities such

as childcare challenges, the Great Resignation, working remotely and increased employee stress?

BERGSTRAND: At Saunders, we're working this year on a concerted mental-health awareness program. What's sad is that the construction industry has one of the highest rates of suicide, when compared to other industries. It also has one of the highest levels of stress, anxiety and substance abuse. We see this as a risk in building our projects safely. We want to make sure that our people and their families are being taken care of. One of the things we've recently launched is an eight-part series, called "Brain Basics," which will help people learn how to manage stress, practice mindfulness, and how to be aware when others are struggling. We're also looking at our benefits program to make sure we're thinking about childcare needs or mental-health benefits for things like anxiety and stress. We really do become families on a job site and in the office. Coming

out of COVID-19, we do understand that many things are different now and they're different for each person.

WALKER: Our focus has been trying to address the ability to offer flexibility in hours and location. Clearly, the pandemic showed us that people could do their jobs from home. However, there are still some who think in the office face-to-face is preferable. We're trying to listen and be more responsive to try and give people what they want. There are times when people need to be face to face but we're looking at what can be done to meet various needs.

DENNIS: Were you mentored in the industry and what did you learn the most from them?

FREEMAN: I had a mentor who was a safety director for a general contractor. He always enforced following through, taking accountability and having

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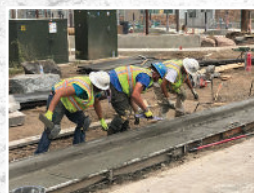
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confidence on project. One of my greatest takeaways from this mentor was to have a more personal approach to leadership of project teams, specifically having a better understanding of craft team members. He taught me to be more diplomatic rather than just going out on the job site and telling people what to do without listening to their needs or concerns.

HEGERTY: I've had multiple mentors and have learned different things from them. However, they consistently gave me the message of "trust yourself" and "ask for more." They told me that I'd make little mistakes along the way but I should trust myself and rebound. Most of my mentors have challenged me to do more than I thought I could.

WALKER: One of my mentors helped me become comfortable with self-promotion, which I think many women generally are not comfortable with. However, if you want more or want to climb the ladder,



I think having different mentors at different stages of your career is important, too, because your skills develop and different doors become open.

- Julie Walker

we have to become comfortable with that. I think having different mentors at different stages of your career is

important, too, because your skills develop and different doors become open. The importance of having good mentors can't be understated.

LIVENGOOD: I have had the honor of working with some amazing companies and people since we started this company. I have received continued support from the leadership at Adolfson and Peterson Construction and Trautman & Shreve. Each of these companies have some of the most amazing and intelligent women working for them and I have learned to be resilient, to listen to the conversations around me, and learn from them. I have learned so much in the time I have worked here, and I am so grateful for the opportunities that I have had. I have also had the opportunity to work with strong women in the past and the current that help me remember why we do what we do each day.

DENNIS: What is one piece of advice

you found most impactful in your career when considering a career in construction?

BERGSTRAND: Focus your energy on being the best version of yourself - don't just try to fit into the crowd.

WALKER: Don't try to do it all or be the best at everything all at once. Have reasonable expectations of yourself.

FREEMAN: A piece of advice I've found most impactful in my career is simple - be both confident and be humble. We all come from different personal and career backgrounds, so you shouldn't let a lack of experience define your career trajectory. Be confident in what you do, but also humble enough to admit mistakes and allow yourself to fail. A lot of times working in a predominately male industry, men are naturally approached as the boss. Don't be offended if it happens, people are always learning.

- Edited by Don Ireland

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