For the last half century, the Alexandria, Va.-based American Subcontractors Association (ASA) has served the construction industry by focusing on business issues affecting subcontractors and specialty trade contractors. And across the U.S., the lack of available, qualified workers is one of the chief concerns among these constituents.

Skilled labor shortages are nothing new, says ASA Georgia’s Executive Director, Vernon Thomas. Even so, his organization is taking a proactive stand on filling the industry’s dwindling talent pipeline—especially since 80 percent of all industrial and commercial construction is performed by subcontractors, ASA officials report.

"ASA Georgia works to identify issues that affect our members. Right now, skilled labor shortages are at the forefront," says Thomas. "Without skilled workers, subcontractors cannot meet the increased demands for construction. Individuals and organizations within the construction industry must work together to meet this challenge.”

**SERVICE AND ADVOCACY**

Thomas, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, knows firsthand what subcontractors contend with day in and day out. In the 1990s, the West Point grad ran a small architectural sheet metal firm. Later, he joined his dad’s professional association management company, Association Headquarters, based in Stockbridge, Ga.
The Georgia native transitioned easily into association management, his military background equipping him with the strategic planning skills necessary for this line of work. It was during this time that he became acquainted with ASA Georgia, one of the company’s clients. ASA’s advocacy of subcontractors’ needs resonated with Thomas. He respected how the group pushed for legislative reforms on such issues as prompt payment, retainerage, surety bonding, lien rights, bidding practices and entitlement to payment.

Impressed by these objectives, he joined ASA Georgia as Assistant Executive Director in 1993, then moved up to his current role as Executive Director in 2000.

COLLABORATION AND SHARED KNOWLEDGE
ASA Georgia, established in 1972, is one of the national trade association’s smaller chapters, with about 50 members currently. But its membership is growing, and with that its resolve to support industry-wide advancements by acting as a clearinghouse of information.

“The ASA Georgia chapter gathers and disseminates information to promote awareness and understanding of key issues,” says Thomas. “Right now, we’re reaching outside of our organization to see how other groups are working to address skilled workforce dilemmas.”

ASA Georgia President, Don Cerlanek, is instrumental in helping him spearhead this effort. Cerlanek is the General Manager of Marek Employment Management Co., a skilled labor staffing provider based in Atlanta. He shares that even if an organization is primed to develop incoming talent, there are still difficulties in recruiting individuals for trades occupations.

Over the last year, members from different groups—including the Construction Education Foundation of Georgia (CEFGA) and Construction Industry Employers Roundtable (CIER)—have collaborated with ASA Georgia and other trade organizations to share ideas and resources on workforce solutions.

“We’re reaching outside of our organization to see how other groups are working to address skilled workforce dilemmas.”

Vernon Thomas, Executive Director, ASA Georgia
“CIER is a collection of pretty much all industry trade associations, and we’ve been at the table from the beginning,” says Cerlanek. “This group facilitates professionals coming together to discuss what’s going on in our state, on issues like workforce shortages.”

Thomas adds, “We all recognize the problem, but what our individual groups don’t know are all the solutions available. We’re not trying to ‘reinvent the wheel.’ Rather, we’re working together to identify existing tools and programs to attract and retain workers more successfully.”

Starting this year, ASA Georgia began coordinating monthly meetings with various entities to learn about initiatives that help increase interest in construction careers.

“The average age of construction workers is now in the mid-50s. If we don’t resolve these recruiting challenges, we’re going to run into the problem of not having experienced professionals around to train new workers,” emphasizes Thomas. He adds, “Our goal is to collect insights from these gatherings, then push out this information to subcontractors through blog posts and e-newsletters.”

TOUR OF KNOWLEDGE
Thomas and his colleagues met with CEFGA in March 2017. This sector-focused organization partners with employers, trade associations, trade unions, government agencies, nonprofits and foundations to create K-12 and adult programs to meet specific workforce needs. Last year, ASA Georgia also attended CEFGA’s Career Expo.

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The American Subcontractors Association represents more than 7,000 member companies within its coast-to-coast network of local and state chapters, which contain both union and non-union firms from virtually every trade specialty.
In February, ASA Georgia members toured the Academy for Advanced Studies facility in McDonough, Ga.

"High schools are pushing students to attend college and pursue white-collar jobs. While on this path, young adults are running up debt and having trouble finding jobs. CEFGA reaches out to kids and school counselors to let them know that construction careers are interesting and rewarding," says Thomas. "CEFGA also recruits workers and trains them in job safety."

In February 2017, ASA Georgia members visited the Academy for Advanced Studies (AAS), a college and career academy in Henry County, Georgia. The mission of AAS is to ensure that students graduate from high school with the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary for college and career success. The program offers specialized career pathways to students from 10 local high schools.

"It was an eye-opening experience at AAS," shares Thomas. "They have an apprenticeship program where individuals at the high school level learn valuable skills that will fast-track their abilities to obtain viable jobs in construction." Learners also have the option to earn high school and college credits simultaneously through dual enrollment in Clayton State University, Gordon State College or Southern Crescent Technical College.

ASA Georgia went to Atlanta Technical College in April 2017 to learn about its program offerings. The institution provides a variety of technical career options, offering instruction on campus, online, and in the evenings or on weekends. There are a variety of specialty, trade-oriented education tracks to choose from, including air conditioning, carpentry, electrical, plumbing and welding.

Earlier this year, the technical college received the Georgia Career Preparedness Award, part of the ACT College and Career Readiness Campaign. ACT recognizes individuals and organizations that are making a positive impact by championing college and career readiness.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

In Georgia, projects statewide are bottlenecking due to talent shortages, says Thomas. "Before the Great Recession, many areas—particularly Atlanta—were growing, and developers tended to overbuild. A lot of businesses went under or downsized to get through the recession. When the economy improved, the companies that survived didn't have the necessary infrastructure to replace workers lost during the economic downturn. Now, there's a lot of pent-up construction waiting to take place—but we lack available, qualified workers," he says.

Part of the challenge stems from misconceptions about construction work.

"Young folks, like millennials, are looking for more purpose in life. We need to do a better job of sharing the intrinsic benefits of building something tangible. If we can paint a picture of accomplishment about having a career in the construction industry, we can start changing perceptions," says Thomas.
He adds, “Currently, the perception is that construction professionals are not well-educated, not paid well, not treated well, and the work may not be safe. But it’s really the antithesis of that! In construction you must have a well-rounded, technical understanding, as well as discipline. You have to be a cut above to be a skilled worker.”

MOVING FORWARD
There’s a heavy demand for skilled workers not just in construction, but also in other industries. “It’s important for subcontractors to understand that we are not just competing amongst ourselves to provide labor for construction trades. We are also competing against manufacturers, blue collar trades and others. Other industries usually seem more glamorous, whereas in construction there’s a stigma that it’s rough, dangerous work outdoors in the harsh elements,” says Thomas.

Cerlanek concurs, adding, “Over the long haul, manufacturers have done well in promoting their jobs in high schools, colleges, trade schools and vocational schools. Construction, not so much.”

Cerlanek says that when he joined ASA Georgia about five years ago, shop and trade-type programs were basically nonexistent in the local high schools. In fact, there wasn’t a single shop class offered in Atlanta. “Nowadays, education stakeholders are actively working to get these programs into schools. There’s definitely a widespread movement toward training, developing and attracting people toward the industry.”

He continues, “There also needs to be more employer participation in this effort. Associations like ours can promote awareness, but it’s the employers that have to hire these people. Getting involved in ASA Georgia helps to maintain awareness of these types of key issues. Through a spirit of sharing and collaboration, we work to advance the entire industry.”

Author Bio: Erica Bender, a Texas-based freelance writer and communications consultant, has worked with clients in the AEC industry for 14 years.

EARLY CAREER AWARENESS INSPIRES FUTURE GENERATIONS

With workforce shortages across the country, now is the time to promote construction careers in every state. One initiative designed to increase public awareness and inspire the next generation of industry professionals is Build Your Future (BYF), sponsored by the National Center for Construction Education and Research.

BYF offers a variety of resources to enhance the industry’s recruitment, training, placement and retention efforts. This includes a GoPro video series designed to generate enthusiasm for—and dispel common misconceptions about—construction careers. Geared toward students, parents, educators and others, many of these videos contain insightful personal testimonies from industry professionals.

To learn more, visit http://byf.org/videos.