



Train Them Up

Hiring teens introduces them to the benefits of construction jobs

By Kevin Klott



Hard hats are on and safety vests gleam as a construction crew assembles for another day's work. Among them are eager and energetic teenagers, ready to learn the ropes of the construction trade.

This is an ideal scenario for Matt Ketchum, a seasoned Southcentral Alaska contractor who believes in the power of youth and the potential they bring to the table. For him, hiring teens isn't just about filling positions; it's about investing in the future of the construction industry.

"I've always felt that our industry tends to look for experienced individuals," says Ketchum, owner of K&H Civil Constructors in Wasilla. "But someone has to train [new workers], and it's our responsibility to give young people a chance."

Ketchum got his start in construction as a teenager while attending Dimond

High School in Anchorage. His football coach got him a job working in home construction. This opportunity led him down a path he hadn't initially considered, but the allure of the industry's excitement and the promise of personal and financial rewards has kept him hooked ever since.

Nearly forty years later, he's giving back by doing more to advocate for young workers.

"Personally, I like hiring younger individuals because they come with a clean slate," he says. "You can teach them from the ground up, without having to unlearn any bad habits."

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Among the teens he's hired is Glenn Steer, who started with Ketchum's company at the age of 17. Like many

of his peers, Steer had initially been uncertain about his career path. But the hands-on experience and camaraderie he found on the construction site changed everything.

"At a young age, working in the construction industry opened my eyes to so many new and exciting career opportunities," Steer says. "I realized there were so many sectors of civil construction that could be applicable to my interests and skill sets."

As Steer delved deeper into the world of construction, he found himself mentored by seasoned professionals who not only taught him the ins and outs of the trade but also imparted invaluable lessons about the lifestyle of working in construction and the importance of industry-wide safety.

"My mentors in the construction industry showed me how a healthy work/

Hiring teens can provide them with valuable skills and opportunities for growth while helping to address the industry's need for new talent.

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"At a young age, working in the construction industry opened my eyes to so many new and exciting career opportunities."

Glenn Steer



Above: Kolten Ketchum, son of Matt Ketchum, says working as a teen taught him valuable lessons, including that every person on a job site is important.
Photo provided by Kolten Ketchum

Left: Providing an opportunity for teens to work is a great way to introduce young people to the industry, says Matt Ketchum, owner of K&H Civil Constructors.
Photo provided by Matt Ketchum

life balance can be maintained while providing for a family and enjoying time off," he says. "Seeing this helped me realize that the future was bright and that more people needed to be educated on the construction industry and its benefits."

DEVELOPING A VALUABLE SKILLSET

Through his on-site experiences, Steer developed a variety of skills, from customer relations to time management, leadership, and the completion of diligent work. These skills not only made him an asset to K&H Civil Constructors but have given him a competitive edge in future job opportunities.

"My experience in the construction industry at a young age gave me an advantage over other qualified

candidates during the job application process," Steer says.

Initially, as a young worker, he faced a lack of experience, a hurdle that he overcame with the guidance of others.

"I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by great mentors," he says.

Steer connected with Ketchum in middle school: Ketchum gave a presentation during one of Steer's eighth-grade classes at Teeland Middle School in Wasilla.

He's now a 21-year-old college student pursuing a degree in mining engineering at the Colorado School of Mines. He, too, is eager to pay it forward, offering advice to other young individuals considering a career in construction.

"Start with summer jobs," Steer suggests. "It is crazy how much you learn by being around competent leaders,

operators, surveyors, and human resource staff. From there you will start to realize what you like/dislike about different jobs and industries and can try something new in the future."

EVERY ROLE IS IMPORTANT

Kolten Ketchum grew up in the construction industry alongside his father, Matt. One of the first projects Kolten worked on was a small roundabout in a highly congested area that his friends and classmates used every day on their way to and from school. He says he was proud to have worked on a project that he knew directly affected his peers and made their traffic experience more efficient.

Being a teen worker on construction projects helped Kolten appreciate the work

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*Matt Ketchum
Owner, K&H Civil Constructors*

that every member of a crew is responsible for. He recognized the diversity of roles, from flaggers enduring long shifts to laborers performing backbreaking work and the operators' precision in completing their tasks. Despite not being able to engage in certain high-risk operations as a young worker, Kolten learned that every role on a job site is important.

"I learned to respect every worker that comes to work to man a shovel or a rake all day long," he says.

While Kolten acknowledged the sacrifices of missing out on typical teenage activities during summers spent working, he found solace in knowing that his efforts would benefit his future. He's now a project engineer for Granite Construction.

"As I got more experience and more skills under my belt, I realized that



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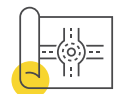
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Glenn Steer, then age 18, stands in front of a loader while on duty for K&H Civil Constructors during the 2021 construction season. Steer is now a mining engineering student at the Colorado School of Mines. Photo provided by Glenn Steer



asking questions first is never dumb. It's always more efficient," he says. "The older workers have done it all. They've done it wrong; they've done it right. The most valuable resource that you have as a young construction worker is the experience of others around you."

WORTH THE RISK

Despite the risks associated with hiring minors, Matt Ketchum encourages fellow contractors to consider the benefits of giving young people a chance in the industry.

"Companies are managing risk all the time," he says. "While there are some risks with hiring someone under the age of 18, the benefits outweigh the risk."

Ketchum has presented at many high schools in Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District about the construction industry and its opportunities. Kids like the presentations and are motivated by the financial rewards.

"Inevitably, a half dozen kids come up to me to ask where they can get a job," he says.

AGC Alaska has more than 250 general contractor members and more than 300 associate members. If half of AGC members hired a young person just for the summer, Ketchum suggested, that would be more than 250 new young people in the industry.

"Many may choose the trades, business administration, project management, or another career path, but the impact year over year could be huge."

Ketchum and his team made sure that their young recruits received the necessary training, both in terms of safety procedures and the intricacies of the job itself. For them, it was a hands-on approach, with learning happening in real-time on the construction site.

"Training primarily happens on the job," says Ketchum. "We provide them with the basics and then let them learn as they go."

Despite the restrictions involved in

hiring minors under the Alaska Child Labor Law, which requires all minors 14-16 to have a work permit on file with the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Ketchum believes the benefits far outweighed the challenges. This approach not only addresses the industry's need for new talent, but it also provides young people with valuable skills and opportunities for growth.

While 17-year-olds do not need an approved permit, it must still be submitted to the Department of Labor. Ketchum emphasizes that his focus is to encourage AGC members to hire more 16 and 17-year-olds.

"I've seen firsthand the impact that exposure to the industry can have," says Ketchum. "Giving young people a chance can change their lives and ours." 🧢

Kevin Klott is a freelance writer who lives in Anchorage.