

# Construction Industry Growth = Increased Safety Risks



John Reilly

by John Reilly, President, Peak Construction

It's the busiest construction season the industry has seen since the recession. Developers and end-users alike are starting projects all over Chicagoland which are ramping-up schedules, material orders, and, most importantly, the need for labor. It is an interesting time as we transition out of a contracting market and into growth. Companies that struggled to weather the storm of the recession are now faced with the increased risk of biting off more than they can chew. The trades, which once offered an abundant workforce, are leaving employers and union halls scrambling to fill the void, similar to what IT and other technology-based occupations were like 15-plus years ago. All of these factors combine, resulting in increased construction job site safety risks. And there's nothing more dangerous to a business than a safety incident on the job site. The risks associated with construction safety incidents can bring a busy and profitable business to its knees – even one that was successful in surviving the recession.

These increased safety risks are the direct result of a construction industry labor pool that has been forced to react to extreme market changes over the last eight years due to the extent of the Great Recession, and now the recent rate of recovery. The construction industry experienced an exodus of experienced employees / managers / workers who exited the industry for good during the recession. Those that exited and returned now need to be brought up to speed with industry and company specific safety

requirements /advancements implemented over the last eight years while, at the same time, coming to grips with their own reduced capacity and the necessity to work smarter, not harder. Inexperienced workers are also entering the workforce to fill the void leading to increased risks associated with subcontractor crews that may be less informed of both their company's and the general contractor's specific safety plans and procedures. Unfortunately, even the smallest oversight or moment of ignorance can lead to an unsafe working environment with the potential to lead to devastating results.

In "Business Insurance's" November 9, 2014, article, "Skilled Construction Worker Shortage is Now a Top Risk Management Concern," Rick Keegan, president of the construction business unit at Hartford, Connecticut-based property/ casualty insurer Travelers Cos. Inc., contributed stating that, "...the inexperienced workers some companies have been forced to hire are less familiar with common construction site hazards and thus much more likely to put themselves or others in positions of danger."

To start reducing these risks, everyone on the job needs to take an active role. Trades, unions and general contractors must renew their focus and enforce strict adherence to company and project specific safety plans. Pro-active management of not only the work being performed, but the workers performing the work must be implemented while the labor pool catches up to the demands that the market has placed on the industry. ■