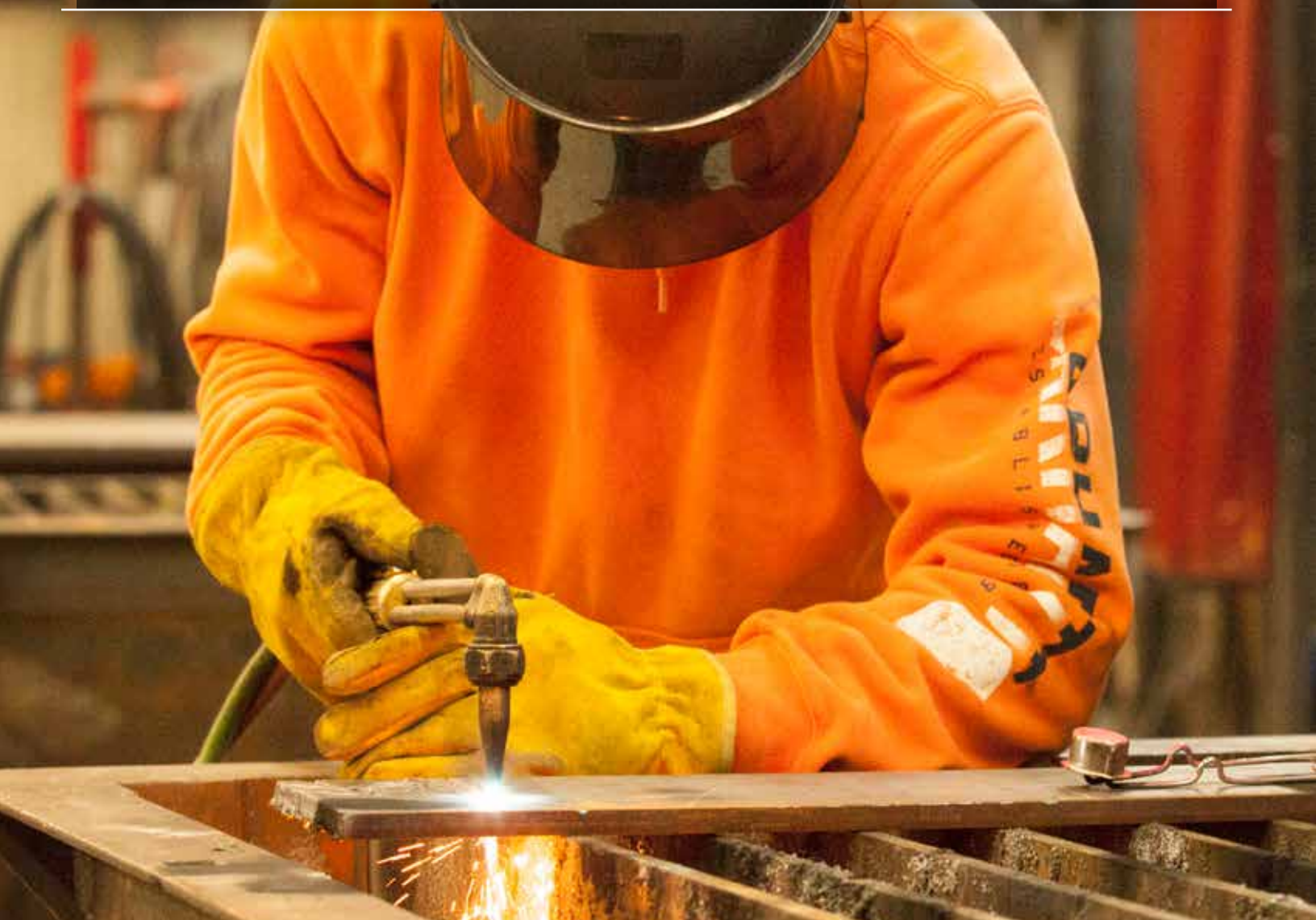


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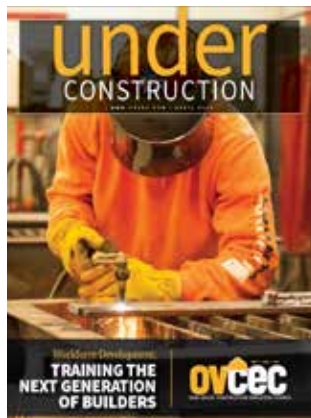
Workforce Development:
**TRAINING THE
NEXT GENERATION
OF BUILDERS**

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Cover Story

Workforce Development:
Training the Next Generation
of Builders

MISSION

The Ohio Valley Construction Employers Council is the unified voice of best-in-class contractors, dedicated to providing quality and value, using the most professional, highly skilled workforce.

VISION

Elevating the construction industry to the highest standards, providing next generation opportunities, and building a more prosperous community.

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FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Eric Starkowicz

The foundation of any thriving industry is its people. In construction, this is especially true. The hands that build our bridges, schools, hospitals, and infrastructure belong to skilled professionals whose training and dedication ensure the success of every project. As we look to the future, workforce development is not just a priority—it is a necessity.

In this edition of *Under Construction*, we explore the crucial role of workforce development in shaping the next generation of builders. Project BEST has been at the forefront of this effort, working alongside contractors, trade unions, and educators to create pathways into the construction industry. Their commitment to apprenticeship programs and hands-on training is equipping workers with the skills necessary to build lasting, meaningful careers.

Through collaborations with high schools, community colleges, and trade programs, we see firsthand how early exposure to the trades can inspire students to pursue careers in construction. Programs at institutions such as Steubenville High School, Wheeling Park High School, John Marshall High School, and

West Virginia Northern Community College provide students with opportunities to develop technical skills, gain real-world experience, and ultimately enter a workforce that is in high demand.

Beyond individual career growth, workforce development is a driving force behind economic prosperity. A well-trained workforce strengthens our local economy, supports businesses, and ensures that our region remains competitive in an evolving marketplace. When we invest in workforce development, we invest in our future.

Additionally, as the industry evolves, so too does the technology and equipment that protect our workers. This issue also explores the transition from traditional hard hats to helmets—an important advancement in safety that underscores our commitment to protecting the workforce we are building.

As an industry, we have a responsibility to nurture and support those who will carry our work forward. By providing training, resources, and opportunities, we are not only addressing today's labor shortages, but also laying the groundwork for a stronger, more resilient construction workforce for years to come.

Thank you for your continued dedication to building our industry, our communities, and our future.

Project BEST: RESHAPING THE REGION'S WORKFORCE



In the Upper Ohio Valley, a transformative movement is underway in the construction industry. As demand for skilled tradespeople surges, Project BEST—the area’s labor-management organization representing both union contractors and building trade unions—is emerging as a vital connector between education, training, and the construction industry—ensuring that tomorrow’s workforce is ready for today’s challenges.

Part of Project BEST’s mission is to help create a robust, well-trained labor force by uniting local high schools, trade schools, community colleges, unions, contractors, and businesses. By actively engaging with guidance counselors and school administrators, Project BEST helps dispel the myth that college is the only path to success. Instead, it showcases rewarding career opportunities in the trades, offering competitive wages, benefits, and lifelong stability.

“Our goal is to let people know they are needed and that great, well-paying jobs are available right here in the Valley,” explains Nathan Butts, Executive Director of Project BEST. “We work to open eyes—especially for those who might not be interested in a traditional college route—by connecting them with apprenticeship programs and hands-on training that set them up for success.”

Through initiatives like regional career fairs, live demonstrations, and one-on-one presentations in schools, Project BEST not only educates prospective tradespeople, but also strengthens the network of union contractors. This collaboration ensures that when major projects arise, the local workforce is the first choice—helping contractors deliver projects safely, efficiently, and with high-quality craftsmanship.

In a region facing the retirement of many seasoned professionals, Project BEST is more than an organization—it’s a community commitment to building a sustainable future through skilled labor.

FOLLOW THE ROAD TO SUCCESS



Connecting Students to Career Opportunities

For many young people, college has long been presented as the default path to success. However, with rising tuition costs and an increasing demand for skilled labor, Project BEST is actively working to change that narrative. By engaging directly with high schools, trade schools, and community colleges, the organization is making sure students and educators alike understand the opportunities available in the construction trades.

“Not everyone wants to go to college, and we’re here to make sure they know there’s another path—one that offers great pay, benefits, and long-term stability,” offers Butts.

One of Project BEST’s most impactful initiatives is its outreach to high school guidance counselors and principals. By providing them with up-to-date information about careers in the trades, they can help direct students toward apprenticeship programs that can lead to lifelong careers.

A Strong Network for Workforce Growth

Workforce development doesn’t stop at recruitment—it requires ongoing training and education. Project BEST has positioned itself as a bridge between aspiring tradespeople and the training programs that can help them succeed.

“We support and help market safety courses, apprenticeship programs, and other developmental measures,” Butts continues. “In a way, we’re like a third-party marketing arm for apprenticeships and unions, helping to connect interested students, parents, and career changers with the right opportunities.”

One of the most significant tools in Project BEST’s arsenal is its newly developed apprenticeship guidebook. This resource provides detailed information about each trade, including what the job entails, how to get involved, and who to contact for more information. By centralizing this information, Project BEST makes it easier for prospective apprentices to find the right path for their interests and skills.

continued on next page

Additionally, partnerships with educational institutions have expanded opportunities for those entering the trades. For instance, an agreement with West Virginia Northern Community College allows apprenticeship graduates to apply their training toward an associate's degree. A similar initiative is in the works with Belmont College, aiming to train estimators, project managers, and civil construction specialists—key roles that contractors have identified as critical needs in the region.

Industry Collaboration: A Unified Effort

While Project BEST plays a key role in workforce development, it is also a part of a broader network that includes unions, contractors, educational institutions, businesses, and end users. By maintaining a strong network of stakeholders, Project BEST helps ensure that when new projects arise, they are staffed by well-trained, highly skilled workers.

“We’re working to keep our network as big as possible,” Butts adds. “That means making sure contractors—whether local or not—know who we are, what we do, and how to work with union-friendly businesses. It’s about keeping that connection strong so that when big projects happen in the region, our local workforce is the first choice.”

A Future Built on Skilled Labor

Looking ahead, Project BEST remains committed to strengthening the region’s workforce. As older generations of tradespeople retire, there is an urgent need to fill those positions with a new generation of skilled workers. By reaching students early, providing clear pathways into the trades, and supporting high-quality training programs, Project BEST is ensuring that the construction industry in the Ohio Valley remains strong for years to come.

For anyone interested in learning more about careers in the trades or getting involved with an apprenticeship program, Project BEST stands ready to help. “The opportunities are here,” Butts says. “We just need to make sure people know about them.”

As the Ohio Valley continues to grow and develop, Project BEST is proving that a strong workforce is the foundation of a thriving community. Through collaboration, education, and training, they are building not just careers—but a stronger future for the entire region.

“Through workforce development initiatives, educational partnerships, and apprenticeship programs, Project BEST is working to ensure that young people and career changers alike have access to well-paying, stable jobs in the trades.”

—Michael Leo, President/CEO, JD&E Construction Services



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Apprenticeship Programs:

BUILDING CAREERS, ONE TRADE AT A TIME

Across the Upper Ohio Valley, union apprenticeship programs are seeing a steady increase in interest as more young people and career-changers recognize the value of union apprenticeships. These programs set the standard for career training in the construction trades. They are recognized for their rigor and comprehensive nature, while offering a unique blend of classroom learning and hands-on experience—allowing apprentices to earn while they learn and gain industry certifications along the way.

Enrollment trends in the Joint Apprenticeship and Training Center (JATC) initiatives are looking promising, according to program officials. Stephen Sipos, Apprenticeship Coordinator, Ironworkers Local 549 states, “The Ironworkers Local 549 JATC provides local contractors with skilled local labor. Through our three-year program, our Apprentices are building on their skillset which provides them with a great career.” He added, “The local high schools and vocational programs have done a great job prepping their students for a future in the building trades.”



Union apprenticeships typically span three to five years, providing in-depth training that covers every facet of a trade—from using state-of-the-art tools and equipment to mastering essential safety protocols. This structured approach not only enhances technical skills, but also instills a sense of discipline and professionalism that benefits both the worker and the contracting companies that hire them.

Another JATC leader, Eric King, Apprenticeship Coordinator, West Virginia Appalachian Laborers, explained, “Our goal is to provide the most certified and productive workforce in the market. We have been and will continue to recruit across the state, utilizing our apprenticeship to produce great union workers. We pride ourselves in our training and skills that we expect to be demonstrated on jobsites.”



Available Resources

In short, the commitment to structured, high-quality training is what sets these programs apart and drives the future of our industry. For aspiring tradespeople, the pathway is clear. Local unions and organizations offer a wealth of resources:

- **Comprehensive Guidebooks:** Detailed breakdowns of each trade, with step-by-step instructions on how to apply, the requirements for entry, and contact information for apprenticeship coordinators.
- **Direct Outreach:** Programs that bring industry professionals into schools and community centers to share real-world experiences and answer questions.
- **Collaborative Efforts:** Partnerships between unions, contractors, and educational institutions ensure that the training remains current with industry standards.

- **Websites:** Information can be found on the sites of individual area unions; statewide building trades, like the West Virginia Building Trades; and the Ohio Building Trades, as well as Project BEST.

Benefitting Both Region and Industry

The presence of highly trained, union-certified workers translates into safer jobsites and more efficient project execution—a benefit that resonates throughout the entire region. With apprenticeships forging a clear path to professional mastery, the future of construction in the Ohio Valley is being built one skilled trade at a time.

Schools in Action: **BUILDING FUTURES THROUGH EDUCATION**



In the Upper Ohio Valley, educational institutions are partnering with the construction industry to create pathways to success for young people. From high school workshops to college-level training programs, these collaborations are opening doors to promising careers in the trades.

Local community colleges are playing a significant role. West Virginia Northern Community College has forged partnerships with local unions, enabling apprentices to apply their on-the-job training toward an associate's degree. Similarly, Belmont College is developing programs focused on trades and construction management, targeting the growing need for skilled estimators, project managers, and civil construction specialists.

High schools are also adding programs. At Steubenville High School, their carpentry program is a shining example of hands-on learning. As detailed in a recent *Weirton Daily Times* article, students in the program engage in practical carpentry projects, gaining real-world skills that prepare them for immediate entry into the workforce. The program's success not only fosters technical expertise, but also ignites a passion for craftsmanship among its students. In the article, teacher Jacob Hudson explained, "There's a shortage of workers in trades and a lot of people are getting older and getting ready to retire, so they need people to take over. College isn't for everyone and there will always be a need for trades."

Wheeling Park High School has developed a comprehensive plan which combines the academic and the technical programs. The school is at the forefront of workforce development in the Ohio Valley. Their robust Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs—including construction, welding, and machine tool technology—are enhanced by expanding partnerships with local private entities.

"By exposing our students to real-world applications of CTE, we're not just teaching them skills—we're laying the foundation for a stronger workforce in the Ohio Valley," said David R. Croft, Ohio County Board of Education President.

The Office of Career Services (OCS) is actively introducing more middle school students to these opportunities through guided tours and dedicated counseling. "These initiatives ensure that students gain practical insights early, helping to build a pipeline of skilled professionals for the region," detailed Dr. Kim Miller, Superintendent of Ohio County Schools.

Rick Jones, Vice Superintendent of Ohio County Schools added, "Our partnership with local industry and proactive steps

by OCS are vital in guiding young minds toward successful careers in the construction industry."

John Marshall High School is another key player, integrating technical skills into its curriculum to ensure students are prepared for the challenges of modern construction. By embedding career and technical education into their programs, these schools are not only providing valuable skills training, but also creating a direct pipeline to apprenticeship programs and long-term employment in the trades.

These educational initiatives demonstrate a shared commitment to workforce development—a recognition that when students are given the tools and training they need, they can build a brighter future for themselves and the region. As local leaders, educators, and industry professionals come together, the impact is clear: a stronger, more resilient labor force ready to meet the demands of an evolving construction industry.



The Economic Impact: **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT'S BROADER IMPLICATIONS**

Recent data from industry sources and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that the construction sectors in both West Virginia and Ohio have been steadily expanding over the past several years.



Construction in the Upper Ohio Valley is on a growth trajectory, driven by a wave of significant development initiatives reshaping the industry landscape. This expansion is not only creating more jobs, but also emphasizing the need for enhanced training programs to equip the workforce with the necessary skills for sustainable long-term growth.

Significant investments in infrastructure and urban renewal are fueling a rapid surge in construction jobs. By investing in training programs, apprenticeship opportunities, and partnerships between industry and education, the region is experiencing measurable benefits.

Employment Growth

According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, construction sectors in West Virginia and Ohio have shown positive trends. As of December 2024, employment in the construction industry reached approximately 35,600 individuals in WV, and 252,700 in OH, both reflecting a steady growth over recent years. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, All Employees: Construction in West Virginia and Ohio, retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; March 24, 2025).

As opportunities multiply, there's a growing imperative to equip this expanding workforce with modern skills through enhanced training programs and apprenticeships. This proactive approach not only meets the immediate demand for skilled labor, but also lays the foundation for sustainable long-term growth.

According to the Ohio Labor Market Information, strategic investments in training and education have bolstered the state's economic activity, benefiting local businesses and communities.

The Ohio Department of Development states on its website that availability of a reliable, skilled workforce is one of the most important factors for businesses planning to expand or relocate.

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Regional Economic Benefits

Investments in workforce development, particularly in apprenticeship programs, yield significant economic returns. In the Ohio Valley, a collaborative effort between local high schools, community colleges, trade unions, contractors, businesses, industry leaders, and organizations like Project BEST is strengthening the region's skilled workforce. High school Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs provide students with hands-on experience, while community colleges offer specialized training tailored to industry demands.

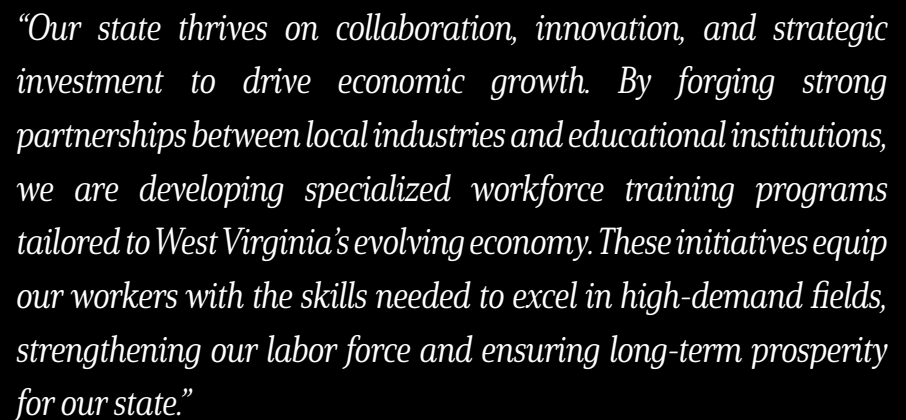
Trade unions and contractors continue to expand apprenticeship opportunities, ensuring workers receive high-quality training while earning a competitive wage. Businesses and end users play a vital role by investing in and supporting these workforce initiatives, ensuring a steady pipeline of skilled professionals. Together, these partnerships are addressing labor shortages, boosting regional economic growth, and building a stronger future for the Ohio Valley.

Leadership and Industry Perspectives

State and industry leadership recognize the importance of workforce development in driving economic growth.

In the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation 2024 Annual Report, Ohio Governor, Mike DeWine declares, "We have continued to focus on creating opportunities for Ohioans to earn the skills and credentials they need to secure in-demand jobs and succeed."

The report states Ohio continues to promote apprenticeships as pathways to high-paying jobs. Pre-apprenticeship programs teach basic technical and job-readiness skills for a designated apprentice occupation or sector to prepare students for a formal Registered Apprenticeship training program.



"Our state thrives on collaboration, innovation, and strategic investment to drive economic growth. By forging strong partnerships between local industries and educational institutions, we are developing specialized workforce training programs tailored to West Virginia's evolving economy. These initiatives equip our workers with the skills needed to excel in high-demand fields, strengthening our labor force and ensuring long-term prosperity for our state."

—West Virginia Department of Economic Development Executive Director, Mike Graney

Josh Jefferson, President and CEO of the Regional Economic Development Partnership (RED), highlighted the role of a skilled workforce in attracting businesses to the area. He noted, "A well-trained workforce is essential for sustainable economic growth in our communities."

These insights underscore the critical role of workforce development initiatives in shaping the economic future of the Ohio Valley region.

West Virginia Construction Employment



- **Growth Drivers:** In West Virginia, rising investments in infrastructure, including road improvements, bridge repairs, and industrial projects, have fueled an increase in construction employment. This growth is part of a broader effort to modernize aging infrastructure and support economic development in the state.
- **Employment Trends:** Employment in the construction sector has seen a noticeable uptick, reflecting an overall healthy trend in regional development. This growth is creating a demand for a skilled workforce that can manage complex projects, operate modern construction equipment, and adhere to evolving safety standards.

Ohio Construction Employment



- **Growth Drivers:** Ohio's construction industry benefits from robust residential and commercial development, particularly in urban centers and revitalizing areas. The state's diversified economy and proactive economic development initiatives have also contributed to the steady growth of construction jobs.
- **Employment Trends:** Similar to West Virginia, Ohio has experienced significant job gains in construction, spurred by large-scale projects and an ongoing need to update and expand infrastructure. This sustained growth is leading to a higher demand for skilled labor and specialized training programs.



PPE, IT AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE!

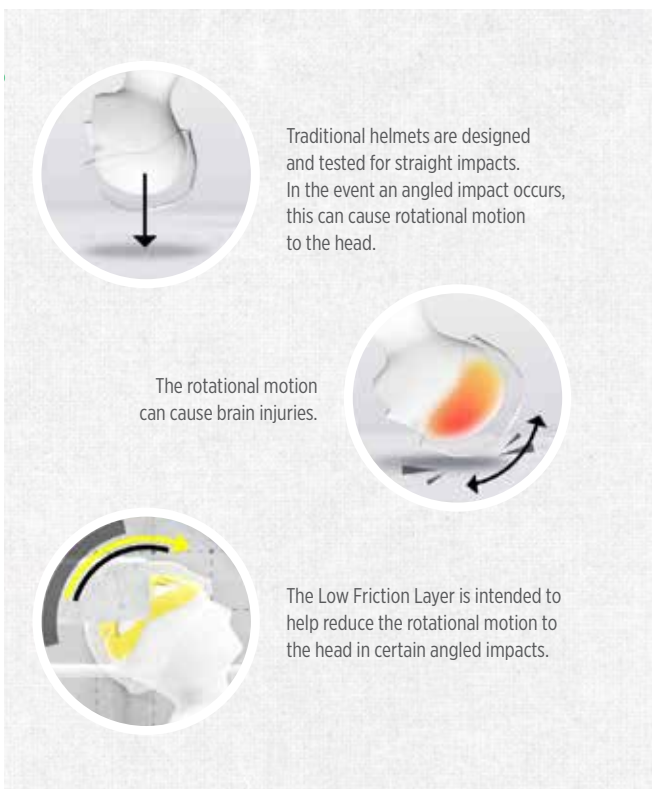
In recent years, personal protective equipment (PPE) has undergone astounding advancements. Once considered a basic safety necessity, modern PPE now boasts innovative designs, advanced materials, and integrated technologies that not only protect workers, but also enhance their efficiency and comfort. Today, industries—especially construction—rely on cutting-edge PPE to safeguard employees from ever-evolving hazards on the jobsite.

Rethinking PPE Selection. You Need an Assessment!

PPE remains a cornerstone of workplace safety. In construction, common gear includes head protection, hearing and respiratory protection, hand and eye protection, fall protection, high-visibility clothing, and electrical protection. However, selecting the right equipment is more than choosing items off a shelf. Conducting a PPE hazard assessment is critical to identify job-specific risks and determine the proper protection. For example, while an MSA helmet with ventilation might be ideal on a typical construction site, it could be disastrous for electrical work. A thorough hazard assessment ensures that workers receive the most suitable and innovative protection available.

Innovations in Head Protection

One significant advancement is the MSA V-Gard H2 Helmet, now equipped with the Mips® system. This interior suspension system is designed to reduce rotational motion—a major contributor to traumatic brain injuries (TBI) from angled impacts. By allowing the helmet to move slightly relative to the head upon impact, the Mips® system redirects energy and minimizes dangerous rotational forces. Given that falls from heights are a leading cause of injury in construction, this technology is a welcome development that enhances worker safety.



MSA Industrial Head Protection Solutions Featuring the Mips® System



Enhanced Design for Comfort and Functionality

Modern PPE is designed with comfort in mind. Lighter, more flexible materials mean that equipment is less cumbersome, allowing for extended wear without sacrificing protection. This focus on ergonomics ensures that PPE not only meets safety standards, but also supports workers' productivity throughout long shifts.

Advanced Material Technologies

Innovations in material science have ushered in a new era of PPE. Graphene-infused gloves and jackets, for example, offer exceptional strength and protection against cuts, abrasions, and electrical hazards, all while remaining lightweight. Other material advancements include:

- **Nanofibers:** These ultra-thin fibers effectively block pathogens and hazardous materials while keeping PPE breathable.
- **Reinforced Polymers:** Stronger and more durable than conventional plastics, these polymers enhance the overall performance and longevity of PPE.
- **Antimicrobial Coatings:** Applied to gloves, masks, and gowns, these coatings reduce the spread of bacteria and viruses.
- **Multilayer Fabrics:** Designed with layers that provide flame resistance, thermal insulation, and moisture management, these fabrics offer comprehensive protection in extreme conditions.

Smart Wearables and IoT Integration

Perhaps the most revolutionary changes in PPE come from the integration of smart wearables and the Internet of Things (IoT). Modern safety gear now features devices that can monitor environmental conditions and worker vitals in real time. For example, smart helmets equipped with sensors can detect hazardous gases and extreme temperatures, instantly alerting the wearer and their team. Similarly, advanced safety vests now incorporate GPS tracking, vital sign monitoring, and fall detection to quickly notify supervisors and emergency services in case of an accident. These connected devices not only improve safety, but also streamline emergency response, ensuring workers receive immediate assistance when needed.

continued on next page

Augmented Reality for Training and Hazard Recognition

Augmented Reality (AR) technology is transforming PPE by enhancing on-the-job training. Through AR, construction workers can experience simulated hazardous scenarios in a controlled virtual environment. This immersive training helps workers develop critical response skills without the risks associated with real-world exposure, making hazard recognition and emergency response more intuitive and effective.

Revolutionary Updates Across PPE Categories

- **Head Protection:** The evolution from traditional hard hats to modern safety helmets—crafted from carbon fiber, Kevlar, or glass fiber—reflects significant technological progress. Integrated sensors, cameras, and AR displays in helmets further enhance safety.
- **Gloves:** Touchscreen-compatible, smart gloves now use conductive materials to allow seamless interaction with digital devices, while improved designs reduce hand fatigue and boost protection.
- **Footwear:** Smart boots equipped with sensors detect falls or shocks, providing real-time alerts and location tracking. These innovations are particularly beneficial for lone workers or those in remote areas.
- **Eye Protection:** AR safety goggles overlay critical information and safety alerts onto the worker's field of vision, reducing distractions and enhancing situational awareness.
- **Clothing:** Smart vests monitor vital signs like core body temperature and heart rate. High-visibility safety vests now utilize phosphorescence technology to enhance luminescence during nighttime work, further increasing safety.



As PPE continues to evolve, the focus remains clear: to provide workers with innovative, comfortable, and highly effective safety solutions. These not only reduce the risk of injury but also contribute to higher productivity and improved overall job satisfaction. With technology and material science driving continuous improvements, the future of PPE is set to redefine workplace safety standards.

In conclusion, the modern PPE landscape is characterized by groundbreaking innovations that transform traditional safety gear into smart, efficient, and comfortable equipment. These developments are crucial for industries like construction, where worker safety is paramount, and they represent a significant leap forward in the ongoing quest to protect and empower our workforce.



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Ron Suhar is a Risk Management Consultant at Marsh McLennan Agency (MMA) where their construction practice provides tailored risk management solutions that address the complexities of the construction industry. With over 19 years of insurance experience, Ron demonstrates value to clients by understanding the unique challenges faced by the construction industry. He assists clients with claims and risk management, ensuring they receive the support needed to reach their risk and financial goals. By combining his expertise with MMA's extensive resources, Ron is committed to helping clients in the construction industry mitigate risks and achieve sustainable growth.

To contact Ron, email: Ron.Suhar@MarshMMA.com or call 614.215.8017.

► The Ohio Valley Is Getting More with Verdantas

Verdantas, a national firm with a strong presence in the Ohio Valley, has recently undergone significant acquisitions. These strategic moves have brought together two respected companies: CT Consultants with an office in Wheeling, WV and Hull and Associates with an office in St. Clairsville, OH. The result is a unified team with significant years of industry experience.

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MEMBERS IN THE NEWS

1

Kalkreuth Roofing & Sheet Metal, Inc. hosted the Wheeling chapter of National Women in Roofing for a tour and luncheon at their newly constructed Bridgeville, PA office. The facility includes 2,500 sf of office space with a 7,500 sf attached warehouse.

2

OVCEC proudly celebrated Women in Construction Week in March, highlighting the incredible contributions of women in our industry. A special thank you to our **Women in Construction Committee** and **Hilti** for hosting a Small Tools Demonstration lunch & learn. This hands-on event provided valuable insights into the latest tools and technology, reinforcing the importance of innovation and skill development in construction.

3

OVCEC and **Project Best** joined forces to help improve the environment through the Adopt-a-Highway program. In 2022, OVCEC adopted the stretch of Mount de Chantal Road from the OVCEC to Kroger. The litter control program is through the West Virginia Department of Transportation, Division of Highways, and Department of Environmental Protection. Together, we are taking steps towards a cleaner and greener future and making a meaningful difference in our communities.

4

Wheeling-based **McKinley Architecture and Engineering** and Pittsburgh architecture firm MCF Architecture announced their strategic merger. McKinley and MCF discovered over a two-year “courtship” that this merger married two firms in a way that accentuated each other’s strengths and bolstered both sides in a way that will fortify them for a long time to come.

5

The highly anticipated Guntry West Virginia officially cut the ribbon in early March on the new shooting range facility now open at The Highlands, in Triadelphia, WV. Guntry’s original location is in Owings Mills, Maryland. The new location in Ohio County, constructed by **JD&E Construction Services**, is their second facility.

6

OVCEC served as the official jersey sponsor for the **Wheeling Nailers’** Pittsburgh Penguins Night. Pictured are Penguins legend and 2-time Stanley Cup Champion, Kevin Stevens and OVCEC Executive Director, Eric Starkowicz, showcasing the OVCEC-sponsored game jersey.

7

Project BEST donated \$40,000 to **WVU Medicine** for the new Robert Sonneborn Family WVU Children’s Outpatient Center on WVU Medicine Wheeling Hospital’s campus.

8

Cattrell Companies, Inc. announced Brad Burkhead as its new President / CEO.

9

OVCEC kicked off Safe Digging Month with a four-hour Excavation Safety Training session presented by our safety consultant, **Joe Safety**. The session covered essential safety protocols to help workers and ensure compliance with excavation regulations, enhancing job site safety and preventing costly mistakes.

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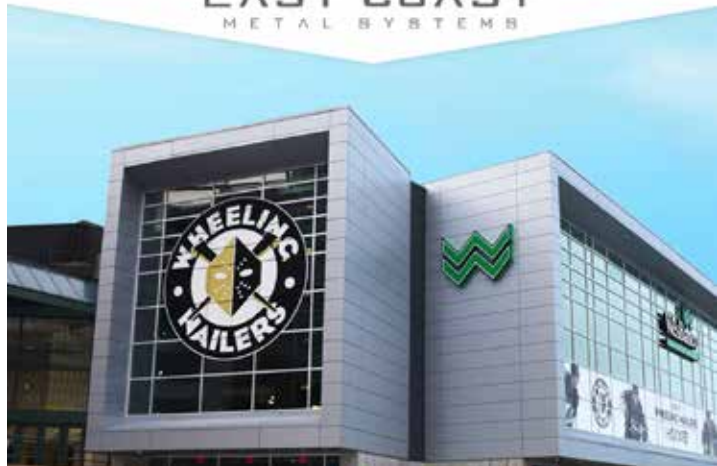
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