



FLICK OF A SWITCH

Making a change and pursuing a new career path can be daunting, but as industries become more digitally led, transferable skills mean people can make the transition far more easily. **Jamie Harris** investigates how open the construction industry is to new recruits with little or no sector-specific experience

There are countless reasons why someone might wish to pursue a new career path.

Redundancy may force them into looking elsewhere; they might be transitioning from military to civilian life; they could be a retired sportsperson; or they could be bored, stuck in a rut and longing for a role offering better job satisfaction or work-life balance.

The concern for many is the risk of leaving an established career behind to pursue one in which they have little experience or few sector-specific skills. Despite the uncertainty, particularly with the financial implications of “starting again”, many industries now highlight the array of transferable skills that are desirable in a new hire from outside the sector – and construction is no different.

GoConstruct.org, a site funded by the CITB that offers careers advice to people looking to enter the industry, points to skill sets from several different industries, such as oil and gas, engineering and logistics and manufacturing, centred around workplaces that hold health and safety, procurement and project management skills in high regard. IT skills and experience with CAD and BIM systems are also on the wanted list.

Furthermore, the industry views soft skills, such as leadership and team management skills, problem solving and the ability to react quickly and efficiently, as desirable.

Richard Gelder, director of the construction and property arm at recruitment firm Hays, says the construction sector’s pull factor is the diverse

selection of opportunities it can offer.

He explains: “With a variety of job roles available in sectors as diverse as project management, engineering, architecture and building services, the construction world is an inviting and prosperous industry to be part of.

“However, those thinking of doing so need to be aware that some roles in the industry do require a number of years of either training or qualifications – so it’s advisable to conduct thorough research.”

Different routes

Apprenticeships are an opportunity to fill gaps in practical knowledge and experience, with the government’s apprenticeship standard for a variety of roles offering qualifications up to degree level, gained alongside practical work experience.

Employers understand that recruiting from outside the construction circle can result in the benefits of a fresh approach to a project, says John Spottiswood, director of Heathrow Logistics Integration at Wilson James, who came into the industry from an armed forces background.

“When I joined Wilson James in my current role, the partnership was being renewed, and Wilson James wanted to offer the client something different. My background was lean management, so I could bring in some of the lessons of things like continuous improvement.

“My armed forces background was in the Royal Logistics Corps, which meant I was able to deploy my knowledge in my civilian career.”

Discussing why he believes he has managed to climb the career ladder in construction – and why he has since hired individuals from an armed forces background himself – Spottiswood explains employers are looking for an “all-round package”.

“The military tends to produce individuals who are personable, understand good leadership, are mentally alert and have some ambition.

“But that is what employers are generally looking for – if those without military experience can demonstrate their personality and their softer skill set, then employers will listen. The individual needs to learn how to convert that general experience into what an employer is looking for.”

Gelder’s view is that while a significant portion of roles will always need previous experience within construction, skills shortages remain and firms are looking for an edge over their competitors.

“Competition for talent is fierce, so employers are starting to becoming more open-minded when it comes to recruiting talent from outside of construction in order to increase their talent pool for certain skills and roles.

“For roles such as project management, there is more opportunity for those outside the industry. We’ve seen an increase in consultancies hiring applicants from a professional consultancy background, like qualified accountants, who have excellent transferable project management skills.”

The following three case studies show the diverse employment backgrounds of people who have entered the construction sector. >>

» CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES



DECLAN FITZPATRICK, 34. FORMER PROFESSIONAL RUGBY PLAYER. **QUANTITY SURVEYOR AT BRUCESHAW**

Why did you decide to switch careers to construction?

I began my career in quantity surveying at the age of 31, having spent the previous 13 years playing rugby professionally for Ulster. Part of the academy programme at Ulster was the opportunity to go to university – most of the guys chose to do sports science, but as I had an interest in construction, I chose to take a degree in a subject that would ultimately lead to a job without any further education at the end of my rugby career. This took an abrupt turn as I was forced to retire in 2014 due to injury. I was taken on by John Lynch Associates as a freelance quantity surveyor and spent a year being brought up to speed on the industry.

What do you think people from outside the sector bring to the industry?

From my perspective, coming from a performance-based industry, I spent years analysing, training and readying myself to perform and then ultimately was expected to deliver on my role as a teammate under the pressure. I like to think I bring an element of professionalism and a demand for quality and teamwork that are needed in the construction industry.

Has your experience outside the industry affected the way you work?

I like to prepare fully and be professional in what I do. I am also a bit of a perfectionist, which occasionally conflicts with deadlines and time pressures. The years within a team environment mean I am open to opinion and debate – I'm not afraid to challenge convention, which I think is a good thing.

What do you like most about the industry?

I like the fast pace and the variety of work. No day is the same and you get to meet people from all walks of life and experience, so there is always something new you can learn.

Any tips for someone considering whether to make a career change and opt for construction?

Bring your own personality and qualities – the industry is team-based, so be open-minded and don't be afraid to engage with people. Learn from them, learn from each and every experience, and challenge the norms.



NICOLE HALES, 29. FORMER CARE WORKER FOR DISABLED CHILDREN. **ASSISTANT CONSTRUCTION MANAGER, BW**

Why did you decide to switch careers to construction?

I was invited to interview for an administrator role at fit-out specialist BW's head office and I started to take an interest in the projects the teams completed. When I looked at case studies and did site visits, I liked the buzz and the atmosphere on site. Sites are busy and varied with a lively atmosphere, requiring co-ordination between lots of different people. The role of a construction manager involves work with and around different types of people. Communication, co-ordination and managing different people are key aspects of the job – areas that suited my skill set.

What do you think people from outside the sector bring to the industry?

A lot of the people that work in construction come from a trades background, so they have the technical knowledge to complete the installation, but the skills in managing people are often overlooked. Maintaining good relationships with all the different parties involved requires good management and communication skills.

What do you like most about the industry?

I like that each day is different, presenting new challenges, resolving issues and working with people from all walks of life. I learn something new every day and my technical knowledge is always expanding, which keeps me feeling challenged.

What has surprised you most about the industry since you joined?

How accepting people are to someone new joining. If I have a technical question, people are happy to show me how something works or explain their process. On the projects I've worked on I've been the only woman, but all the operatives treat me with respect and follow direction. Our projects tend to last about three to five months, which keeps it fresh with different challenges, people and design briefs – there's no time to get bored.

Any tips for someone considering whether to make a career change and opt for construction?

Construction has a lot of different roles and anyone considering a career in construction needs to get out on site and see what goes on. Speak to different people in the industry and understand what each job involves to see what would suit your skill set.



JOSH START, 34. FORMER BRITISH ARMY OFFICER. **HEAD, COLNBROOK LOGISTICS CENTRE AT HEATHROW AIRPORT FOR WILSON JAMES**

Why did you decide to switch careers to construction?

My education and background, including nine years in the British Army, was in logistics so when I was looking to transition to the civilian workforce, the construction industry was a natural next step. I was looking for a challenging new role, but one that would build on the skills and experience I had accumulated. My new career has many of the same elements – the movement of materials, vehicles and people efficiently and safely – but now I play a hands-on and senior role in managing stakeholder relationships and meeting key performance indicators and financial obligations.

Has your experience outside the industry affected the way you work?

I've found there are a lot of similar processes and procedures in military to construction logistics, so my background is certainly an asset. It has also influenced the team ethos we have worked to build.

What do you like most about the industry?

I enjoy the fact that complacency is not an option in construction logistics. Working at Heathrow – or almost any 21st-century construction or logistics hub – includes a number of complex security priorities that have to be enforced and maintained to see a job through successfully. All the while we have to challenge the status quo and find new ways to innovate our platforms and systems to deliver for our clients.

What has surprised you most about the industry since you joined?

There have undoubtedly been a few surprises along the way. I have been amazed at the speed at which huge and complex projects can be completed in confined and restricted locations, and the large number of people involved.

Any tips for someone considering whether to make a career change and opt for construction?

Networking is key. There are a lot of organisations that support ex-service personnel in job searches or career transitions (BuildForce, Royal Logistics Corps Foundation, Career Transition Partnership), and several membership organisations within the construction and logistics fields, but genuine relationships are still incredibly important. A well-managed professional relationship can open a lot of doors.