



CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Recruiting Outside the Box

How one electrical contracting firm is successfully attracting and retaining electrical professionals through a new flexible work model

Karla Nugent

It's no secret that finding labor in the construction market is a serious challenge. The industry continues to struggle when it comes to replacing and finding workers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the construction industry is expected to need approximately 200,000 new workers in 2024 to address the workforce shortage — and about 151,400 openings for construction laborers and helpers are projected each year, on average, until 2032.

Recruitment is one of the highest hurdles in the industry today. As *The New York Times* journalist Jason M. Bailey wrote, “With the retirement of baby boomers in full swing, the construction industry is grappling with its biggest challenge: refilling its pool of employees. But it faces significant resistance among younger workers.”

A combination of factors seems to be contributing to the shortage. Although COVID-19 was one of those factors — U.S. Census Bureau data for September to November 2021 showed that between 6.8% and 8.4% of blue-collar workers from construction, transportation, and production moved to white-collar professions — the labor shortage was an issue before the pandemic. A study by the Oliver Wyman Forum found that the desire for more work flexibility was a key motivation for blue-collar employees to transition to a remote work job; it also said that almost four out of five who transitioned to remote work were successful.



Weifield Group is experimenting with a rolling 4/10s model — where crew members all work four 10-hour days per week with overlapping crews to cover all five days of the work week. This better accommodates client requirements and maximizes efficiency.

Getting younger generations and individuals from diverse backgrounds into construction is tough not only due to the work-at-home shift but also due to plenty of long-held (but incorrect) beliefs about the industry. These misconceptions include viewing construction as unsafe and blue-collar in nature while also being “behind the times” in the area of innovation. The truth is the construction industry is a multi-dimensional field that offers many interesting, rewarding, and fulfilling career opportunities without the burden of college debt. However, when looking at the core of the issue affecting prospective workers in the industry today, perhaps the largest source of dissatisfaction involves workers’ perception of how the industry’s demanding schedule may affect their day-to-day lives.

“Young salaried workers often become burned out because of the demanding hours and lack of flexibility in construction,” said Brian Turmail, vice president of public affairs and strategic initiatives for the Associated General Contractors of America.

As a result of the compelling data and research, Weifield Group is taking active steps toward industry-wide adoption of flexible work as a means of attracting and retaining talent. The reason is simple. Research shows that whoever solves the flexible work issue first will get the workers.



Weifield Group has experimented with a new Flexible Work Initiative idea, which was developed with the input of numerous GC, architect, engineering and owner/developer partners in the firm's regions. Weifield employees are reporting a high level of satisfaction and performance under the new arrangement.

U.K. flexible schedule pilot program

A pilot program run by flexible work consultancy Timewise evaluated flexible work schedules on job sites conducted by four major construction firms in the U.K.—Skanska UK, BAM Nuttall, BAM Construct, and Willmott Dixon, which collectively employ 11,000 people. Various schedules, individual days off, and staggered shift approaches were tested across a range of sites, including London’s HS2 high-speed rail infrastructure project. While none of the firms involved in the pilot reported a negative impact on budgets or schedules, workers reported numerous benefits in post-pilot surveys:

- Participants who felt their work hours gave them enough time to look after their health and wellbeing rose from 48% to 84%.
- Workers who regularly worked beyond their contracted hours decreased from more than half, to just over a third (51% to 34%).
- Workers’ sense of guilt decreased; the portion of workers who said they felt guilty if they started later or finished earlier than others on site fell from 47% to 33%.
- Trust in colleagues working remotely improved; the number of workers who agreed with the phrase “if someone who is able to, works from home, I am not sure they are working as hard as they would be on site,” fell from 48% to 33%.

“Our involvement in the Timewise flexible working trial aligns with our focus to support our people to be at their best and create inclusive environments that attract a wider diversity of people into the industry,” said Adrian Savory, CEO of BAM Nuttall. “The results of the pilots have demonstrated flexibility for operational roles is possible, and has been a win, win, win — for the business, teams, and for improving individuals’ wellbeing.”

Weifield Group Contracting, a leading multi-regional electrical contractor with headquarters in Centennial, Colo., has seen similar results in numerous projects where they have implemented a flexible work approach. Overall, productivity on these jobs was at or above the predicted rates when using the flexible work model; in other words, the projects utilizing a flexible work schedule not only kept on par with our productivity expectations (did not have a significant downturn in productivity) but were likely a key factor in allowing us to exceed expected rates.

“Workers on jobs with flexible schedules save fuel costs and have more time for their lives,” said Dillon Flynn, a Weifield foreman. “The company also saves costs as workers are driving company vehicles 20% less during the week, and overtime and urgent makeup work can be scheduled on the fifth day — still allowing employees to have a regular weekend off. Additionally, there is higher production because you have to break down and set up materials and tools less frequently during the week. Most general contractors are very receptive to this model — none of the jobs I’ve worked with this schedule had any safety concerns, and they all achieved higher than average gross margins.”

Addressing the objections

This flexible working idea is not widely embraced by all; in fact, it is somewhat of a taboo subject in the industry today. Research from ELECTRI International shows that 40% of workdays are comprised of “productive time.” Thus, eight-hour days yield 3.2 hours of productive time — versus 4 hours in a 10-hour day. Overall, you may be gaining a 0.8-hour increase in productivity for an extra two hours of pay.

However, the relentless schedule that persists in construction is a significant problem, especially for men. It restricts their ability to play a more active role in family life. It is also linked to poor mental health with some dark statistics: death from suicide among construction workers is 10 times more frequent than from accidents, and 25% of construction workers have considered taking their own lives. Adding to employee stress, many site workers face lengthy commutes as they move with projects, which further detract from their personal and family time.

Historically, the primary measure of success for construction projects has been: *Was it delivered on time and within budget?* This assessment often is in direct opposition to the well-being of workers, as there is a common perception that long hours and squeezing resources are the key to meeting targets. If there is a problem with the project, longer hours are often expected as a way to address it.

The pressure for projects to meet client deliverables has been a fundamental factor in the construction industry’s resistance to flexible working, but the U.K. pilot program uncovered that the fears are unfounded... the program demonstrated that flexible

working can be implemented successfully on frontline operation construction sites with no detrimental effect on the budget or program. It also met its goals of improving wellbeing and initiating a positive shift in attitudes to flexible working.

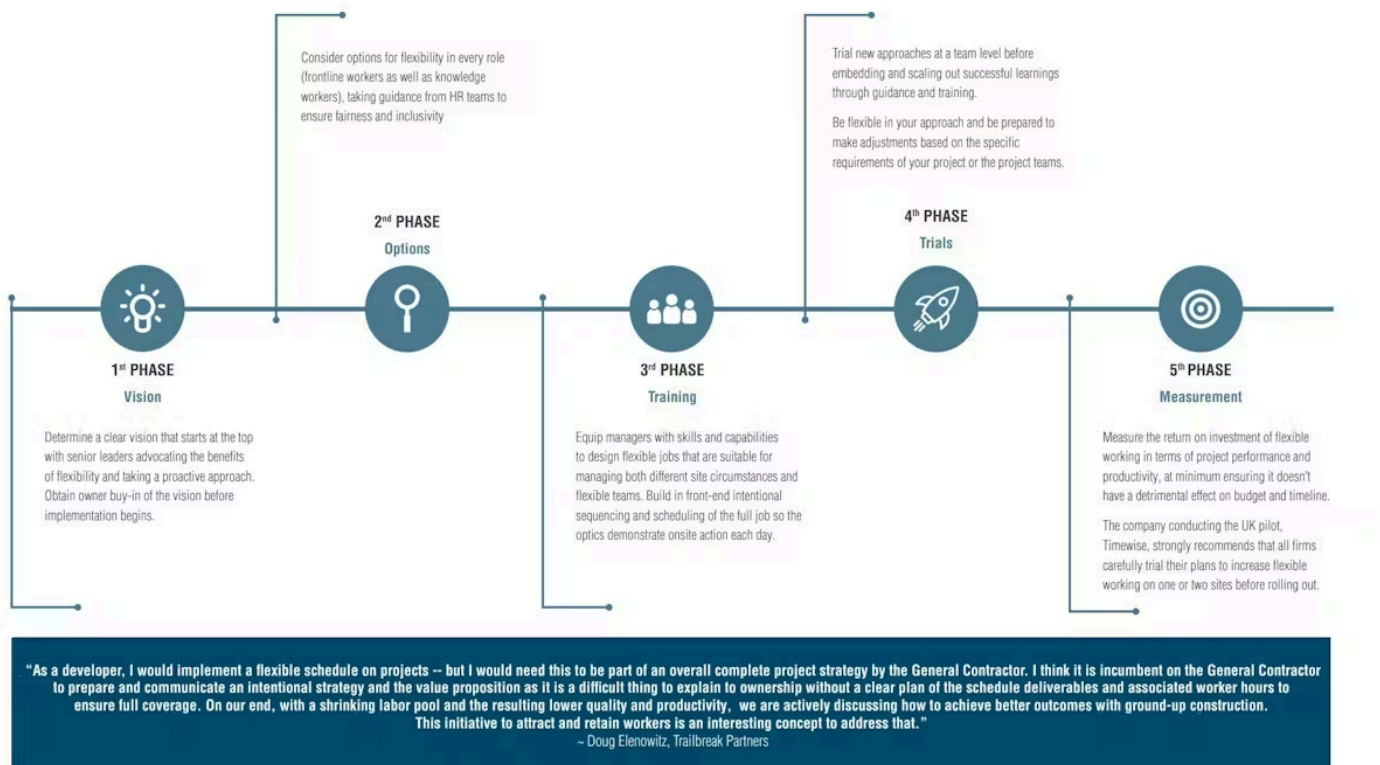
Tangible benefits

The perceived issues around flexible work can be managed by setting proper expectations and executing a sound process — but, in general, most have to try this type of work model a few times to see the benefits. Some obvious benefits of this model include:

- **Flexible work is good for in-creased production.** Certain projects have time-intensive requirements that are better absorbed with an extended workday (e.g., workers who have to take a lift for 30 minutes to get to the floor of a high-rise building they are working on, can spend more time working once they reach that floor).
- **It is good for morale.** Field crews tend to like flexible work as they enjoy a three-day weekend, each week.
- **It is more efficient.** Working one less day per week results in reduced gas costs to travel to and from work, less downtime for picking up and laying out, and one less day on the job to be exposed to potential safety hazards.
- **It better satisfies client requirements.** Utilizing a model such as “rolling 4/10s” (where crew members all work four 10-hour days per week with overlapping crews to cover all five days of the work week) works better to accommodate client requirements.
- **It allows for more make-up work/better training.** A rolling 4/10s model allows supervisors to utilize the fifth day for any weather-related makeup work or desired OT by the owner/general contractor, and key training as needed throughout the project.
- **It can be a powerful differentiator.** A company with the willingness and ability to execute this type of flexible environment demonstrates higher proficiency in planning, scheduling, and communication, which, if described and documented well, could be used as a strong differentiation point between

companies during sales or negotiation. Owners want to work with sophisticated companies that are highly skilled at execution.

To implement a flexible schedule model, Timewise suggests a five-phased approach that starts with creating a clear vision and obtaining owner buy-in, working with HR to determine options for flexibility in every role, training leaders on how to manage flexible teams, conducting trials of the new approach before rolling out universally and measuring the impacts to budget and schedule on those trial projects (see the **Flowchart** for more details).



Case study #1

Andrew Cook, superintendent for Balfour Beatty Construction, decided to move to a “4/10s” schedule on his commercial full-floor, 36,000-square-foot office space project in Charlotte, N.C. As the general contractor, Cook had the authority to make the work schedule decision; all of the trades had to follow the plan, yet Cook was present on-site for the entire five-day work week.

“I found this schedule beneficial to me, personally, because this quieter time on Fridays gave me time to do paperwork, look at the schedule, walk the job, and see

phases I wanted to see,” said Cook. “I was able to look ahead and plan, which is hard to do with a job site full of subcontractors.”

He also noted the schedule significantly improved team morale and reduced costs. “It saved us two hours each week on start-up and shutdown time, not having to do that the fifth day. In the end, we were ahead of schedule and received our TCO one day early, which was huge.”

Case study #2

Meredith Wardwell, Centura Health’s senior director of design and construction, was in charge of oversight for a new construction integrated project delivery (IPD) project at Centura Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colo. This was a two-phase project encompassing six stories and including the emergency department, operating rooms, sterile processing department, NICU, intensive care unit, and medical/surgery areas of the hospital.

The hospital team decided to implement a flexible 4/10s work schedule on the project to provide a better working environment for the craftworkers due to the extra day off, per week. Because construction for the project fell in the summer into hunting season, the extra day off per week was a big motivator for many of the crew members.

“We positioned it like this to the crew — if you are able to knock out your scope of work in 4/10s — you have a three-day weekend, and you hit the ground running the following week,” said Wardwell. “If you don’t hit your milestones and everyone is waiting on you, Friday is your makeup day. They really rose to the occasion, and it worked great for us.”

The results of the flexible work trial were clear: Overall, the project came in 6% under budget and the team was able to fund wish list items based on that savings adding greater value to the project.

“Ultimately, this project provided opportunity and buy-in for all trades,” said Wardwell. “If possible, I would implement flexible work on every project.”

Create an industry-wide paradigm shift

If construction businesses begin taking a different view toward creating a new working model, flexibility will make a huge difference in a sector that hasn't evolved much in a long time. The shift starts with thinking about outcomes rather than hours spent at work as well as actively challenging traditional perceptions and mindsets about how work needs to be performed in the construction industry.

Employers in the electrical industry that are willing to explore new ways of collectively recruiting and retaining talent, can ensure the well-being and performance of individuals and teams while protecting the future of our industry.

For more information on Weifield Group's Flexible Work Initiative, visit www.weifieldcontracting.com/flexible-work-initiative/.