

The Mechanical Contractor's Guide to Attracting the Next Generation of Young Professionals

by Robert W. Wendover

Hollywood Mechanical faces the same challenge as most of its industry colleagues – recruiting engineers, estimators, and project managers from a workforce that hasn't had sufficient numbers in more than a decade. Jack Grant, Hollywood's president, has more business than he can handle. But he and his team spend hours each month trying to balance supply with demand. Do they refuse new business to keep their existing customers happy? Do they stop bidding on jobs they can't staff or hope to have the people they need in time? Do they move people from the construction side to the service side to cover the inevitable emergencies?

It's one of the most challenging parts of a contractor's job – sourcing talent. With looming Baby Boomer retirements and colleges struggling to keep up with demand, firms across the US spend more than their fair share of time with this dilemma. Then there's recruiting itself. Employers throughout the US have discovered that today's young professionals approach the job search process in a wholly different way than

those of even five years ago. The reason? Mobile technology. This, coupled with young professionals' philosophy about work in general means that any firm that wants to recruit top talent has to develop an entirely new strategy for sourcing and engaging with these emerging contributors. That's what this guide is all about.

Rather than continuing what they've always done, the most successful contractors are taking lessons from the firms that have learned how to connect with young graduates who live on their smart phones, but wouldn't think of making a call. While tremendous focus has been placed on the Millennials, the oldest of this cohort is in their late thirties and already seasoned contributors. We are in a transitional time. The last of the Millennials are in their early twenties, according to the US Census and the leading edge of the next generation is graduating from college. This group, alternatively called Generation Z, iGeners, and Homelander, is proving to be significantly different than their older siblings. (I choose to call them iGeners,

based on the extensive research of Jean Twenge, author of *iGen* and a professor of psychology at San Diego State University.) These differences are so pronounced in some cases, I hear Millennials asking, “What’s wrong with this younger generation?”

The big divide, as might be expected, is digital technology. The leading edge of *iGen* reached adolescence just as smart phones were introduced into the marketplace and social media platforms such as Facebook and SnapChat became a part of society’s daily consciousness. The result has been millions of emerging students and employees navigating their ways through daily life using a handheld screen to communicate, research, shop, learn, develop relationships and interpret the world around them. Let’s begin by examining some of the attributes these *iGeners* share:

Digital communication is in their blood – A young engineer and I were discussing a problem he was struggling with. I suggested he call the customer.

“I’ll just email them,” he said.

“It could take hours or even a day to get a response,” I argued. “I bet you can get an answer right away if you give them a ring.”

“Naw, I’ll just email them,” he repeated.

I, and many managers, have had this kind of exchange any number of times with college students and professionals in their early twenties. While researchers have postulated reasons for this resistance, the plain fact is they simply don’t make phone calls. But here’s the dilemma: As employers, you can compel them to pick up the phone. But if you call them as recruiting prospects, they may never pick up answer the call. Texting, e-mail, even Facebooking is a better strategy.

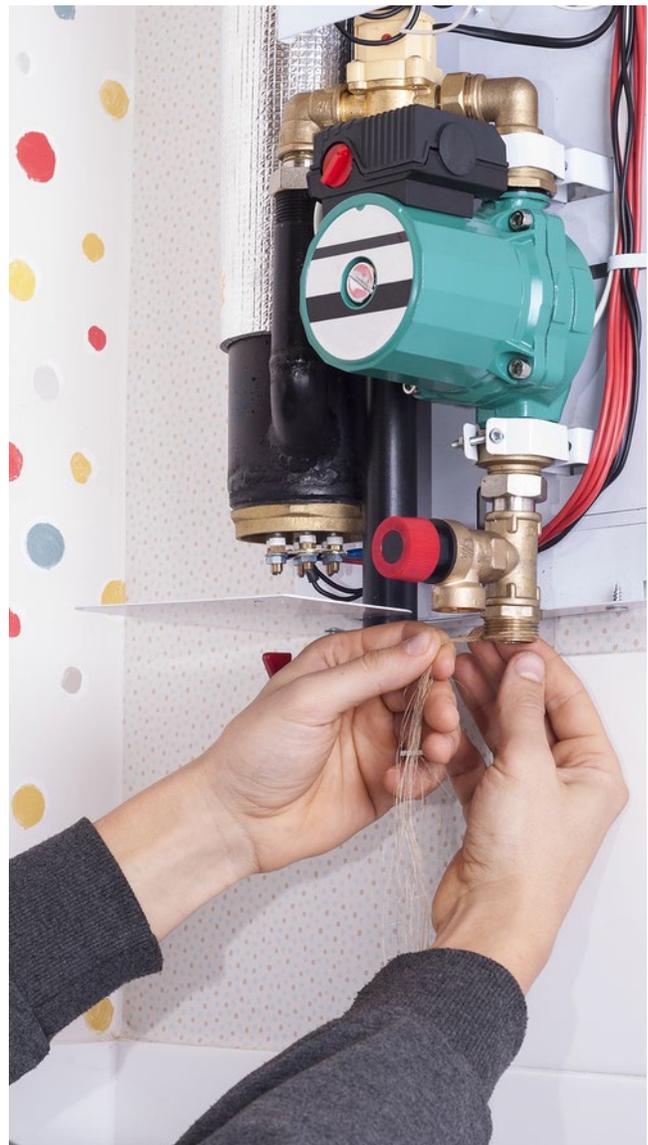
They depend upon social media to find openings – For most *iGeners*, social media presence for both personal and business connections is as essential as breathing. The largest employers in many industries employ a team of full-time social media recruiters whose job it is to locate, connect with and lure top performers. While this may not be financially feasible for your firm, understand that you are competing with these conglomerates in your search for engineers, project managers, estimators and other technical specialties.

They depend upon the web, almost exclusively, to research employment opportunities – Being members of the mobile generation, it simply doesn’t occur to *iGeners* to look elsewhere. After all, who

would want to work for an organization that isn’t, in their minds, tech-savvy? The simple truth? If you do not have a convincing presence on the Internet, the graduating members of *iGen* won’t know you exist.

***iGeners* visit websites and social media on their smart phones.** Is your website “mobile optimized?” Having a web presence is not enough. It has to be viewable and navigable on a four-inch screen. For those with recently updated websites, this feature may already be enabled. If not, ask your webmaster to make the adjustment. For those with an older or less sophisticated site, the challenge could be more significant. Want an easy test? Open up your site on your smart phone. If you have to use your fingers to expand and contract the content on the screen, it is not mobile optimized.

They crowd source information, opinions and input – Where digital immigrants will send an e-mail or make



a few phone calls to trusted individuals, digital natives have always used social media to accomplish the same objective. You may think, “I get better insights when I phone colleagues.” That may be true, but you’re missing the point. iGeners have come of age surveying their “friends” through Facebook and searching for factoids on the Internet.

Many don’t know what work “looks like” – America is at a 50-year low among teenage workforce participation. Where those in previous generations “cut their teeth” mowing lawns, working fast-food, and serving as lifeguards, many iGeners have sought other endeavors including summer classes, travel, and even intense video gaming. While the reasons for this have been attributed to a number of influences, the bottom line is that the straight-A engineering student who applies to be a project manager may have never held wage-paying employment.

They are restless but interested in job security – The majority of professionally educated Millennials expected to be in their first job out of college three years or less. iGeners are more circumspect. They watched older siblings struggle to find employment directly out of college during the past recession. They are still anxious, however, to make the most of their opportunities. Assuming that this generation will stay put without providing an engaging work environment is a mistake.

iGeners want to learn from seasoned pros, but on their terms – Even more so than the Millennials, this emerging cohort understands the knowledge they can glean from those who have been around for years. But the way this knowledge is transferred is critical. Simply putting old and young together so one can share stories with the other is a non-starter. Firms taking the time to coach their seasoned pros on how to engage and relate knowledge to young professionals is a worthwhile investment.

They see the value of a career, but expect work/life balance – As mentioned with job security, iGeners understand the value of building a career. At the same time, they also see work as one component of a more fulfilling life. iGeners may not be as assertive as Millennials in expressing their beliefs about balancing priorities. But they will take their talents elsewhere if they feel the job is becoming an untenable grind.

They want to learn via video, gaming and, over time, virtual reality – iGeners are graduating from college having experienced the latest in simulations, computer-aided design and other digital wizardry. But many still enter workplaces based on blueprints,

clipboards, and other tools of the analog era. As more than one young engineer has expressed to me, “When the laptop I have at home is faster than the one I have at the office, Houston, we have a problem.” Embracing the latest technology can be an expensive investment. But the comfort this generation feels with these applications will prove beneficial as your firm makes the transition.



Recruiting Today’s Emerging Professional

So how do you and your firm “up your game” when it comes to recruiting today’s top talent? Begin by answering these four questions:

1. Who are we hiring and why? When I ask employers if they track the results from different applicant sourcing efforts, one in fifty will say they do. If you don’t know whether your time and money are well spent, you are at the mercy of whoever applies. Ask your HR department to answer the following questions:

- Over the past three years, where have the majority of our applicants come from?
- When examined over a five-year period, are the applicants we’re recruiting turning into our best contributors? If not, what’s the fix?
- How well are our recruitment investments paying off in attracting the best contributors?
- What do we need to adjust in our recruiting efforts to get a better return on time and spending?

If you don’t have an HR department, ask an intern from a local college to gather this data and perform this analysis. It’s a great project for a business major.



2. Which applicants, of those we screen, do we hire the most? In other words, what major attributes do these individuals share? As a result of learning this, how should we adjust our recruiting efforts to attract the interest of these people?

3. Why should applicants come work for us? Make a list of the top three kinds of applicants you successfully hire. Then make a list of what you believe are their top five desires/requirements in a job. (Don't know? Ask the top young performers who work for you.) Then compare these lists to the reasons you promote for coming to work for your firm. How well do they match? If you're not "selling" what they want to "buy," what can you do to correct this?

4. How can we best connect with our targeted applicant sources? Once again, review the list of from where the majority of your applicants come. Develop a distinct strategy for connecting with each group. Obviously, a number of the methods, such as social media, web promotions, and connecting with influencers may be the same. But there will be nuances you can exploit to your advantage. A good example of this would be asking employees from a particular school to serve as ambassadors to their alma mater, both connecting with faculty and participating in the on-campus recruiting process.

Bonus -- Secret shop your recruiting effort. Retailers use secret shoppers to evaluate customer service, merchandising, and pricing. Try the same kind of thing with your recruiting process. Ask a few young professionals you know from outside the firm to review the website and make web, phone, and e-mail contact, playing the role of applicant. How are they treated? How prompt is the response? Are they connected with the appropriate people? You get the idea. Sadly, what you assume is going on may not be at all.

Implementing Your Plan for Recruiting Tomorrow's Young Professionals

So now that you know where the majority of your applicants come from, their priorities, and how to connect with them, how do you implement a plan that will result in acquiring top talent for your team? Begin by auditing your website for the following:

Navigation – We all struggle, at times, trying to use a website whose organization is far from intuitive. Don't let yours be one of these. The best websites have been designed around superior navigation. Think of the five websites you find most easy to use. Determine what makes them so and adapt those strategies/characteristics.

Loading Speed – There are few things more frustrating than waiting for a web page to load. This timing is impacted by a number of factors outside of your control. But the two areas where you can influence this are video and photos. Video files, which can be as large as 500mb, should not be embedded in a website. Rather, they should be uploaded to a site such as YouTube or Vimeo and linked back to the your site. Additionally, all photos should be optimized for the web. This means that the project photo you took should be reduced from its original size of one megabyte to no more than 100kb. The smaller the photo file, the faster it loads.

Inclusion – Take a look at the images and illustrations on your site. Are they still dominated by mature, white males? iGeners have come of age hearing constant messaging about equality and inclusion. They want to be assured your firm is one that embraces diversity.

Video – In the on-line world, video is becoming the new text. Rather than a 500-word letter welcoming



applicants, have the owner record a 60-second video saying the same thing. Rather than listing recent projects, create a narrated slide show. Rather than quotes from happy employees, ask them to record “selfie” videos of their impressions.

Engagement – Live-chat technology has been around for a long time and is remarkably inexpensive. For less than \$50 per month, you can have someone monitor incoming inquiries from prospective applicants. Those in the office can take turns responding by simply leaving the live-chat application open on their computers as they complete other tasks. When someone inquires about employment, your firm can engage instantly.

Build your digital presence

Now that your firm has a “killer” website, it’s time to look at other ways to enhance your digital recruiting presence:

Video Channel – Your firm may already have a channel on YouTube or Vimeo. If not, they are easy and inexpensive to create. The members of iGen are all about video. Why read when you can watch? Why watch the “talking head” when you can be entertained? The channel, itself, can be used a number of ways: 1) as a site from which to link videos back to your website, 2) A place to host videos for training and knowledge sharing, 3) A place to host videos which can be linked

to promotional e-mails, tweets, and social media posts.

Cameras on job sites – Consider placing cameras on job sites and then linking these back to your video channel or website. Once again, this provides potential applicants with a good look at the types of projects they’d be involved with. Be sure to place an employment link on this page to capture impulsive interest.

Interviews with staff – Record a variety of short interviews with young professionals and seasoned pros that illustrate career opportunities, training, day-to-day challenges and responsibilities, and workplace culture. Have them talk about projects, the apprehensions they might have had, and how they learned to fit in and thrive. The goal is to make an emotional connection with applicants.

A day in the life of an estimator, project manager, engineer, and service manager – Take the video process up a notch by producing narrated videos that take viewers through a typical day with your professionals. iGeners are comfortable making these kinds of videos for personal purposes. Why not leverage this for your firm? Let them have a little fun and chances are you’ll get segments that will out-engage anything you can produce in a studio. Large accounting firms have been using this strategy for years with good results.

Up your firm's social media fluency – While social media can appear intimidating and time consuming to manage, it has to play an essential role in your recruiting outreach. As mentioned before, some large firms employ social media recruiters. The point here is not to build a large effort around connecting with young applicants. But as a firm, you have to be timely in response to social media inquiries. iGeners assume that if they “message” you on Twitter, Facebook, SnapChat, or Linked-In, they will receive a response within a short period of time. The response can be something as simple as thanking them for the inquiry and including a link to your firm's employment webpage. Considering the shortage of qualified young candidates, you don't want them telling their peers, “I messaged ABC Contracting and they never got back to me.”

Get your young professionals involved. They are closest in age and demeanor to iGeners. They are comfortable with social media, cultural trends, popular entertainment, and the lexicon of late adolescence. Include them when you meet with applicants.

Accounting firms, for instance, send recent hires back to their alma maters with on-campus recruiters. Their job? Make friends. Put applicants at ease. Talk about how they like working for the firm. And discreetly evaluate each applicant in terms of demeanor and workplace culture match.

Lay the groundwork for on-going relationships. Even if an applicant wasn't a match or declined your offer, keep in touch. Who hired him? Why did she turn you down? Did he stay in the industry or take a job elsewhere? All of this can be accomplished with a simple contact management program and a bit of on-line relationship building. Whenever you have an opening, look to those in this database. The person you rejected last year may be the perfect match for a new project.

You need a plan that everyone embraces. Recruiting should never be left up to the human resources department to operate in isolation. Attracting top talent is everyone's responsibility. It is the receptionist who's delightful on the phone, answers questions and directs inquiries accurately. It's the project manager who's forever on the lookout for bright young professionals he can direct to the firm's website. It's the superintendent who is building relationships with academic and community leaders. It's the estimator who teaches at the local community college and encourages students to come to work for his firm. Expecting an immediate return is not the point. It's planting the seeds of awareness and interest.

Finally, don't rush to hire. It's easy to succumb to a “just fill the opening” philosophy when talent is in short supply. But hiring three mismatches in order to hire one match can have a devastating impact on productivity and the bottom line. You wouldn't take business that more trouble than it's worth. Why do this? The key is persistence and maintaining a recruiting process that yielding results long-term.

A Word About Time and Investment

As I conduct seminars around the country, one of the first questions contractors ask is, “How much time and money does all this take?” The short answer? Remarkably little. Some firms have the resources to create a recruiting powerhouse. But most firms are limited in what they can invest. That said, a clearly targeted, well-organized, and superbly communicated recruiting effort can be remarkably effective without breaking the bank. It will also result in measurably better retention and productivity. For smaller firms, this can be a significant addition to the bottom line.

Like it or not, this industry's professional talent shortage is not going away. If anything, it is becoming more intense. As the members of iGen continue to enter the workplace, they will change the way recruiting is implemented. But attracting top talent does not have to be the on-going headache experienced by many.

A well-conceived plan, a killer Internet presence, and consistent execution will make your firm an employer of choice among the best and brightest.

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