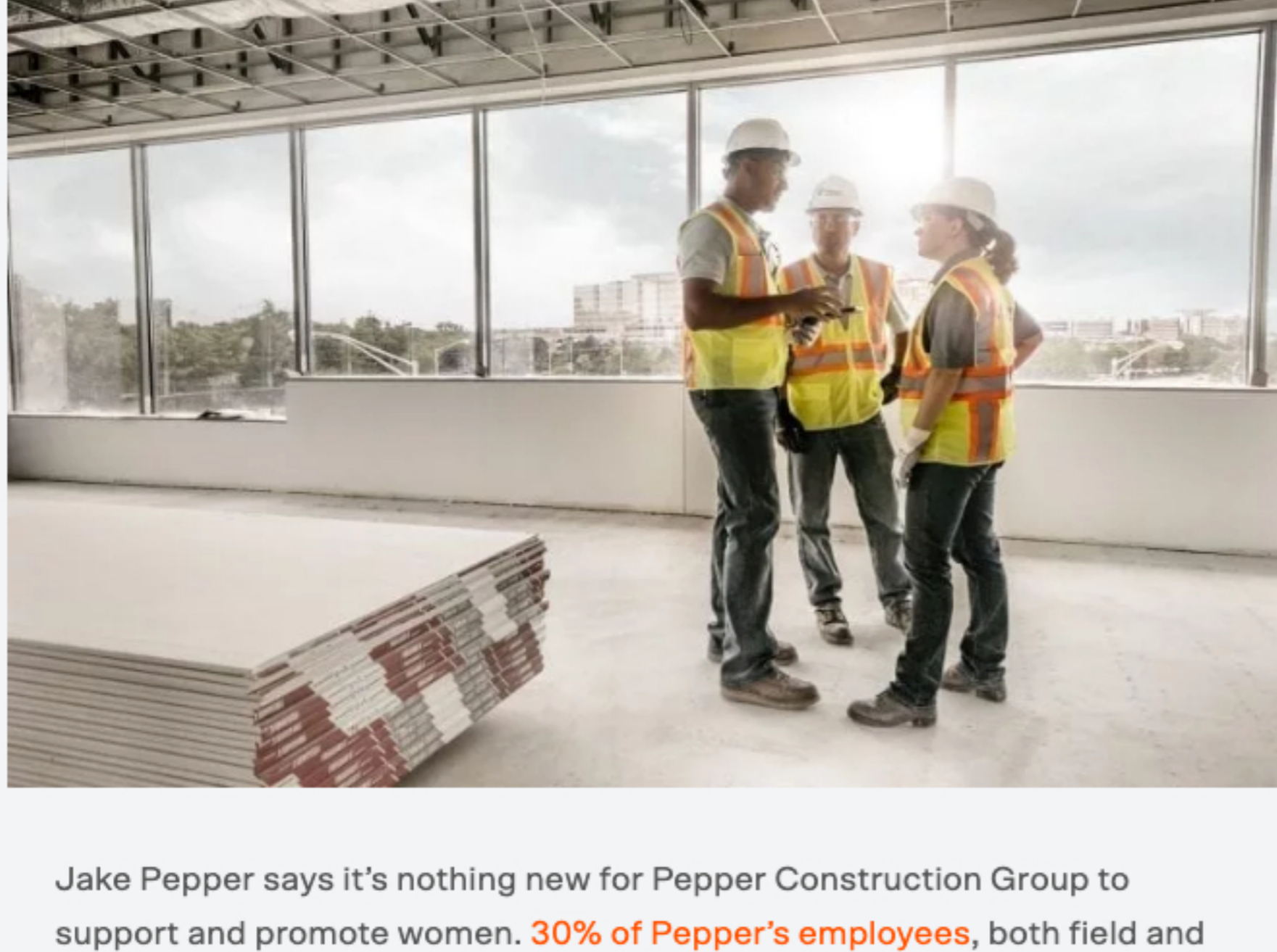


In the Company of Women – How and Why Pepper Construction is Hiring More Women

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Jake Pepper says it's nothing new for Pepper Construction Group to support and promote women. **30% of Pepper's employees**, both field and office staff, are women. That's more than triple the percentage of **U.S. women working in construction** today, which is currently 9%.

"It was something that was always important to us and just made sense," says Pepper, a vice president of the family-owned business. He cites Sandra Reinert, hired in the early 1980s, who rose through the company to become a project vice president; Marilyn Beis, the company's first female carpenter, hired in 1971; and Mary O'Malley, who started as a carpenter apprentice and became the company's first female superintendent. Today O'Malley serves as a senior superintendent.

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In recent years, the Chicago-based company has been looking to include women in its executive ranks all the way up to the company's board of directors. There are no women on the board yet but “it's something we know is important in order to avoid groupthink,” says Pepper.

Technology Driving Diversity

Pepper believes that technology's continuous expansion in construction is helping create more roles and bring more women into the industry.

“Changing the way things are done is going to take away some of those traditional barriers,” Pepper says.

In fact, it already has. For every new technology that is used in the field, new office support positions are created. He points to Jennifer Suerth, an engineer and vice president of technical services at Pepper, as an example of someone who has risen through the ranks because of new technology. Suerth's skill in adopting evolving technology has given her a vibrant, cutting-edge career.

“Technology has opened doors tremendously for all of us,” she says. After undergraduate training as an architect at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Suerth added a structures option to her graduate degree in architecture, and her increased interest in the technical side of things led her to see the huge potential of new technology in her first jobs.

“ “People, especially women, thought they had to take a traditional route, and now there are other options,” says Suerth.

“I'm not joking when I say our titles are changing and our roles are changing because technology is changing. People, especially women, thought they had to take a traditional route, and now there are other options,” says Suerth. “The role I'm in today didn't even exist when I started my career.”

Moving the Needle

During her first jobs at Arup and then at Mortenson, both in Chicago, Suerth led the way in applications of technological tools in her offices, and taught others how to make use of these tools.

When Stan Pepper contacted her about a job, Suerth says she was running Mortenson's largest and most complex projects in Chicago and managing the group.

“I thought long and hard about it because I liked where I was and I liked what I was doing, but after I talked with Stan Pepper and some of the other Peppers, I realized there were huge opportunities there.”

It made a difference to her that she was allowed to sit down with Jacqueline Lavigne, now a senior vice president and chief marketing and strategy officer.

She knew the Peppers took her seriously because she had this opportunity to ask questions and get answers from a woman who knew the company from the inside. Suerth made the move because she believes the Peppers are sincere in their desire to move toward greater inclusion.

“There's definitely still progress to be made, but at Pepper the needle's actually moving, so even though there's still more work to be done, they're very conscious of it, they recognize it, and are putting in effort.”

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As an executive, Suerth often finds she is usually the only woman in the room. “I joke that when I go to conferences, I'm a female in a room of men, and then with the VP title, it's a double whammy.”

As soon as Suerth joined Pepper, she began to attend an in-house women's group that meets quarterly. “I got involved right away. As we move up the ladder, it's more and more important.”

She tries to be available to listen and puts in a good word for other women when they are up for promotions.

“A lot of people talk about how if you move up the ladder, some of the hurdles are other women.” She wants, instead, to help other women to advance.

Diversity Helps the Bottom Line

When asked what she would say to executives at another company who remain undecided about the benefits of hiring and promoting more women, Suerth offers these points:

First, she says, “There are hard stats that show workplace diversity can actually help the bottom line. We've talked about how only 9% of the people in the industry are women, but statistics show that companies see a 15% increase in profitability when they have female executives.”

Second, she continues, “ethnically diverse teams are 35% more likely to outperform those that aren't. ... Diversity can impact the company as a whole, and I truly believe that's because a diverse workforce brings in different ideas. If everybody looks the same and acts the same, which is what construction has been, that's why we haven't had increases in productivity like other industries.”

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Finally, she says, it's important to show women interviewing for a job that there are other women succeeding at the company. This was her experience when she interviewed at Arup—a woman was running the office, and that made a difference to her. She had a built-in role model from the beginning.

“If you're interviewing (for a new hire), you need to show what your company looks like.”

It helps to introduce female candidates to women even if they work in another group. “They still have insight into the company and the culture. That would be the easiest low-hanging-fruit piece of advice.”

In addition, options that allow women to have a family and continue on their job with options flex hours or by working from home one day a week can make a difference, she says. Often, women are afraid to ask about these options, but more and more, companies are willing to accommodate the needs of women who are raising families.

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