Construction Talent Index

Western U.S. Edition | Q4 2025

Dynamic Executive Search

Letter from our Founder

The Western United States construction market is entering a period where talent availability is becoming as consequential as backlog.

Over the past several years, project pipelines across commercial, industrial, and infrastructure sectors have expanded faster than the leadership systems required to support them. As a result, many contractors are now operating with limited bench depth, extended hiring timelines, and rising compensation pressure across critical roles.

In live market activity, this is no longer theoretical. Over the past year, we have watched multiple Western contractors enter emergency hiring situations after a single failed superintendent or project executive hire triggered cascading project delays, strained client relationships, and unplanned seven-figure exposure. In several cases, firms with strong backlog were forced to slow or restructure active projects. Not due to lack of work, but due to lack of qualified leadership capacity.

The Construction Talent Index was created to formally track these labor market conditions.
This publication is built from live recruiting activity, active executive and leadership searches, compensation negotiations, and ongoing market mapping conducted by Dynamic Executive Search across Western U.S. construction markets. It is designed to provide construction leaders with a consistent, decision-oriented view of what is happening inside the construction talent economy and what those movements mean for operations, risk, and long-term competitiveness.

This inaugural edition establishes the baseline readings of the Construction Talent Index. Future releases will track directional movement over time.

— Zach Motzkus
Founder, Dynamic Executive Search

Executive Summary

The Western U.S. construction labor market remains structurally constrained across mid-market general contractors operating in commercial, industrial, and civil sectors.

While overall project activity remains healthy, the availability of experienced estimators, project leaders, and operations executives is not scaling at the same pace. This imbalance is producing measurable pressure across compensation, hiring velocity, and leadership stability.

Based on live recruiting activity and active searches executed by Dynamic Executive Search across Western markets, this quarter's Construction Talent Index establishes three defining conditions:

• Talent availability has become a limiting factor.
Over 41% of active engagements last quarter were replacement or risk-mitigation driven searches, not growth hiring. The most common trigger events were failed leadership placements, unexpected resignations, and project-critical performance gaps signaling a market where continuity risk is now a primary hiring driver.

•Compensation is adjusting upward unevenly.
Total compensation movement remains most aggressive in estimating leadership, senior project leadership, and operations roles, where accepted offers are averaging 12–24% above incumbent comp ranges. Estimators and Preconstruction leaders continue to represent the longest time-to-fill and highest offer-volatility segment of the market.

• Leadership depth is emerging as a primary performance divider.
Firms entering searches with defined bench strategies are closing roles 29% faster, experiencing fewer late-stage candidate fall-offs, and reporting materially lower disruption tied to leadership transitions. By contrast, under-benched contractors are disproportionately entering reactive, high-urgency hiring cycles.

Across active negotiations, the most consistent deal-blocking factor is no longer base compensation. It is workload realism, team infrastructure, and succession visibility, reinforcing that senior construction talent is selecting environments, not just offers.

These conditions are not temporary. They reflect a labor market entering a multi-year recalibration phase.

Construction Talent Index Snapshot

Demand Pressure — High
How this is tracked:
- Active search volume (total live roles per quarter)
- Replacement vs. growth ratio (% of searches driven by backfill, failure, or risk mitigation)
- Urgency classification rate (% of searches designated “critical” or “project-impacting”)
- Average time-to-engage (days from intake to active search launch)

Compensation Movement — Moderate-High Upward Pressure
How this is tracked:
- Accepted offer variance (% above client’s initial budget range)
- Quarter-over-quarter comp delta by role family (Estimating, Operations, PM, Exec)
- Counteroffer rate (% of finalists receiving retention or counter offers)
- Deal re-trade frequency (# of searches requiring comp scope expansion mid-process)

Candidate Supply — Structurally Constrained
How this is tracked:
- Qualified candidate yield (interview-qualified candidates per 50 targets)
- Submittal-to-interview ratio
- Interview-to-offer ratio
- Hardest-role index (roles with the longest average days-to-first-qualified-candidate and time-to-fill)

Mobility & Retention — Elevated Friction
How this is tracked:
- Process fallout rate (% of candidates exiting due to counteroffers, fear of change, or project timing)
- Late-stage withdrawal rate (post-interview/post-offer exits)
- Average decision cycle (days from first interview to acceptance/decline)
- Offer acceptance rate

Leadership Gaps — Widening
How this is tracked:
- Leadership replacement share (% of searches at PM+, PX, Ops, or Executive level)
- Bench-driven vs. emergency searches (planned vs. disruption-driven)
- Time-to-productivity risk window (vacancy duration in project-critical roles)
- Repeat-hire indicator (firms initiating multiple leadership searches within 12 months)

Each indicator establishes baseline readings and tracks directional movement over time, forming the long term and short term measurement framework of the Construction Talent Index.

Western U.S. Hiring Demand Trends

(**Based on active Western U.S. search volume last quarter)**
• Estimator / Senior Estimator — 28% of all active searches
• Project Manager / Senior Project Manager — 22%
• Superintendent / Senior Superintendent — 18%
• Project Executive — 14%
• Preconstruction Manager / Director — 11%
• Operations Leadership (Ops Manager, Director, VP) — 7%

Collectively, estimating, preconstruction, and project leadership roles now account for over 75% of all live construction searches within the mid-market GC segment.

Market Observations
• Estimating and preconstruction teams are under the greatest strain.

These roles represent the longest average time-to-fill and the lowest qualified-candidate yield across all tracked searches.

• Risk-driven hiring is accelerating.
41% of searches this quarter were replacement or stabilization driven, not growth up from prior baseline activity.
• Firms with backlog but thin leadership benches are disproportionately represented.
Over half of replacement searches originated from contractors carrying strong awarded backlog but lacking succession or bench depth.
• Infrastructure-adjacent contractors continue to exhibit steadier hiring patterns.
Their searches show lower urgency classifications, longer planning windows, and reduced counteroffer disruption.
• Project starts are outpacing leadership pipelines.
Across active accounts, average vacancy duration in senior project roles now exceeds active project ramp timelines.
Field Signal (Market Example)

This quarter, a mid-market Western GC initiated an emergency senior superintendent search after a failed leadership hire coincided with the startup of two commercial projects. Within six weeks, project schedules were re-sequenced, a preconstruction leader was pulled into field coverage, and ownership entered the market offering compensation materially above prior ranges.
Not to grow, but to stabilize live work.
Demand is no longer centered around growth alone. A rising portion of searches are now risk-mitigation hires tied directly to project continuity and leadership exposure.

Salary & Compensation Benchmarks

These ranges reflect live recruiting activity, active compensation negotiations, and recent accepted and declined offers observed across Western U.S. construction markets, supplemented by third-party compensation studies and labor statistics.

Estimating & Preconstruction
Estimator: $85,000 – $115,000
Senior Estimator: $110,000 – $145,000
Preconstruction Manager: $125,000 – $165,000
Director of Preconstruction: $150,000 – $195,000

Field signal: Multiple Senior Estimator searches this quarter closed between $135,000–$150,000 after initial budgets capped at $120,000–$125,000. In two cases, firms expanded comp ranges mid-process following candidate withdrawals tied to counteroffers.

Project Management
Project Manager: $95,000 – $125,000
Senior PM: $120,000 – $155,000
Project Executive: $145,000 – $190,000
Field signal: Project Executive candidates managing $75M–$150M annual work volumes are consistently declining offers below $160,000 base, particularly when oversight ratios exceed 3–4 active projects.

Field Leadership
Superintendent: $90,000 – $120,000
Senior Superintendent: $115,000 – $150,000
General Superintendent: $135,000 – $175,000
Field signal: Senior Superintendents with ground-up commercial or civil experience are now seeing total compensation packages approach $155,000–$165,000 when per diem, truck, or travel incentives are included even when base ranges remain lower.

Operations Leadership
Director of Operations: $145,000 – $185,000
Vice President of Operations: $165,000 – $220,000
Field signal: VP of Operations searches are showing the widest comp dispersion, with final numbers driven more by succession risk and workload absorption than title. Two recent conversations exceeded $200,000 base after failed internal promotions created leadership exposure.

Talent Movement & Retention Patterns

Why candidates are engaging
• Project instability
“My projects keep getting reshuffled, and nobody can tell me what I’m running six months from now.”

• Leadership turnover
“We’ve had three different operations leaders in two years. Everything’s reactive.”

• Limited advancement paths
“There’s nowhere for me to go unless someone retires or burns out.”

• Compensation compression
“I’m carrying more risk than people making the same money I am.”

• Desire for higher-quality projects and teams
“I want to work on better-built jobs with stronger teams, not just chase volume.”

Why candidates are declining offers
• Strong counteroffers
“Ownership came back hard once I resigned. They finally fixed the things I’d been asking for.”

• Unclear backlogs
“I couldn’t get a straight answer on what I’d actually be walking into.”

• Leadership credibility concerns
“The vision sounded good, but I wasn’t confident the structure was there.”

• Lengthy decision timelines
“By the time they circled back, I’d already mentally moved on.”

• Cultural misalignment
“It just didn’t feel like an environment set up for people to win.”

A growing share of high-value candidates are exiting processes late-stage when leadership quality, operational systems, or project visibility fail to meet expectations. Compensation is rarely the sole breaking point.

Leadership Risk Map

Structural Issues Emerging Across Western Contractors

Across Western contractors, several consistent structural issues are appearing each carrying measurable operational impact:

• Thin preconstruction leadership creating bid strain
→ Resulting in longer bid cycles, elevated estimating error exposure, and missed pursuit volume, as small teams are forced to cover disproportionate workload.

• Overextended project executives
→ Driving slower decision velocity, inconsistent project oversight, and increased downstream cost and rework risk as executive bandwidth becomes the bottleneck.

• Superintendents promoted without adequate operational support
→ Producing field burnout, quality escapes, schedule slippage, and avoidable conflict with owners and trade partners.

• Limited succession planning
→ Forcing reactive, premium-priced searches, prolonged leadership vacancies, and material continuity risk on active projects.

• Informal recruiting during high demand
→ Leading to longer vacancies, weaker candidate quality, higher fall-off rates, and comp escalation driven by urgency instead of strategy.

Contractors operating with defined leadership layers, visible career tracks, and planned bench strategies are consistently closing roles faster, retaining longer, and absorbing materially less execution risk than peer firms.

What This Means for Construction Leaders

• Reframe talent from an HR function to a continuity system.
Leadership teams are being forced to treat recruiting, succession, and bench building as business continuity infrastructure, not support services.

• Shift from pay-first offers to platform-first environments.
Firms must now compete on project quality, leadership structure, workload design, and career visibility not just compensation.

• Invest in bench depth before it is needed.
Leaders are being pushed to build surplus leadership capacity instead of hiring only at the point of project exposure.

• Treat preconstruction leadership as a strategic choke point.
Backlog growth is forcing executives to prioritize estimating and preconstruction leadership as a constraint on revenue, margin, and risk.

• Move from reactive hiring to risk-managed workforce planning.
Organizations that delay hiring until breakdown occurs are implicitly accepting execution risk, schedule compression, and cost volatility.

2026 Outlook

Across Western U.S. construction markets, the Construction Talent Index indicates four core trends entering 2026:

- Estimating and preconstruction roles will remain in highest demand
- Leadership movement will increase
- Compensation growth will moderate but remain elevated
- Contractors with defined recruiting strategies will increasingly separate from reactive competitors

How these dynamics express themselves will vary based on broader market conditions.

Scenario 1: Backlog Softens
If awarded work moderates or slows:
- Estimating and preconstruction demand intensifies, not eases.
 Firms will compete on win-rate, margin discipline, and pursuit quality, increasing pressure on top estimating leadership.
- Leadership movement becomes selective rather than volumetric.
 Executives will see replacement of underperforming leaders accelerate as firms optimize cost structures.
- Compensation growth narrows, but volatility increases.
 Base ranges stabilize, while top performers continue to command premiums and underperforming segments compress.
- Structured recruiting becomes a cost-control mechanism.
 Firms with defined pipelines will hire faster and more precisely, while reactive firms absorb false starts and failed placements.

Scenario 2: Financing Tightens
If capital becomes more restrictive:
- Risk tolerance drops.
 Demand shifts toward battle-tested operators, turnaround leaders, and margin protectors.
- Failed hires become more expensive.
 Longer vacancy windows and misaligned placements will carry outsized cost, delay, and client-relationship impact.
- Compensation pressure redistributes.
 Total compensation flattens, but security, backlog clarity, and leadership credibility become primary acceptance drivers.
- Bench depth becomes a defensive asset.
 Organizations with internal successors and external pipelines will absorb disruption without destabilizing live work.

Scenario 3: Project Starts Accelerate
If starts outpace current forecasts:
- Preconstruction and field leadership shortages widen.
 Time-to-fill extends further as project ramp speed outstrips leadership supply.
- Leadership movement accelerates materially.
 Poaching, counteroffers, and private-equity-driven leadership upgrades increase.
- Compensation pressure re-accelerates.
 Especially in estimating, senior superintendents, and operations leadership.
- Reactive hiring becomes a structural disadvantage.
 Urgency-driven searches translate directly into execution risk and margin erosion.

Cross-Scenario Conclusion
Regardless of macro direction, the Construction Talent Index points to a consistent outcome:
Contractors operating with defined recruiting systems, visible succession tracks, and active leadership pipelines will outperform peers in execution stability, hiring efficiency, and long-term competitiveness.

About the Construction Talent Index

Methodology

The Construction Talent Index is a recurring market intelligence publication developed by Dynamic Executive Search to measure labor market conditions across mid-market general contractors operating in the Western United States.

Index readings are derived from aggregated, anonymized data drawn from active executive and leadership searches, live candidate engagement and placement activity, compensation negotiations and offer outcomes, and ongoing market mapping conducted across commercial, industrial, civil, and infrastructure-adjacent construction firms.

These internal signals are normalized into quarterly benchmarks including role-specific demand share, replacement-to-growth hiring ratios, time-to-fill, qualified candidate yield, late-stage fallout, and compensation variance. Directional movement is tracked longitudinally to identify sustained shifts in availability, mobility, and leadership risk.

Index conclusions are contextualized and validated using national labor statistics and independent construction workforce research.

External Reference Sources

The Construction Talent Index is supported and benchmarked against data from:

- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) — Construction employment, occupational outlooks, wage data, quit rates
- Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) — Workforce surveys, hiring sentiment, construction labor shortages
- Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) — Construction Backlog Indicator, Construction Confidence Index, workforce studies

For construction leaders seeking to benchmark their organization against current market conditions, including leadership structure, compensation alignment, or bench depth, direct conversations are available.

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