

# Women in Construction

By Lily Samuels

**T**he shotcrete industry—whether dealing with recreational, infrastructure, or underground applications—is inarguably a male-dominated field. Can this change? If so, why should it, and why should we care?

According to 2014 Bureau of Labor statistics (refer to Table 1), women comprise only 9% of the construction industry in the United States. Considering how—by contrast—women are 51% of the country’s population, this is a significant underrepresentation. It also, however, signifies a tremendous opportunity for the industry’s benefit.

## Vast Potential

As a female executive in a reputable luxury shotcrete construction company, I am part of that 9%. I was not born into the construction world, and I didn’t go to school for this or receive any formal training in construction management. And yet, in the course of career transition, I have found a remarkable and rewarding challenge in this industry.

I know I am by no means an exception. There are serious female power players in the shotcrete and pool industries. Furthermore, there are countless other women in other fields who are upwardly mobile, ambitious, and in possession of highly transferrable skills that we have needed to quickly develop to survive in these challenging economic times. These skills—among them a modern aesthetic, polished communication, technological

savvy, commitment to company brand and message, keen sensibilities as consumers, solution-oriented critical thinking, consensus-building, and the list goes on—can pay massive dividends for any company.

My suggestion to the pool, shotcrete, and general construction industries: find these people and hire them. Reach outside the immediate market and access female candidates with multi-disciplinary backgrounds, including the social sciences, the arts, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), law, and business.

## Diversification: New Life

Why should you hire them? Because diversification of your work force is like a shot in the arm, imparting vitality, new ideas, and fresh thinking that can help a company stay relevant.

One thing we know about the pool industry in particular is that it is full of family businesses, many of them multi-generational. It recruits from within: children will get a start in the family shop and then either take the helm or move laterally to other companies in the industry. Anecdotally, we know that many women in the industry hold their positions because their fathers or husbands needed administrative or logistical support while doing field work, so they run the office or back-end operations, or dig further into the business and end up taking over. Many of these women hold important positions in the shotcrete industry today, and their contributions cannot be overstated.

The “legacy” factor of the pool industry is one of its strengths. Every rose has its thorn, however; and in some of these companies, a particular way of doing things might linger for generations and become set in stone just because that is the way it has “always been done.” While these family enterprises are at the heart of American small business, their environments can in some cases become closed off and stagnated, no longer reflecting either the market or resonating with the client they endeavor to serve.

While bearing the utmost respect for the past, I humbly suggest that the rapidly changing world we live in requires a dogged commitment to self-reinvention, growth, and a fearless approach to change. The way business is conducted is constantly evolving. Survival is predicated on the ability to correctly interpret and respond to those

**Table 1: 2014 Bureau of Labor statistics**

Industry	% of workers
Services	59%
Finance	54%
Wholesale and retail	46%
Public administration	45%
Manufacturing	28%
Agriculture	24%
Transportation	23%
Mining	13%
Construction	9%
All industries	47%

*Less than 10% of the construction industry is female, whereas other sectors have much higher rates of female employment*  
(Source of table: [www.osha.gov/doc/topics/women](http://www.osha.gov/doc/topics/women))

changes. Accessing the waves of educated, resourceful, and ambitious women entering the workforce is one such response.

## Why Hire A Woman?

I should pause here and clarify. I am not advocating the mass hire of women for its own sake alone. Indeed, no two people are identical; so it is impossible to make accurate sweeping statements about the effects “women” as a singular group would have on the industry.

For instance, the cliché idea that all women are an asset to male-dominated industries because they have a gentling effect on their tough-as-nails male colleagues and sweeten the experience for the client is an oversimplification. Some of the toughest, most driven, direct, and efficient managers I’ve worked under have been women. While calm and controlled, there was nothing gentle about their management style—they demonstrated the grit and incisiveness that the ideal executive should have when the situation calls for it. Similarly, many women have the gift of organization and can get an office running on all cylinders, while others are focused on big-picture strategy and have no bandwidth for the minutia. In my opinion, generalizations about the merits of women as opposed to men are reductionist and unhelpful.

So no, my argument for concerted effort to draw female candidates to the industry is a simple and practical one: untapped resources. Currently, the construction industry pulls 9 of every 10 hires from the male population. Statistically speaking, broadening that hiring pool increases the range of skills and perspectives that a company stands to absorb through its hiring program. The diversification of the available skills in a company is like additional arrows in a quiver or more fuel in a tank.

To be sure, hiring people out of their current fields requires that you both be able to attract them and then retain them. Competitive compensation, health benefits, and a clear growth track are essential components to catching a candidate’s eye and compelling them to sign on. When courting a serious candidate, assume that they will gravitate toward serious opportunities where the potential for both growth and successful contribution is high.

## My Story: Old Skills, New Growth

Like I alluded before, my career trajectory to my current position was by no means direct. On the contrary, I entered this field full-time after years of managing my full-time career in international human rights work in New York City and abroad while simultaneously consulting on shotcrete education. Could two industries be more different? Doubtful. The skills, however—

management, organizational, operational, public relations, marketing—transferred well.

Personally speaking, as Vice President of Drakeley Pool Company and Drakeley Industries (our sister consulting firm specializing in shotcrete applications), I was interested in the opportunity to have a critical role in creating growth. With the support of my colleagues throughout the company, I have been able to streamline systems, institute a rebrand that both honors and refreshes our company’s core identity, and actively participate in the execution of our custom shotcrete installations.

However, when asked what my key contribution has been to our two firms, I make an immediate connection back to my previous line of work.

Then, most of my day-to-day tasks involved communicating with key partners literally all around the world. Whether I was up at 3:00 a.m. to make a call to Kenya or writing an e-mail as simply and clearly as possible to a partner in South Sudan whose grasp of the English language was rudimentary, I was constantly striving to be understood correctly.

The only way to do that was to exercise what I describe as “active empathy”—putting yourself as best you can in the other person’s shoes and acting accordingly. And it became engrained in the way I conduct business.



*Fig. 1: Lily Samuels, Vice President of Drakeley Industries and Drakeley Pool Company, heads up client relations and general operations at the two firms*



*Fig. 2: With shotcrete capable of such high-quality, high-value installations, companies stand to benefit from hiring tech- and marketing-savvy professionals who can make sure the firm's brand reaches its target client*

So today, in my new line of work, as I work with my clients to realize their vision for their project, those same skills are relevant. I want to understand my client, comprehend what makes them tick, what they need from us, and what they ultimately hope to achieve with the swimming pool or water feature that we are building for them.

I want to find out how they want to be spoken to, what makes them feel heard and understood, and how we can work together creatively. These questions are now at the core of how my staff and I interact with our clients.

Too often in this industry (and only occasionally for good reasons), the client is framed as demanding, unreasonable, and on the opposite team. This could not be a more destructive mindset. It is damaging to consistent positive outcomes with clients, and it is something our company has actively worked to eliminate from our way of thinking. We have changed almost everything about the way we communicate, from our online approach to our collateral materials to the way we answer the phones.

## **Big Payoff**

It's paying off. Our lead conversion rates have gone up significantly: once we begin a dialogue with a client, it becomes clear to them that we are operating in a way that they did not expect but that they deeply appreciate, and that resonates with them as unusual and valuable. Our projects roll out more smoothly, and miscommunication between us and the client is increasingly rare. Upon a project's completion, client feedback almost always touches on our responsiveness and the ease with which questions or problems were answered and resolved.

In short, this is a prime example of how my professional experience in a completely different

sector and field has not only informed my approach but also allowed me to contribute directly to our company's success. Am I particularly good at this kind of communication because I'm a woman? Maybe, but it probably has more to do with the simple fact that I was given opportunities to develop the skills, and now my current company is reaping the benefits.

I share this story not to elevate myself but to point to how hiring from a wide and diverse pool of candidates can elevate a company, and in my opinion, an industry.

There are myriad women of enormous potential who want the chance to distinguish themselves as professionals, have a meaningful effect on a company's success, and launch or continue their careers in a place where their skills will be valued and effective. The construction industries would do well to offer them that opportunity.



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