

JOB MARKETS BY ARIANNE COHEN

# A Collision Course with Roadwork

THE EXECUTIVE HEADS TO A COFFEE SHOP for her daily latte, but today there's only one person behind the counter, and only drip coffee is available. The guy who usually makes the lattes left to build a bridge.

A little-known labor problem is about to land in the laps of hiring managers, from an unexpected source: the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal of 2021. That's the \$1 trillion US bill that aims to do

everything from repair old roads to improve rail lines. As those projects develop, so will the need for new hires—as many as 15 million over the next decade, mostly drawn from labor pools in other fields.

Construction, for example, is the most common career alternative for people who work at distribution centers and as truck drivers. And those who build bridges and roads will hardly be the only group Uncle Sam and his contractors will be reaching out

to. The bill will fund new jobs for experts in the grid system, broadband networks, and the environment. “Right now everyone’s trying to figure out how to get through the pandemic,” says retail expert Craig Rowley, a senior client partner at Korn Ferry. “This will be our next worry.”

During the New Deal, the last major government-inspired public-works projects, the unemployed were sadly plentiful. But fast-forward to this century, and companies are facing an unprecedented labor shortage. The numbers are not pretty: warehouse and distribution centers are already short hundreds of thousands of workers (Walmart alone is hiring 20,000 this season, and a recent Korn Ferry survey found that many retailers plan on opening new distribution centers). This puts infrastructure-bill jobs on a collision course with the demand for truck-driver and distribution talent. And it gets worse. “All of the bill’s construction work is also going to create competition for steel and concrete and bricks and so on,” says Rowley. “If you want to build distribution centers, you need bricks.”

To be sure, many companies stand to profit handsomely from the influx of project funding. But that will only be possible if they can keep staffed. “The infrastructure is great for the country,” says Michele Capra, vice president of client services for talent acquisition at Korn Ferry, but it does give employees a reason to leave, she says, particularly those

who consider their call-center or retail or latte job to be temporary, because a substantial number of the infrastructure-bill jobs will come with training. “The bill is providing opportunities to learn a niche skill that people can really build a career on, without having to go back to school,” says Capra. For example, a telecom technician who is accustomed to working outdoors with little opportunity to advance might jump at a specialty sewer-building job with training, which would provide a similar environment but higher future salary.

The way to retain those workers, says Capra, is to build a culture that repeatedly spells out their internal career paths, a step that companies have historically skipped with entry-level employees. “Say, ‘This is what your role will look like in six months, a year, two years, and here’s how your compensation will increase,’ so that employees can see their futures,” she says.

In the end, more inclusive hiring may be the best answer at many firms trying to expand their labor pools, say experts. But that will take a lot of careful study of local markets. “A lot of times companies say, ‘I need to hire more experienced black engineers in Montana,’” when few exist there, says Jacob Zabkowitz, vice president and general manager for Korn Ferry’s Global Recruitment Outsourcing business. “Companies that do well on this are open to flexibility on where the action is.”

## THE TAKEAWAY

Retaining staff is all about creating career paths.



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BOARDS BY RUSSELL PEARLMAN

# Defining Net Zero

NO ONE EXPECTS ANY SINGLE ORGANIZATION TO save the planet. Achieving net-zero carbon emissions by mid-century would cost an estimated \$1 trillion to \$2 trillion of additional investments per year, or 1% to 1.5% of the world's gross domestic product, according to the UK's Energy Transition