

Assistant Superintendent - Career Exploration

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Abstract

The construction industry is one of the most diversified fields due to the large number of products, systems, methods and processes that are involved to complete different types of projects. Due to this, a diverse staff is required to be able to successfully complete projects on time and on budget. Young people, whether in college or in the trades, who have interest in becoming an assistant superintendent are in demand currently and should strongly consider a career in construction management. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight on the qualifications and skills required for an assistant superintendent in a construction company, as one of the critical site jobs, and to explore the relevant career potential. The paper also includes valuable information using interviews with two of the professionals in this area of expertise.

Introduction

For a construction project to succeed, to have the scope completed on time, at or under budget, and be well built and functional for the client, it takes a team of skilled labor managed by an efficient staff. A critical member of this management team is the assistant superintendent, the person in charge of the direct supervision and organization of the foremen and trades and managing inspections and punch lists (Tenah, 1986). Construction job sites can have a large variety of different trades, each there to perform a specific task, in accordance with the building plans and specifications. With this large variety of trade groups working comes an amount of on-site chaos that needs to be scheduled and managed by the assistant superintendents to keep the project running smoothly.

The other management positions such as scheduler, estimator, and project manager tend to be off site, and broader stroke style management. While those positions are critical in planning at the start of the project, and the project end and wrap up, it is the day to day management of the superintendents that keeps these projects running successfully. The project site management team typically includes field engineers and superintendents who are on site every day for the duration of the project. The field engineers typically manage the more technical material, such as plan and BIM coordination, requests for information, and contract documents, where the superintendents manage the day to day function and personnel on site and the immediate schedule. It is within this job description that the ability to plan ahead, to schedule work activities, to have a strong work ethic, to get along with others, and to possess team leadership skills make up the top five competencies required to effectively perform superintendent work (Gunderson, 2011).

It is understood that for these construction management positions to function properly and make the most effective use of time, funding, and resources, the proper information needs to be

delivered within a timely and clear manner (Broughton, 2016). Considering this, there is much responsibility on the project engineer and project manager to get the superintendents adequate and timely information about what is happening from the big picture point of view. This is especially critical in terms of larger project schedule and the scope, while the superintendents play the critical role in providing a feedback loop of site information to the project management team (Tenah, 1986).

Responsibilities of Assistant Superintendents

The construction assistant superintendent is the immediate aide to the general superintendent and is responsible for the “direct daily supervision of construction activities on the project” (Schaufelberger 2017). This work that is supervised is not limited to self-performed work, but also included the work performed on and off site by all subcontractors. While the project scheduler is responsible for the larger master schedule of the project, the assistant superintendent is responsible for the daily scheduling and coordination of the activity for all labor working on site. This must be expressed to all the trades on site in order to ensure smooth daily operation. If there is a conflict between trades, such as a lack of coordination or a scheduling issue that has two different groups working in the same area simultaneously, it is typically brought to the attention of the assistant superintendent on site first. The assistant superintendent resolves those issues. In addition, in the case of a lack of coordination between trades, the assistant superintendent mediates those conversations.

Another critical job responsibility of the assistant superintendent is to be the first one to notice unsafe practices happening on site and to intervene as quickly as possible. To manage safety on site, the assistant superintendents are usually out on the site, walking the site and observing the work taking place. The assistant superintendents, along with the other field management team members will typically conduct daily safety meeting with the trades people or just the foremen to identify what safety risks are part of the immediate scope of work and how to mitigate them (Schaufelberger 2017).

Assistant superintendents are typically the first line of inspection for the quality of the work. They manage the daily walk throughs to make sure the correct elements are being built in the correct locations and match the project plans and specifications.

Becoming an Assistant Superintendent

Unlike project engineers, the education required to be an assistant superintendent varies. Some assistant superintendents have no college education, and have worked their way up through the trades, while about half have practical job experience mixed with some college training. According to one survey, approximately 6% of all superintendents have a bachelor’s degree (Broughton, 2016). A practical understanding of how projects are built and interpersonal communication skills are essential for this career, and education in construction management or engineering are only helpful, especially if candidates are anticipating moving up in the construction field (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Pay and Benefits for an Assistant Superintendent

According to glassdoor.com, the average yearly salary of an assistant superintendent in the United States is \$69,915 (Glassdoor, 2019). Payscale.com puts the midwestern assistant superintendent median salary at \$59,860 (Payscale, 2019). It is important to note that these salaries are base pay only, and there are many factors that can contribute to compensation, including various reimbursable expenses, overtime, and performance bonuses.

Job Outlook for Assistant Superintendents

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2015, the opportunities to become an assistant superintendent appear to be on the rise. Specifically, it is projected that employment in this career is expected to grow 9% from 2014 to 2024 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Interviews with Current Assistant Superintendents

In the following section, you can read the questions that assistant superintendents A, B, and C were asked about their career and their responses:

In some initial, quick statistical questions asked of the respondents, two out of three responded working over 60 hours per week and two out of three responded as having completed a bachelor's degree in a construction management program. When assistant superintendents A, B, and C were asked on scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the highly dissatisfied and 10 being highly satisfied, how satisfied they were with their career, the respondents replied with 10, 8, and 9, respectively. When asked on the same scale about their compensation satisfaction, the respondents A, B, and C replied with 10, 7, and 8, respectively.

Q: How long have you been an assistant superintendent? How long were you involved in construction prior to that?

Assistant superintendent A started out in the trades, as a carpenter's apprentice, and slowly worked his way up through the trades. He has worked a total of 27 years in roles from tradesman to general superintendent. Assistant superintendents B and C each completed a bachelor's degree from a collegiate construction management program. Assistant superintendent B graduated in May 2019 and started his career as an assistant superintendent. Prior to this, B worked internships during his school breaks from classes. Assistant superintendent C also graduated from a construction management program and progressed the past four and a half years from assistant PE (project engineer), PE1 and PE, and was promoted to assistant superintendent in July 2019.

Q: Can you provide a snapshot of your daily tasks?

Assistant superintendent B described his day as primarily "driving the daily quality and scheduling of jobs, making sure the right stuff is in the right spots." With coordination with the project engineering team, he helps in handling RFIs (requests for information) to the architects and ensuring that the built structure matches the submittals and project specifications. Assistant superintendent C identified his key day to day responsibilities as managing the logistics and field coordination, handling the deliveries, details, material staging and manpower on the site. Due to the size of his current project, assistant superintendent C identified concrete, curtain wall assemblies, roofing, and miscellaneous steel components as the primary focus of his

responsibilities. Assistant superintendent A said that his main daily tasks included leading safety meetings with the trade foremen and creating small one to three day schedules based on the project master schedule.

Q: As an individual who manages different trades or subcontractors on site, which one(s) do you find more challenging or demand more time to coordinate their work?

Assistant superintendent A said that at preconstruction meetings, the team figures out which trades and subcontractors are going to complete what scope and when. When the project starts on site, A stated that he *“identifies the weakest links and helps push them along.”* Assistant superintendent B stated, *“Starting off, MEP trades are more challenging as the nature of their work is more complicated and less intuitive to understand. However, I feel rather comfortable understanding masonry and framing.”* Assistant superintendent C identified elevators as a complicated building component that requires multiple trades to coordinate well to install properly. He also highlighted enclosures saying, *“Enclosure trades are demanding due to always fighting the weather to get the building watertight and/or heated thanks to those cold Chicago winters!”*

Q: What is one thing you do not want to see on site when you arrive at work?

All three respondents identified subcontractors who are not working or did not show up on their scheduled date. Assistant superintendent A also said, *“Gates left opening meaning that someone was on site who should have not been, or water running out of my building.”*

Q: What is something you hope to see change as the construction industry grows and evolves?

Assistant superintendent A said that the computer integration has gotten so much better from when he started with no computers on the site at all. He still wants to see further development and coordination happen with computers. Assistant superintendent B wants the trades to grow with more young people interested in working in actually building buildings. *“It is great to see more people my age who are passionate about getting a building put together, rather than just coming in for a paycheck.”*

Q: Do you consider your work, managing trades and schedules, to be mentally exhausting?

Assistant superintendent A stated, *“Extremely, next question.”* Assistant superintendents B and C stated that it can be tiring, especially when things get out of hand. *“Things can change by the minutes, sometimes even seconds, so staying on your A-Game is crucial. This is what I find exhausting.”*

Q: How important are interpersonal skills in your area of work?

“You have to be part psychologist and part babysitter to be a successful superintendent. Try and figure out what the team is gonna do and get ahead of them,” assistant superintendent A said. B and C agreed with that notion and emphasized the importance of communication and building relationships with each of the tradespeople on site. B also identified that every person on site wanted to be interacted with in some way or another and trying to identify which level of involvement is appropriate is still a work in process. He added, *“Different personalities are also common among different trades.”*

Q: After working in the industry, what are skills or competencies you would recommend ever construction management student should focus on before graduation?

Assistant superintendent A said, *“Attitude and effort. The academics need to be there, but most important is the personality for success.”* Assistant superintendent B emphasized the importance of comprehension of how a building gets built, and it is important to learn some commonplace building classes. He said he would have liked to have some classes that leaned towards a trade or vocational type classes as an overview of the trades work. Assistant superintendent C further emphasized the need for communication with all different types of people, with a further discussion on how it is perfectly acceptable and encouraged to ask questions when unsure about something.

Q: What are the challenges meeting an assistant superintendent?

Assistant superintendent A said that managing the PE and PM style paperwork and the legal and written aspect of work are challenging to him. Assistant superintendent B stated that he is challenged by *“knowing what happen and who goes next is still a new challenge to me. I am trying to gain as much practical on site experience as I can.”* Assistant superintendent C identified staying on top of things and ahead of the curve as projects progress can be quite challenging, and there is a learning curve to a new mind set as an assistant superintendent compared to his time as a project engineer.

Q: What is the thing you like best about your job?

A: *“The rear-view mirror factor. You drive through Chicago and I can show you my resume as a superintendent. There is the want of immortality, of leaving this legacy on my city.”*

B: *“Interactions with different people daily. Every day is different. You get to see changes every day, see the building come together.”*

C: *“Construction is a fluid environment that changes daily. Schedules are great on paper; however, as we go through the daily tasks, things will change. The ever changing puzzle pieces are what keep me going in this industry.”*

Conclusion

The role of an assistant superintendent is critical in having a project built on time, on budget, at the quality of the owner’s demand, and safely. The continuous demand for those who have the personality and skill set to work as an assistant superintendent is well justified as the industry continues to grow and evolve, and technological changes influence the way the built environment is constructed. This career requires a strong personality, high work ethic, and interpersonal communication skills at levels that are not seen amongst the other roles in construction management. The primary duties of working long hours on site, managing daily schedules, administering daily safety briefing and coordinating between trades can be exhausting, but according to the interviewees, is a highly rewarding career, both personally and in terms of compensation.

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Note: Interviews with assistant superintendents A, B, and C were conducted in November and December 2019.