



SUPERVIEWS



**STORIES, STATS, AND SECRETS
OF CONSTRUCTION SUPERINTENDENTS**

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Introduction

What's one universal characteristic that construction superintendents share? We decided to ask the supers themselves: "Good communicators." "Leadership." "Problem-solving." "Diligence."

These days when everything is becoming more automated and electronic, certain jobs still place a high value on good old human judgment. There's no better example of such a job than the construction superintendent.

The superintendent oversees site work on a construction project, acting as the human link between the owners, the designers, and the field.

A big construction project might employ a variety of supers with different specific responsibilities. A large general contractor may have dozens of superintendents, some of whom are assigned to specific sites, and others who float from project to project as needed.

Superintendents are construction's field generals. They are critical to a project's success, especially when it comes to addressing unanticipated issues in the field.

It's a job that requires something no software or checklist can accomplish: understanding people and how to communicate with them. This is a role reserved for a very particular kind of person.

FieldLens wanted to find out more about superintendents and what makes them tick. We interviewed over half a dozen superintendents and surveyed over 160 construction professionals.

We set out to learn:

- What are the hardest and most rewarding parts of the super's job?
- How are supers adapting to a rapidly changing technological landscape?
- What do supers and their colleagues really think about each other?
- How much do superintendents get paid, and where are they most in demand?

What we learned confirmed some things we already knew about supers, but also upended some stereotypes.

Even though they have some of the hardest jobs in the industry, construction superintendents are happy with their work. Although they seem to be all answers, they are learning every day.

And while technology governs much of how supers work, they also haven't lost their heritage. "My father was a superintendent and made a good honest living at it, so I went to school to follow his footsteps," says Tony Dougherty of Rogers-O'Brien Construction.

Construction supers today put in long, challenging days and earn above-average salaries. Above all, they enjoy a job that doesn't keep them behind a desk. They feel most at home out where people get their boots dirty.

Read on to find out why being a superintendent just might be the hardest job in construction.

The Hardest Job in Construction

- Superintendents and their colleagues all agree superintendents have a hard job.
- One reason it's hard: Supers have to juggle many different tasks.
- “It's like being the ringmaster of the three-ring circus.”

There seems to be little doubt that supers have one of the hardest jobs in construction. They know it, and so does everyone else on the job.

To the open-ended question “Who has the hardest job in construction” the most popular answer among all the construction professionals we surveyed, at 16% of respondents, was “superintendent” or “super.” (For comparison, the next most popular answer was concrete work, with 4% of the answers.)

When we looked specifically at superintendents we surveyed, 26% said that their own job was the hardest—also the most popular answer.

What's so hard about it?

We asked supers another anonymous, open-ended question to help better understand: “What's the hardest part of your job?” Some of the responses were:

“Poor construction drawings. Slow responses to RFIs.”

“Keeping subcontractors on track.”

“Dealing with county inspectors.”

“There is not enough time in the day.”

“Paperwork and keeping it to date and accurate.”

We asked the
open-ended question

“Who has the hardest
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of superintendents said it’s
their own job

Our additional, in-depth interviews with superintendents revealed more. Superintendents describe a variety of demands that keep them in constant motion. Hour after hour, the tough questions never let up.

“When you’re a superintendent you never have the chance to walk through a building without somebody approaching you,” says Mitch Kennedy, a superintendent with Rogers-O’Brien Construction.

Lucas Wilke, a superintendent with Manhattan Construction, says the more experienced supers learn to anticipate problems rather than react to them. “I’d classify them into two groups: good superintendents and great superintendents. The good react well to issues. If a problem comes up, they can solve it, work through, and move on. The great try to find the problem before anyone else does, to be as proactive as they can.”

In addition to keeping up with communication, supers have to manage people and keep their poise while doing it.

As Mitch Kennedy explains: “Superintendents have the ability to take on multiple tasks, digest it all, come

back and find the correct answer or direction, and just be able to get that back to the people who don’t understand (either the plans or job situation). It’s like being the ringmaster of the three-ring circus—or it can be like adult day care—depending on which day of the week it is.”

All the juggling of tasks, schedules, and personalities can stress a super out. One superintendent we interviewed says he likes to ride a motorcycle to relieve stress. Another says he likes to go bass fishing. One says he enjoys the slow pace of doing stained glass in contrast to the break-neck pace of the job. Jim White, a superintendent at Tatum Brown Custom Homes, says, “I have eight grandchildren. I watch *Frozen* four times a week.”

As we’ll examine in the next chapter, technology has added whole new ways for superintendents to keep up with the relentless challenges of the job. But now they have to keep up with the technology, too.

The Connected Superintendent

- Virtually all superintendents now use smartphones for work.
- Supers say today's technology is helping them do their job better.
- "You're never too old to learn."

Many superintendents have been in the construction industry since before wide usage of the handheld mobile phone, and well before the phone got "smart."

"I had the first phone on the job at Kier," recalls Jeff Chapman, a superintendent with Kier Construction. "It was an analog. We used to call it 'The Brick,' and we'd joke that if you forgot your hammer you could use that phone."

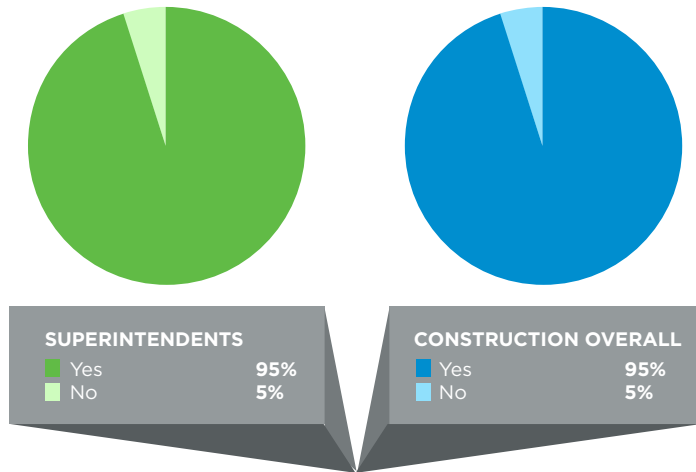
Since those days, supers' jobs have increasingly asked more of them in terms of embracing new technology. Whether it's new software to store and share files, tools to capture images and other media on the project, or new scheduling and project management programs, supers are expected to seamlessly integrate new technological tools into their daily routines.

Supers might not always burst into applause when greeted with the latest gadget or app, but they are masters at one thing: learning. Jeff Chapman says, "You're never too old to learn. If you're not a stick in the mud, you can learn something new every day from the younger guys, especially on electronics."

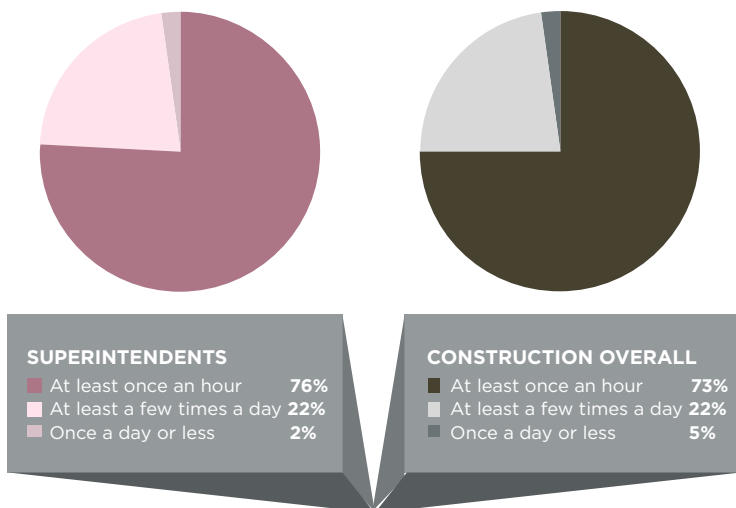
Some superintendents might (secretly or not so secretly) long for simpler times when they didn't have to worry about keeping pace from year to year, but many others embrace the new normal as enthusiastically as a V.D.C. manager or one of the youngest guys on the job.

"Construction is another world today, and all for the better," says Jim White.

Do you use a mobile device as part of your job?



How often do you use a mobile device at work?



“When someone says, ‘They don’t build ‘em like they used to,’ I say, ‘You should be glad.’ Both structurally and administratively, things are much better today.” He elaborated: “When I started there were no cell phones, no Internet. That says a lot. We had yellow pads, pagers... dimes and quarters to make phone calls. We had to go back to our trailers. Now we can FaceTime-walk a house for a client who’s on vacation to show them what they’re coming home to.”

In our survey, 76% of supers say they use their mobile devices at least once an hour, slightly more than construction professionals on average. The superintendent has a cast of characters to keep in touch with on a project, whether it’s to provide an update to the owner or to follow up with a subcontractor whose role on the job is critical to make the schedule.

And most supers believe that mobile technology is helping make their jobs easier, not harder. When we asked superintendents in our survey, “Does using a mobile device make your job easier or harder,” a whopping 95% said it makes it easier.

In interviews, supers stress that technology helps them cover more ground—literally being in more than one place at once. “A big problem for supers is going back and forth from field to office. Now drawings are digital, and you can share and mark up, and comment easily. [With my phone] I can do safety inspections, drawings and photos, and check the weather out in the field,” said Levi Brush, a superintendent with Rogers-O’Brien Construction.

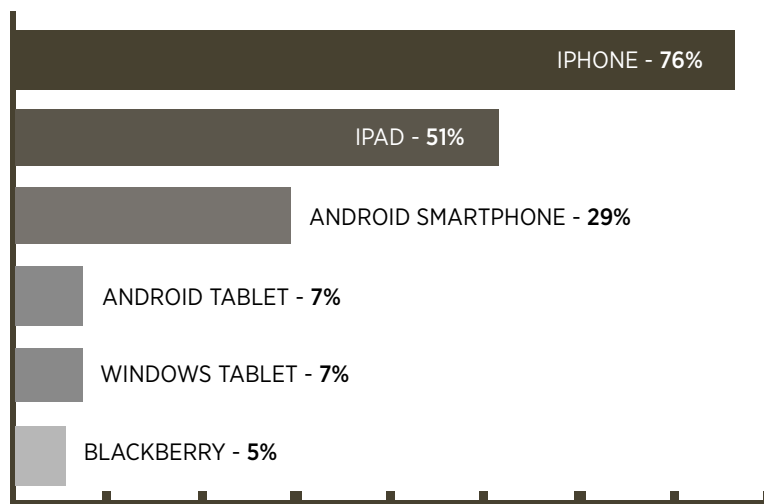
Another super, Marc Minster from Wadman Corporation, called out an example of how mobile tech helps supers make the office feel like they’re synced up with activity in the field: “Now we’re to the point of mobile communication where things are instantaneous. I’ve heard from people in my office: ‘Hey that concrete you’re pouring right now looks good.’”

If you've noticed more Apple products on jobsites lately, you're right on. The iPhone is far and away the most popular of all the mobile devices used by superintendents we surveyed, with the iPad being the most popular tablet. Many superintendents use multiple devices.

On one jobsite we visited recently, we met a superintendent who was juggling a Blackberry, an iPad, and an iPad Mini all at once to keep communication flowing on the project.

Superintendents often use multiple devices, with Apple devices being the most popular.

Most popular devices, by % of superintendents who say they use them



Earning Power

- A typical superintendent can earn over \$92,000 a year.
- Jobs are coming back: 80% of construction firms plan to hire this year.
- The job demands long hours and, for some, frequent travel.

Superintendents make a good living. Construction managers (a job classification that includes superintendents) take home an annual mean wage of \$92,700 across the U.S., according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

The highest earners are based in the Northeast, where mean wages can top \$120,000. In contrast, the average construction professional earns \$45,630, aligning pretty closely with the average American worker in any job at \$46,440. Today's construction manager is about 47 years old, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

According to the Associated General Contractors, the current jobs outlook is also good. A full 80% of construction firms plan to hire more workers in 2015 and only 7% plan to reduce the workforce. Of the 23 states surveyed (with large enough sample size), Virginia-based companies plan to increase hiring by 95%, more than any other comparable state.

The density of construction managers is highest in areas where the energy and transportation industries have a large footprint, including places like Victoria, Texas, and Fairbanks, Alaska.

And the demand for experienced superintendents is growing, with salaries to match, as fewer young construction professionals step up to fill that role.

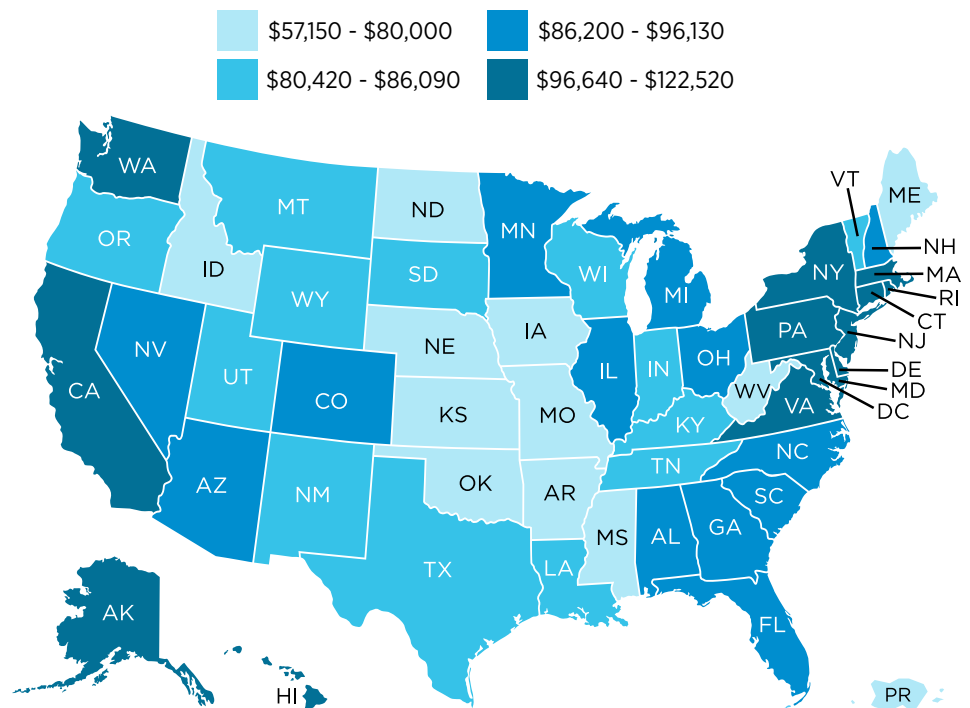
But having strong earning power comes at its own cost. One superintendent surveyed said that the hardest thing about his job was "Being away from my wife and kids for long periods of time."

A super's day often starts before most of their crew has arrived (around 5 a.m.) and wraps up about 12 hours later, usually an hour or so after most of their crew has gone home. Their role on projects can last anywhere from a few months to several years.

Superintendents work hard and get compensated to match. As we'll see in the next chapter, one of the biggest perks is hard to put a price on: job satisfaction.

Where Superintendents Earn the Most

Annual mean wage of construction managers (including superintendents)



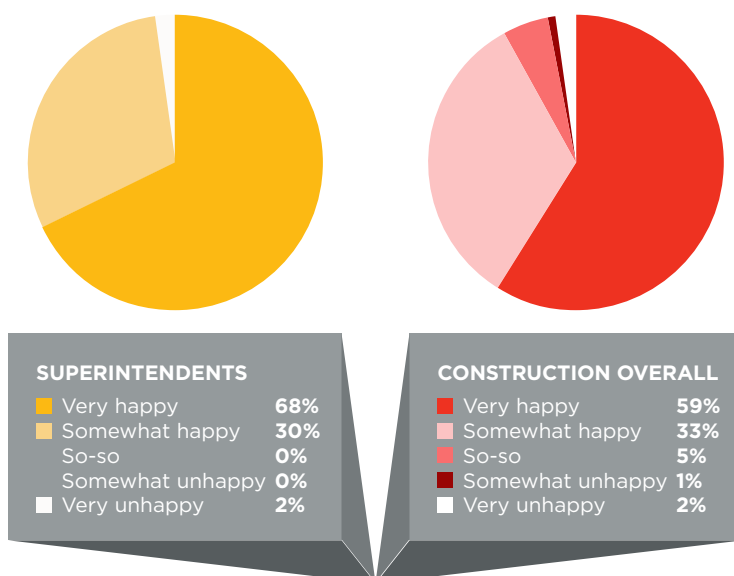
Metro areas with the highest concentration of construction managers

1. Victoria, TX
2. Fairbanks, AK
3. Naples-Marco Island, FL
4. Anchorage, AK
5. Corpus Christi, TX
6. Odessa, TX
7. Hot Springs, AR
8. Beaumont-Port Arthur, TX
9. Houston, TX
10. North Port-Bradenton-Sarasota, FL

Loving the Job

- Superintendents say they're happier on average than other construction professionals.
- They list many reasons for job satisfaction, including being able to see the fruits of their labor.
- "I enjoy digging into the issue and figuring things out."

How happy are you with your job?



Can it be that the hardest job in construction is also one of the most enjoyable? The supers we surveyed and interviewed thought so. Of all of the construction pros we surveyed, 59% reported they were "very happy" with their job. Of the superintendents surveyed, that number jumped to 68%.

Levi Brush explains: "God gifted me with the ability. I'm analytical, and the leadership role is a natural role for me. I enjoy what I do...Even though some days it doesn't seem like it, I enjoy digging into the issue and figuring things out."

His colleague Mitch Kennedy says, "I'm a real people person. When there was an opportunity [to become a superintendent], I said yes. From that day forward I never regretted it one bit." Every good super knows, relationship-building is another key skill on any project.

Despite all of the various challenges associated with their job, supers tend to get a sense of fulfillment from a job done well and on schedule. Superintendents surveyed described a variety of different qualities as the "best

part” of their job. These ranged from “Working with a great team” to “Being able to see all the hard work we put on these projects and seeing them come together” to “Watching younger professionals mature in my company” and “Completing a project and the owner is happy.”

We also heard many superintendents describe the satisfaction of learning all aspects of the construction trades.

“If I don’t learn something new every day I go to work, there’s no reason for me to be in construction,” says Marc Minster.

Lucas Wilke touched on a super’s often vast knowledge of the trades: “They used to say ‘A super is a renaissance man.’ He didn’t need to know everything but as much as he could.”

Explains Jim White: “A new vendor or a new trade will say, ‘On this building we’re doing this,’ and it’s like a light bulb goes off. So simple. Why didn’t I think of that? At first, we might be skeptical, and then we find out it works and it becomes part of our repertoire.”

This wide range of knowledge, and affinity for all the trades on the jobsite, makes superintendents highly influential in construction, as we’ll see in the next chapter.

Your Greatest Influencers

- Superintendents are increasingly responsible for keeping fast-paced jobs on track.
- Good superintendents are skilled at bringing people together and coordinating a project.
- “You have to get yours subs, suppliers, everybody on board.”

One thing we were interested in was how superintendents got into their role in the first place. Everyone had a different story, but most supers shared in common that they enjoy the challenge of leading and being looked up to.

“I’d always seen the guys that walked around the job and had that authority,” says Mitch Kennedy. “People were drawn to them, and it seemed like they had all the answers. I got energized about becoming the go-to guy,”

Marc Minster talks about getting (and communicating) the “vision” of the project: “There are 30 different supers in our company. The most important thing is the ability to schedule and get the vision of the project. You have to get your subs, suppliers, everybody on board to see why you’re doing things the way you’re doing them. That is a big part of your project’s success.”

And with this weight of responsibility to inform and rally the project team, comes an additional task: to be as proactive as possible. “Part of the problem is that the architects and engineers used to have more time to plan. That window is shrinking,” said Lucas Wilke. “They’re tasked with producing more, and the drawings are more challenging. So the field has had to step up and be cognizant. We have to be proactive for the architect...the pace of the job has definitely up-ticked. You always

have to be on your toes. They're expecting more and more for you to find problems and make the schedule."

As smartphones and other technological wonders empower superintendents to work more efficiently, owners are expecting them to finish jobs faster than ever before. They're walking through virtual renderings of buildings at the same time that they're expected to cobble together paper reports back in the trailer. And they're still the person walking through the building without a moment's peace.

With so many people relying on supers to set the tone and pace of the project, and with so much riding on them to provide the right answers and direction, it's clear that supers are some of the greatest influencers in the industry.

Construction firms should recognize the growing expectations and shrinking windows supers have to contend with today. Companies that equip superintendents with the best tools and technology will better position their construction projects for overall success.

Thanks

Special thanks to Levi Brush of Rogers-O'Brien Construction, Jeff Chapman of Kier Construction, Tony Dougherty of Rogers-O'Brien, Mitch Kennedy of Rogers-O'Brien, Marc Minster of Wadman Corporation, Lucas Wilke of Manhattan Construction, and Jim White of Tatum Brown Custom Homes.

Survey data is based on a FieldLens poll of 163 construction professionals conducted in December 2014.

Salary and geographic data is from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics May 2013 Occupational Profiles.

ABOUT FIELDLENS

FieldLens is the mobile-first communication platform designed by builders, for builders. It helps construction professionals communicate more effectively so that they can spend less time managing information and more time building better.

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