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Introduction

In January 2020, the first cases of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) infections were being reported in the United States. Following clusters of outbreaks in China and other countries, the world would soon fall victim to unprecedented pandemic challenges, including overflowing healthcare facilities, shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), and nationwide lockdowns. Infection rates and deaths would climb to alarming numbers. For the construction industry, the uncertainty of COVID-19 brought its own set of issues for those professionals working to build or repair our buildings, infrastructure, or homes.

This essay examines COVID-19 and its impacts on Southwest Missouri through a multitude of interviews with industry practitioners from a variety of organizations, including general contractors, owners, engineers, trade partners, and industry professional organizations. Analyzing the data, three topics emerged as common themes : employment issues, day-to-day operations, and the health and safety of workers. The following sections highlight personal experiences and takeaways on how the pandemic affects businesses now and potentially into the future.

Day-to-Day Operations

When the pandemic began, fear spread quickly, causing people to transition to working from home. For Mike Brown, working from home did not work very well. He states, “We rely so much on going to each other, talking, asking questions, and getting help. Communication was really hard.” Working together in an office comes with many relational aspects all of which build trust, teamwork, and collaboration. When individuals began working from home, the community was impacted greatly, and many were unsatisfied. While most came back to work in the office, some continue to work from home. According to GR Stovall, President of DeWitt & Associates, their company has employees that have not returned to the office and continue to work from a distance.

As some continue to work from home and others are forced to quarantine, new ways of communication needed to be implemented. The biggest change has been the use of virtual meeting platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Duo, to interact with the owner, design team, and onsite personnel. The use of virtual meetings has been a controversial topic within the construction industry. While some fear that the lack of face-to-face communication breeds distrust and creates a distance between the GC and the owner, others believe that virtual meetings allow for more flexibility and are a timesaver. The biggest challenge moving forward will be determining what meetings are best held virtually and what meetings need to be in person.

Outside of the use of virtual meeting platforms, the general use of technology to exchange information has become somewhat of a standard. According to Adam Parks, Senior Construction Manager at Q & Company, there was a plethora of subcontractors, suppliers, and city offices that would not let individuals come into their facilities. “This

Health and Safety

The health and safety of workers has always been a consideration in the construction industry, but never to the extent that we are seeing now. With uncertainty of new federal policies and OSHA requirements, contractors are having a hard time maintaining a stable workforce.

“On Nov. 5, OSHA published its COVID-19 vaccination-or-testing policy for businesses with at least 100 employees companywide. On Nov. 6, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals issued a stay temporarily blocking the rule. The Department of Labor's chief legal officer said in response, "We are fully prepared to defend this standard in court.”” (Lisa Nagele-Piazza, J.D) The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals isn’t the only one against the new policy. As some employees refuse to get vaccinated and projects begin requiring vaccinations for onsite staff, companies are having to be cautious with what projects they bid.

Tim Hanna has his concerns regarding this issue, “

While the issue of vaccinations is still unclear and out of our control, it is important to stay positive and reflect on how the industry was able to adapt and stay open through the pandemic. Companies implemented daily temperature checks, social distancing, and sanitation guidelines. Employees that become ill are being more receptive to going home to recuperate versus staying at work and potentially spreading the illness to those around them. As an industry, we became more aware of infectious diseases and how to keep employees safe from them.

Conclusion

While some of the changes to the construction industry are short term, some are here to stay. The most important concept for companies to remember is that it is vital to stay flexible and to be willing to make changes to adapt. As an industry, we have already shown that we can in the following three areas: employment issues, day-to-day operations, and the health and safety of workers.

As a professional organization, the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) can continue to assist the industry by partnering with influential groups, such as government entities, to help establish realistic policies and procedures for responding to all possible infectious diseases, not just COVID-19. In addition, the organization could help educate and help implement the requirements set in place.

Although it may seem that the negative impacts of COVID-19 greatly outweigh the positives, that is not the case. The virus not only tested the industry's resilience, but it proved that that we can adapt to any challenges that may present themselves.

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