

Internships building female leaders at Exxel Pacific

By MERRISSA WESTERMAN
Exxel Pacific

Internships provide invaluable opportunities for young professionals to gain hands-on experience and develop crucial skills in the construction industry. At Exxel Pacific, internships also empower young women and prepare them to thrive in the industry, serving as a bridge between academic learning and professional success. For women, particularly in traditionally male-dominated industries like construction, internships provide a platform to learn from other professionals, build confidence, and gain the necessary skills to thrive in the industry.



Westerman

WOMEN THRIVING AT EXXEL PACIFIC

Exxel Pacific's internship program has been successful in cultivating female leaders. Many former interns have advanced to leadership roles within the company, contributing to its success and paving the way for future generations of women in construction. We spoke with several women at Exxel Pacific who started as interns and have since grown into leadership roles to learn how their internship shaped their careers.

MELISSA VOLLMER, DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS OPERATIONS

Q. What inspired you to pursue a career in the construction industry, and how did you reach a leadership role?



Vollmer

Melissa Vollmer: I stumbled into construction. A family friend of someone at Exxel Pacific introduced me to the company, and I started as an administrative intern. Early on, I was fortunate to have an incredible manager who became a mentor. She saw potential in me that I didn't yet see in myself and consistently encouraged me to take on more responsibility. She created an environment where I felt comfortable trying new things and



The women of Exxel Pacific at the company's Verdant jobsite.

Photo courtesy of Exxel Pacific

wasn't afraid to fail.

Early in my career, I adopted a simple rule: say yes to every opportunity. Whether it was within my formal role or not, I raised my hand. I attended every event I was invited to and volunteered for any task that needed support. That mindset opened doors I never anticipated. It allowed me to grow beyond my job description and created new opportunities within the company. I often recommend this approach to anyone early in their career or new to an organization. Saying yes helps you learn quickly, build relationships, and gain exposure across the business.

Q. What was the most pivotal moment during your internship at Exxel?

MV: One pivotal moment for me was witnessing how deeply

Exxel Pacific's executive team cares about employees. It's a major reason I've been with the company for over 12 years. I remember sitting in on a discussion about a costly employee benefit decision. It was the type of decision that wouldn't be publicly recognized and would have a financial impact on the company, but it would meaningfully benefit employees—even if they never knew the details behind it.

What stood out was how consistently the executive team focused on doing what was best for employees, without hesitation. That experience shaped how I view leadership and business. It brought our core value—doing the right thing when no one is looking—to life. Being supported by leaders who genuinely prioritize people has been a gamechanger for me and has

significantly influenced how I approach my own leadership.

Q. How can women support other women in the construction industry?

MV: I've participated in conversations about promotions and career development, and I've seen firsthand how impactful it is to have an advocate in the room. Having someone at the table who speaks up for you can significantly influence your career trajectory.

My advice for women is to build strong relationships across your organization. You never know who will be in a position to advocate for you, and those connections matter. For women who are in a position to support others, I encourage being intentional about using your voice. Small moments of support and visibil-

ity can make a lasting difference in someone's career.

BROOKE CHEW, PROJECT MANAGER

Q. What is the biggest change you have seen in the field since you started?



Chew

Brooke Chew: Historically, construction has been viewed as slow to change, but over the last few years in our area, I've seen a commitment to growth. It has been fantastic to see the industry evolve not just in technology and safety, but also in the diversity of the workforce.

These changes have resulted in a more innovative and inclusive environment, improving the product and the lives of those who build it. The future, and more specifically the people behind the future of construction, excites me.

Q. How can companies use their internship programs to develop women within the industry?

BC: Construction is a diverse and complex field, which can make it laborious to find your place in. I see internships as a mutually beneficial experience to combat this obstacle. Using internships as an introduction to the industry allows women to see how their unique strengths align with the team. Interns can experience firsthand how team members work together to deliver the product and therefore can visualize their place within the ecosystem.

Q. How do you see the future of women in construction evolving over the next decade?

BC: The statistics of women joining the construction workforce over the last five years have been encouraging. I look forward to the day construction is no longer considered a male-dominated field. Our industry's future success depends on its ability to innovate, and we can do that by fully utilizing the talent and perspectives of the entire population.

DONNA MARSHALL, CFO

Q. How did the internship program set you up for success?



Marshall

Donna Marshall: I started working for the company over 15 years ago and was the first administrative intern for Exxel Pacific. I was lucky enough to have a great mentor that saw something in me and poured her experience and knowledge onto me. She told me about her experiences and how she dealt with them, she helped me to find my voice, showed me how important communication is and how to adapt my style to the person or situation I'm in.

I knew she was always in my corner as my support system, encouraging me when I needed it and helping me learn from my mistakes. She helped me grow into the person I am today, and I am grateful for her and the

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BUILD SOMETHING STRONGER

Women who build: Voices from RTC's construction management program

■ The career tech route is an increasingly popular one for women, building confidence and opening doors.

By **DARLENE SEPTELKA** and **AISHWARYA FADNAVIS**
Special to the Journal

Rising project demands are intensifying labor shortages across the construction industry, with firms reporting continued difficulty filling both craft and management roles. Women remain underrepresented, comprising just 11.6% of the workforce as of January 2026, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. At Renton Technical College (RTC), the Construction Management program is helping expand the industry's talent pipeline by preparing women to begin and advance long-term careers in construction.

RTC offers evening, online, and hybrid classes, allowing students to balance school with work and family commitments. Full-time students can complete the associate degree in two years, while working adults, parents and career changers can progress at their own pace.

Female enrollment in RTC's Construction Management program increased from 13 percent to 33 percent between 2021 and 2026. This growth reflects rising interest among women in construction and highlights education as a clear pathway to advancement.

To understand why, we spoke with five current students and graduates. Their stories reveal how education builds confidence, creates stability, and opens doors.

DANIKA ALDANA CORTEZ

Cortez has spent five years as a member of Local 528 as an apprentice concrete finisher on projects ranging from infrastructure to sidewalks. She works full-time at Jansen and received the 2025 Peggy Cook Apprentice Award from the Washington Women in Trades.

As a working mother managing long shifts and overtime, Danika attends evening classes at RTC. She says coursework has changed how she sees her job. She now understands why certain materials are chosen and how field decisions connect to the larger project.

Scholarship sup-



Septelka



Fadnavis



Cortez

'Never give up. Believe in yourself.'

- Danika Aldana Cortez

port has eased the financial pressure of returning to school. After graduation, she hopes to move into estimating or project support roles and build long-term stability for herself and her child.

KELINA BUNBURY

Kelina Bunbury entered construction through the Seattle Conservation Corps in 2017. She began in entry-level roles, joined Laborers' Local 242 in 2018, and advanced to journeyman working on major infrastructure projects.

While raising her teenage son and attending RTC, Bunbury is focused on advancing from fieldwork to management. The program's flexible schedule allows her to balance work, parenting and education. She brings years of field experience into the classroom and connects theory directly to job-site realities. At home, she and her son compare notes about school, and encourage one another through their classes.

She is interested in estimating, field engineering, or project support roles where she can apply both technical training and field knowledge. She has already mentored several women into the union and intends to continue creating pathways for others while helping deliver projects that make a lasting impact on the community.

CORI KIA

Cori Kia represents a younger generation entering construction. Her interest began building with Legos and playing Minecraft with her carpenter father, and continued through high school woodshop. After graduation, she enrolled in the ANEW pre-apprenticeship program, where she saw other women pursuing trades careers and realized construction could be her path.

After moving to Renton, she discovered RTC's Construction Management program and began classes in September 2025. She attends full-time while working part-time and occasionally



Bunbury



Kia

'Seeing a knowledgeable woman teach us is uplifting, it makes me feel like I can get there too.'

- Kelina Bunbury

joins her father on job sites. Her coursework reinforces the hands-on learning that first sparked her interest.

'There are so many ways into construction. Don't limit yourself to just one.'

- Cori Kia

JONI DOMBROWSKI

When Joni Dombrowski enrolled at RTC in 2014, she already had nearly 20 years of experience in electrical, HVAC and civil construction. When the company she worked for downsized, she chose to formalize her knowledge and advance her career. Balancing full-time work, children, and family life required coordination and the support of her husband. RTC's hybrid structure and small cohort environment made it manageable. She completed her degree in 2016.

Today, Dombrowski is a Project Manager at Olson Brothers Excavating, where she handles estimating and construction management for public works projects. Her discipline in scheduling, communication, and documentation has earned the trust of public clients who regularly invite her to bid on emergency work.

She encourages women to trust that they belong in construction. Resilience, continuous learning, and a strong support system matter.

ASHLEY LEHMAN

Ashley Lehman began her career in an administrative role at Sellen Construction, uncertain of her long-term direction. Exposure to projects and encouragement from colleagues led her to pursue construction management.

While working full-time, Lehman enrolled at RTC and completed her degree in 2016 through evening and hybrid courses. She earned scholarship support from Sellen and the



Dombrowski



Lehman

'It was more than a piece of paper. It changed the entire course of my career.'

- Joni Dombrowski

AGC Education Foundation, which helped make it possible. As she progressed through school, she advanced from project assistant to field coordinator to project engineer.

Today, Lehman is a Project Manager at Sellen with more than 12 years of experience on major commercial projects. One of her most meaningful experiences was working on the Seattle Storm Center for Basketball Performance, designed and built largely by women. Walking into meetings where women were not underrepresented reinforced her belief in the importance of representation in the industry.

When starting a family, Lehman notes that work-life balance has not been a challenge for her, largely due to Sellen's supportive culture, particularly around school, family responsibilities, and returning from parental leave. She also sees the industry becoming more open to work-life balance for both women and men.

She encourages women not to be deterred by a lack of construction experience, emphasizing that technical skills can be taught, while communication, organization, and reliability are qualities they already possess.

THE COMMON THREAD

Across five different journeys, one theme emerged: determination. Danika Aldana Cortez and Kelina Bunbury are balancing work, family, and school, while Cori Kia is carving out her path into the industry. Joni Dombrowski and Ashley Lehman are already applying their education in leadership roles, managing public works and major commercial projects.

Their stories show that RTC's two-year degree is more than a credential; it opens doors. In their experience, classroom learning connected directly to real projects. Applying those concepts on the job built skills, and the supportive classroom environment gave them the confidence to speak up and share their experience.

As the industry works to strengthen its workforce, these women remind us that the talent and determination to lead are already here.

Darlene Septelka is a retired University of Washington professor and an advocate for the construction industry and women in the built environment. Aishwarya Fadnavis is a Construction Management faculty member at Renton Technical College and a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington.

How mentorship is shaping the next generation of women in construction

■ Two mentor/mentee pairs discuss their paths to belonging, succeeding and finding empowerment in the industry.

By **MYRRH CAPLAN**, **RANDEE SCHUSTER** and their mentees
Skanska

Careers in construction are not built with one blueprint. They are shaped by thousands of paths, skill sets and the people willing to invest in you. For us, mentorship has been one of the most powerful tools shaping our journey, and while our paths to the construction industry and to Skanska have been unique, one thing we all agree on is we wouldn't change where we ended up for the world.

As mentor/mentee pairs -



Caplan



Schuster

Myrrh Caplan and Bailey Zak, and Randee Schuster and Shannon Stief - we recently got together to discuss a wide range of topics about the industry, what's helped us grow in our careers, and what still needs work for women in construction.

ON FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND OVERCOMING MISCONCEPTIONS

Randee Schuster: When people outside the workplace learn I work in construction, the first reaction is usually disbelief. The idea of a woman working in construction still feels unexpected. Even within the industry, people often assume most women start in office roles and stay there, but that wasn't my path. I worked in the field first.

On job sites, people often assumed I needed help. I felt the need to go above and beyond and not let anyone help me because I didn't want to be seen as a burden. I wanted to be equal and pull the same weight. Those experiences shaped how I approach

my job today.

Shannon Stief: I hear similar assumptions. People assume I never did physical labor, but I started doing electrical work at a modular construction company in Colorado. My mentor then was an electrician with decades in the trade. We supported each other. I helped him with technology, and he helped me learn the craft.

That partnership gave me the tools and hands-on experience to stand on my own and respond confidently if anyone questioned my ability. It also helps me communicate better with field teams in my role today because I understand the work from the ground up.

Bailey Zak: I didn't grow up thinking construction was the plan, but once I got in, I real-



Stief



Zak

ized how many paths exist. I've worked in several roles over eight years, and each one helped me build a different skill set. The validation I got from others early in my career - people recognizing my potential even when my background wasn't traditional - helped me picture a long-term future in the field.

Myrrh Caplan: When I started in construction, the industry looked narrow from the outside. Many people assumed success depended on physical tasks or a single technical track. Over time, I saw something different.

Construction needs planners, collaborators, problem solvers,

and leaders. We need people who come from other industries and bring new ways of thinking. I have watched this industry open up, and I no longer see limits on who belongs or how far someone can go, especially for women

ON FLEXIBILITY, CAREER MOBILITY, LABOR SHORTAGE

MC: Flexibility shaped my career. I moved locations and roles when opportunities aligned with my interests, especially around sustainability and consulting. Not everyone has the option to relocate, but flexibility also includes learning new skills, supporting other teams, and staying visible beyond your

immediate role. That approach builds resilience and opens opportunities.

BZ: My flexibility came through role changes and involvement in new tools and pilot efforts. Each move taught me something different about the business. Being open to learning outside my core role helped me understand the bigger picture, build confidence and create more ways to contribute.

RS: Construction faces a real labor shortage, especially in the field. When you look at the num-

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Myrrh Caplan and Bailey Zak discuss the growth of the Embodied Carbon in Construction Calculator (EC3) while connecting at a recent sustainability conference. Photo courtesy of Skanska

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Building the talent pipeline

■ *Creating more career pathways for women in construction.*

By **CORIANN PRESSER**
Lease Crutcher Lewis



Presser

The construction industry is facing a talent shortage that can no longer be framed as a future problem. It's here, and it's reshaping how we think about education, workforce development, and who gets to see themselves in the trades.

A 2025 Associated General Contractors of America survey found that in Washington state, the vast majority of construction firms struggle to fill hourly craft positions and salaried jobs, echoing a national trend.

But solving the shortage isn't just about filling open roles. It's about expanding who views careers in construction and related fields as viable options in the first place.

For many girls and young women, inspiration begins with seeing people who look like them thriving in the field.

That visibility is powerful. It turns abstract ideas about "the trades" into tangible career possibilities and helps students imagine themselves getting there.

SEEING A FUTURE IN THE TRADES

At a winter career fair at Meridian Middle School in Kent, Lewis general foreman Lorie Tibbetts did exactly that. She and super-

intendent Dustin Zyph connected with students about life at Lewis, the many pathways into the industry, and the wide range of roles available in construction—from hands-on field leadership to project management, engineering, and operations.

Beyond handing out Lewis swag, the kids gravitated to Tibbetts as she shared her personal journey and what she loves about her work. Tibbetts has had a hand in building many of Lewis' large-scale Lewis commercial projects in Seattle, including Rainier Square Tower. Her journey with Lewis began back in 1990 during a concrete pour on the Second & Seneca tower project.

For students, hearing directly from a woman leading work in the field helped challenge outdated assumptions about who construction is for and what success can look like.

They even felt comfortable asking Tibbetts and Zyph a question that was undoubtedly top of mind: how much money do people working in construction make?

These moments of connection may seem small, but their impact can be lasting.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE THROUGH LEARNING

Turning inspiration into action requires creating spaces where girls can actively explore and experience the trades, especially at a time when students and families are seeking affordable pathways into stable careers.

Last summer, Lewis helped sponsor Camp BuildHER, a free,



Coriann Presser (center) took part in a panel discussion at Camp BuildHER in the summer 2025, sharing about her career journey and the many pathways available in construction. Photo by Mason Kelley Photography

weeklong construction camp for girls in grades 7-10 held in Kent. Campers learned foundational trade skills and leadership skills and connected with women working across the construction industry.

Organizers also hosted panel discussions where female leaders

shared their stories and offered candid advice. Participating in one of these panels and hearing from other speakers reminded me once again that there's no single "right" path for everyone. That said, across all of our experiences, there were consistent themes for success: resiliency, being self-motivated, being a hard worker, having a desire to work in a team, and being able to creatively problem solve. That was true of each of the speakers, regardless of their ultimate career path.

It was gratifying to hear that the campers left feeling inspired, empowered, and ready to explore all the opportunities ahead.

EXPANDING TRAINING AND EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Building a sustainable talent pipeline requires not only getting students into training and education programs, but also supporting them so they succeed once they're there.

That means connecting motivated learners with resources, mentorship, hands-on training, and structured pathways into careers—especially for women and historically underrepresented groups. This ensures that those initial sparks translate into lasting careers.

One way Lewis bridges the gap between education and employment is supporting pre-apprenticeship programs like Seattle-based ANEW, which provides safety, technical, and physical training while actively recruiting women, people of color and formerly incarcerated individuals.

A variety of Lewis employees came to the company through ANEW, and Lewis field leaders



Presser (center), Lewis Senior PM Catherine Lane (left), and Senior design-Construction Integrator Eva Talbot (right) at a WIC Week jobsite tour at 701 Dexter in 2025. Photo courtesy of Lewis

regularly support participants through mentorship, mock union interviews, recommendation letters, and direct job placements on our projects.

The Lease Crutcher Lewis Foundation also provides a platform for making a meaningful impact.

Since its inception in 2021, the

foundation has committed more than \$720,000 to nonprofit partners focused on building a more diverse construction workforce. That includes scholarships for historically underrepresented individuals at local colleges

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Lewis General Foreman Lorie Tibbetts speaks to a group of students at Kent's Meridian Middle School at a December 2025 career fair. Photo courtesy of Lewis

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Mentorship

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bers, the opportunity is obvious. Women make up about half the population, yet only about ten percent of the construction workforce.

If more women entered this industry, a significant portion of that shortage would ease. The talent already exists. The industry needs to make space for it.

SS: The future depends on whether construction feels welcoming. Women will join and stay only if they see opportunity and respect. When women believe they belong and see paths to succeed, their participation will grow and that kind of shift would strengthen the workforce and help stabilize the industry long term.

ON AUTHENTIC EMPOWERMENT

MC: Policies around parental leave, caregiving, and flexibility show whether a company truly values its people. These policies support everyone, not only women. For example, when a father gets time off to spend with his newborn, that benefits the mom, too.

When employees feel cared for, they stay engaged and committed. That culture helps address workforce challenges across the industry.

RS: Support shows up in both big and small ways. Industry events like Women in Construction Week matter. So do subtle actions. When a woman is talked over in a meeting and a leader brings the conversation back to her, that matters.

Holding space is just as important as representation, which is strong where we work. Diversity is visible, especially in leadership. That progress is encouraging.

SS: Leadership roles matter. Seeing women as project manag-

ers changes expectations across the team. It signals trust and capability. That visibility lifts everyone. One area that still needs growth is field leadership. A strong female superintendent would challenge outdated assumptions about who leads in the field. More visibility there would help move the industry forward.

ON WOMEN SUPPORTING WOMEN ON JOB SITES

MC: When I started, there were few women in project roles. We rarely connected with each other. At the time, there was a sense that sticking together might be viewed as weakness. Looking back, that isolation was unnecessary. I am encouraged by how different things feel now. Younger women expect connection and support, and that shift strengthens teams.

BZ: There are still moments where you can feel alone on a job site. What helps is knowing others are nearby, even if they are on different projects. I encourage younger project engineers to connect with each other and share experiences. Those relationships help balance the harder days and remind you that challenges are temporary.

ON WORKING TOGETHER AND FEELING SUPPORTED

RS: Shannon and I also work under Erin, another woman in construction. That structure is not common, and it makes a difference. We check in with each other beyond task lists. We pay attention to how things feel, not only whether something is complete. Understanding personalities and emotional cues helps us work better together.

SS: That emotional awareness sets the tone. Working under Rande is not about taking orders. It

is about learning how to navigate situations. I watch how she communicates with subcontractors and handles pressure. That approach aligns with how I want to lead.

When I am asked to present or step into something new, the conversation happens first. That preparation builds confidence.

ON ADVICE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

MC: Career growth does not move in a straight line. Some years feel quiet. Others feel demanding. I spent many years doing hard work that did not feel remarkable at the time. That effort added up.

Loving the work, even during routine periods, kept me moving forward. I remind younger professionals that growth happens over time, not on a fixed schedule.

BZ: Patience is tough early on. You see where you want to be and waiting feels uncomfortable. I felt that pressure myself. What helped was keeping perspective. Each project ends. Each role teaches something.

I learned to focus on doing the work well and trusting progress would follow. Hearing that perspective from someone further along made it easier to slow down and stay focused.

RS: Confidence matters. Women bring skills and perspectives this industry needs. Doubt creeps in easily, but it does not reflect ability. Trust what you bring to the table.

SS: Strength has many forms. Being kind and approachable does not mean giving ground. You are allowed to be both soft and strong. That balance supports long careers.

ON WHY THIS CONVERSATION MATTERS

MC: Mentorship and sponsorship shape careers. They also shape companies. Investing in people requires time and attention, and the return shows up in stronger teams and future leaders. I see this work as part of my responsibility to the industry.

BZ: Having someone invest in you changes how you see yourself and your work. It creates a sense of belonging and accountability. My goal is to extend that same support to others as I grow. That cycle strengthens the industry for everyone.

SS: Having support makes growth faster. Trying something new feels less risky when someone stands behind you. If I lose my place in a meeting or forget a detail, I know that does not define me. That sense of safety encourages effort and learning.

RS: It also creates room for questions. Asking questions should never feel unsafe. When people understand the “why,” the work improves. Together, our mentor and mentee relationship reflects what is possible in construction. Trust, support, and shared learning strengthen individuals and teams. When women invest in each other, the entire industry benefits.

These stories remind us that when women invest in each other, we help build an industry that's stronger, more inclusive, and better prepared for the future.

Myrrh Caplan is senior vice president for sustainability at Skanska USA Building, and a mentor to Bailey Zak, sustainability manager. Rande Schuster is a senior project engineer at Skanska USA Civil, and a mentor to Shannon Stief, project engineer.

Internships

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experience.

Q. What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced as a woman in a leadership role in construction?

DM: At times throughout my career, I've encountered challenges in ensuring my voice is heard and my perspective is respected. To overcome this, I have contin-

ued to speak up, double check my facts and information to ensure they are correct, been consistent, stood my ground, but above all else, kept my communication and demeanor respectful. I always try to keep the big picture in mind and choose when to speak up.

Relationships are extremely important, and my key to developing and maintaining good relationships is communication.

Everyone communicates differently, and it's important to identify the individual communication styles of everyone you interact with.

Exxel Pacific's internship program is playing a pivotal role in empowering women and promoting leadership diversity in the construction industry. By

providing mentorship, hands-on experience, leadership training, and networking opportunities, the company is helping to shape the future of the industry, and ensuring that women have equal opportunities to excel and lead.

Merrissa Westerman is the marketing coordinator at Exxel Pacific.

Pipeline

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and universities and support for organizations across the Pacific Northwest like Sawhorse Revolution and ANEW.

EMPOWERING WOMEN AT ALL STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS

Supporting long-term success for women in construction also

requires supporting employees' growth, development, and sense of belonging once they're on the job.

At Lewis, our Women's Development Group helps provide that support. It's one of several company-wide affinity groups designed to foster connection, mentorship and shared learning. Members meet regularly to dis-

cuss the opportunities and challenges unique to being a woman in construction.

Reflecting on these efforts — from early exposure in classrooms and camps to mentorship and community-building — it's clear there's enormous potential to make careers in construction more accessible and equitable to more people.

Working together across the industry, we can create a future where anyone with the passion and talent to build has the opportunity to succeed.

Coriann Presser is president of Lease Crutcher Lewis's Washington division. Her career at Lewis began with an internship in 2005.