

Perspectives on the Shortage of Skilled Tile Installers



Photo: suravikin via Getty Images.

A major problem for the flooring industry in today's coronavirus world is a lack of skilled installers. Nowhere is the labor shortage more acute than in the tile segment, where the demand for tile installations far outstrips the industry's current installation capabilities. Floor Trends recently sat down with Fishman Flooring Solutions' Brandon Garrett, one of the company's ceramic tile experts, to discuss the labor shortage and gain his perspective on some ways to mitigate it. Garrett, who has been in the flooring industry for approximately 10 years, is a business manager in Fishman's Mid-Atlantic Region. He can be reached at brandon.garrett@fishman.com.

FT: Is the shortage of tile installers a new problem?

Garrett: No, the tile and stone industry has faced a shortage of skilled labor for many years. Over the last 10 years, I've had quite a few customers stop installing ceramic tiles entirely or, even worse, close their doors, due to a lack of qualified installers.

FT: What has been the impact of COVID-19 on the labor shortage?

Garrett: Labor shortages became far more problematic after the COVID-19 pandemic began. I'm asked if I know of any tile mechanics looking for work probably three to four times a week. Those who are fully staffed are willing to do whatever it takes to keep their installers happy and on the payroll.

The longer the pandemic goes, the more complicated things get. For example, vaccine mandates are now a problem. In many states, commercial job sites are requiring tradesmen to be fully vaccinated. However, many of them are refusing to do that. As a result, many commercial installers are either being removed from job sites or are being forced to fire full crews because no one is vaccinated.

FT: How are commercial tile installers keeping up with demand in the face of significant worker shortages?

Garrett: Many of my customers are booking installations more than 10 weeks out due to pent-up demand and the fact that they are operating with only 50 to 60 percent of their normal labor force. Several of them have implemented mandatory Saturday installations in order to keep pace with demand. Others are being very selective regarding the projects they take on.

FT: How do you see this pent-up demand for tile installations impacting the tradesmen who are actually doing the work?

Garrett: One major issue caused by these shortages is an overwhelming workload for those technicians who want to work and they end up suffering from burnout. Today, loyalty in the workplace is at an all-time low. Burned-out workers aren't afraid to move on to the flooring retailer down the road or leave the industry entirely for a more attractive job.

FT: Are there any new adhesive and/or tile technologies on the market that can help tile installation contractors maximize their on-the-job efficiency and offset some of their labor shortage problems?

Garrett: The first product that comes to mind with regard to increased on-the-job efficiency would have to be the Schluter Shower System. It provides a watertight assembly and drastically reduces the time of installation. From shower pans to preformed niches, the Shower System offers everything you need for a fast, dependable waterproof installation.

Premixed grouts, such as Mapei's Flexcolor QG, which is a professional grade, ready-to-use specialty grout for commercial and residential installations, can also make installers more efficient. Most of the claims I have been involved with over the years have been due to over or underwatering the grout. The beauty of products like Flexcolor QG is that they don't require the use of water. You can simply open a bucket and begin grouting, saving time and avoiding potential headaches.

Tile leveling spacers, such as QEP's LASH Leveling Clips, are extremely underestimated products in the tile world in my opinion. Leveling spacers will not only prevent the tile from moving during installation and curing time, they'll also speed up the installation process by eliminating the need for a level to avoid tile lippage. Some of these systems require a small investment up front, but they can save installers a fortune in terms of time saved and potentially costly lippage claims.

FT: Do you have any thoughts on how tile installation contractors can find laborers?

Garrett: It takes hard work, but it can be done. One thing I'd recommend to installation contractors is learning all social media platforms inside and out and take advantage of them to attract workers. Currently, the average tile setter in the United States is 43 years old, and we need to tap into younger workers. Contractors can create social media accounts and post things like progress videos of projects and interesting new tools to gain the attention of younger workers. In my opinion, installation contractors who are current on social media have a leg up in hiring new employees.

I also think the hiring process should be as transparent as possible. In today's world, the last thing people want is to commit to a new job and find that they were over sold on the position. Finally, in today's climate, I believe the best hire is someone with little to no experience who can be trained to the flooring contractor's liking.

FT: Let's talk about training newly-hired tile installers? Is there a way to accelerate their education process?

Garrett: That's an excellent question. There are a wide variety of new products that will both shorten and simplify the education process.

Product manufacturers are an obvious place to go for training. Distributors like Fishman are another place to turn both for training newly-hired tilers and for information on easy-to-use products that shorten and simplify the necessary training.