COGENCE Alliance

Owners + Architects + Engineers + Contractors

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Cogence Central Ohio Chapter Roundtable – November 20, 2025

The New Realities for Construction Trade Contractors and Suppliers

PRESENTATION SUMMARY:

The presentation brought together leaders from multiple construction trade contractors—interior systems, electrical, modular prefab, material supply, and commercial flooring—to discuss their businesses, current industry challenges, and how technology and prefabrication are reshaping construction.

The New Realities for Construction Trade Contractors and Suppliers

Featured Panelists:

- Dave Anderson, Mid-City Electric
- Brad Carson, Valley Interiors
- Kelly Greene, DIRTT
- Kevin Jones, Jones-Schlater Flooring
- Brian Pickard, Interior Supply

Company Overviews:

- Firms represented ranged from large union contractors with 1,500+ employees to smaller specialty contractors with ~35 staff.
- Core services included interior framing and drywall, electrical work (especially healthcare and data centers), modular prefab wall systems (DIRT), building material distribution, doors/frames/hardware, and commercial flooring.
- Several companies emphasized long histories (40–65 years) and regional or multi-state operations.

Key Industry Challenges:

- **Labor Shortages** – Skilled labor is the most pressing issue, driven by high demand, aging workers, and difficulty attracting young tradespeople.
- **Schedule Compression** – Projects often start before designs are complete, forcing trades to work faster and out of sequence.
- **Education & Communication Gaps** – Many stakeholders (owners, designers, contractors, trades) lack understanding of new systems, sequencing, and tolerances.
- **Pricing Volatility** – While post-COVID material prices have stabilized, labor costs and anticipated tariff-driven increases remain concerns.
- **Sequencing & Building Conditions** – Especially critical for flooring and prefab systems that require conditioned spaces and proper tolerances.

Labor & Workforce Strategies:

- Union and non-union contractors are investing heavily in training, including on-site trainers and factory-based labor.
- Recruitment increasingly starts at high schools and vocational programs.
- Incentives (bonuses, overtime, meals, improved site conditions) help but are often temporary and can disrupt labor markets.
- Better jobsite environments (cleanliness, facilities, safety) improve morale, productivity, and quality.

Technology & Innovation:

- Widely adopted tools include:
  - iPads and digital project management platforms
  - Layout robots (HP SitePrint)
  - Laser scanning and CNC fabrication
  - Revit/CAD coordination and 3D fly-throughs
  - VR training for equipment operators
- Flooring technology has advanced in adhesives, moisture mitigation, and self-leveling compounds, reducing reliance on highly skilled labor.
- Technology allows companies to scale geographically and rely on fewer, less specialized workers.

Prefabrication & Modular Construction:

- Prefab is used across trades: exterior wall panels, electrical racks, pre-hung doors, bathroom pods, and modular wall systems.
- DIRT's system emphasizes design for disassembly, sustainability, and adaptability—especially valuable in healthcare.
- Benefits include:
  - Faster schedules
  - Reduced on-site labor needs
  - Better quality control
  - Flexibility for late program changes
- Challenges include:
  - Jobsite tolerances vs. factory precision
  - Transitions between prefab and field-built elements
  - Need for early planning and coordination

Cultural & Generational Shift:

- Younger workers adapt more easily to new technologies and processes, though they may lack experience.
- Older workers bring valuable knowledge but may resist unfamiliar methods.
- The industry is in a transition phase, where learning, failure, and adaptation are unavoidable.

Overall Takeaways:

- The construction industry is undergoing major change driven by labor shortages, schedule pressures, and rapid technological advancement.
- Prefabrication, modular systems, and technology are key solutions—but only when paired with early engagement, education, and collaboration.
- Success depends less on doing things “the old way” or “the new way,” and more on communication, flexibility, and willingness to adapt together.

BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSION – FEEDBACK AND SUMMARY:

Discussion Topic: *If pre-fabrication is the future of construction:*

- *What are some of things holding it back?*
- *How do Owners and Designers keep up with the ever-evolving trends / methods / technology?*
- *How does it become an option (a tool in the toolbox) for every project?*

The Need for Education and Early Integration

- **Education is Crucial:** Emphasizing the need for owners to understand the opportunities offered by prefabrication (prefab) systems, not just with specific companies like DIRTT, but across the industry.
- **Early Project Integration:** Integrating prefab considerations early in the project lifecycle, specifically during the Request for Proposal (RFP) phase, is essential.
- **Incentive and Criteria:** Owners should make prefab a criterion in their presentations and RFPs to encourage creative proposals from trade partners and push innovation.
- **Architectural Impact:** Early knowledge of prefab can help architects set up drawings appropriately, leading to more efficient pricing by trades.

Key Advantages of Prefabrication:

- **Quality:** Building components in a factory setting leads to higher quality due to controlled environments compared to building in the elements.
- **Schedule Acceleration:** Prefab allows for parallel construction (e.g., building walls in a factory while concrete is poured), significantly speeding up the overall project schedule.
- **Improved Site Efficiency:** This acceleration frees up trades like flooring and ceiling installers, allowing them to work faster on open floor plans.
- **Cost Savings:** While upfront planning may have costs, prefab can lead to savings through reduced labor time on-site, fewer dumpsters, and decreased general conditions costs.
- **Reduced Risk:** Prefabricated elements can arrive inspected, reducing on-site issues and potential delays.

Challenges and Considerations for Prefabrication

- **Upfront Planning and Coordination:** Significant time and effort are required for initial planning and detailed coordination with fabricators and design teams.
- **Cost Comparison:** Owners sometimes compare prefab costs directly to conventional systems, which may not be an accurate or fair comparison.
- **Limited Options:** The market for certain prefab systems may have fewer providers, potentially limiting choices.
- **Impact on Traditional Trades:** Widespread adoption of prefab can change the scope of work for traditional trades, potentially impacting their roles.
- **Scale and Repetition:** Prefabrication is often most successful on projects with scale and repetition, like exterior wall systems. Renovation projects can present unique challenges.
- **Hidden and Unforeseen Costs:** Costs associated with coordinating site-specific elements like elevator shafts for bathroom pods, and maintaining those spaces before installation, can be significant and hard to foresee.
- **Tolerance Stacking:** Proper vetting of tolerances is crucial to avoid issues when prefabricated components meet other building systems.
- **Midstream Changes:** Making changes to a project after prefab components have been designed or manufactured incurs significant time and cost penalties.

Strategies for Successful Prefab Implementation:

- **Early Collaboration:** Engaging fabricators and trade partners early in the design phase (design assist) is key to successful coordination and problem-solving.
- **Consultant Role:** Consider a dedicated consultant or team member focused on prefabrication opportunities from the early design stages (SD phase).
- **Owner Commitment:** Owners need to commit to prefabrication early in the design process to avoid costly midstream changes.
- **Education and Communication:** Continuous education and open communication are vital for clients, owners, and project teams to understand the full scope and benefits of prefab.
- **Leverage Expertise:** Reach out to prefab providers and contractors to discuss potential applications and benefits for specific projects.
- **Focus on People:** While technology is important, investing in and training skilled people remains critical for implementing and utilizing technology effectively.
- **Relationship Building:** Strong relationships and collaboration among team members (owners, designers, contractors, fabricators) are paramount.