

KCA's 'young leader award' looks to engage future industry leaders

By: *Ioannis Pashakis*

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Adam Smith, a senior program manager with Camp Hill-based general contracting firm, JEM Group, accepts KCA's Top Young Leader Award from Jon O'Brien, the association's executive director.

The Keystone Building Contractors Association (KCA) recently named the winner of its annual KCA Top Young Leader Award, a program highlighting young talent in Pennsylvania's contracting industry.

Adam Smith, a senior program manager with Camp Hill-based general contracting firm, JEM Group, was named KCA's top young leader in the award's third year.

Smith has worked at JEM for more than five years and in 2020 was promoted from project manager to senior manager. He said that the one-two punch of the promotion and award has shown him how invested the company is in his growth and how confident they are in him as a leader.

"Having this opportunity to become a senior program manager and be nominated for this award means the world for me because my manager and our owner sees me as someone that can drive their company to where they want to go," Smith said.

The KCA began its young professional's award one year after Jon O'Brien, executive director of the Lemoyne-based association, took over leadership. O'Brien joined KCA at a time where the association was in need of a rebranding with many building contractors in the region viewing it as their grandfather's association, according to O'Brien.

"When we started hosting events we would call different contractors and tell them to come and they would say 'I'm not that old,'" he said. "We wanted people to know it was a new day at the KCA."

The KCA Top Young Leader Award was created to highlight the up-and-coming project managers and young professionals making a difference in the industry rather than the company owners whose trophies are their winning projects, said O'Brien.

KCA's more than 100 member organizations can nominate staff for the award with the winner chosen by an awards committee made up of four company owners, O'Brien and previous award recipients.

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“No matter how busy he is, he is never too busy to stop and help a team member, provide input or help problem-solve and I think that sets him apart,” she said. “He always has time to help and that’s a big deal.”

For the incoming generation of leaders, pay is important but a bigger part of keeping good talent is a positive work culture and recognition to affirm why an employee is doing what they are doing, said Smith.

“Looking at the older generation, the baby boomers joined a company and stuck with it,” he said. “That’s not as true in these younger generations. Yes a paycheck is important and security is a major piece but it’s also about purpose. It’s that sense that I have built something for someone that’s long-lasting.”

Programs like the award may also help the industry tackle its need for talent. Staff members who get engaged with the industry early in their careers can help guide it into its future, said O’Brien.

“There is a real need (for employees) and people are constantly looking for project managers, estimators and more,” he said. “When you find the good ones you hold onto them, give them training, tools, guidance and recognition.”



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