The 2007 recession changed retirement plans for many International Union of Elevator Constructors (IUEC) members, forcing them to work past the IUEC’s typical retirement age of 58. During that time, postponed retirement, combined with the lack of new construction during the downturn, led to fewer apprentices brought into the trade. The economy has since picked up, and many workers who delayed retirement are now looking to leave the workforce. The new challenge: there won’t be an adequate pool of skilled apprentices ready to fill these open positions.

This problem is not unique to the elevator industry. Construction jobs in the U.S. alone grew by more than 250,000 in the last 12 months, and the upward trend is expected to continue. Still, many millennials and individuals considering a job change are looking at career paths outside of the skilled-trade industries, resulting in a labor shortage of qualified trade workers, including elevator mechanics.

To help fill these open positions, our industry must expand recruitment efforts and aggressively include an often-overlooked group of potential applicants — women. Women make up a little more than 1% of the workforce of elevator technicians, and we believe they’re critical to filling the current skills gap.

At Otis, we are actively reaching out to and engaging women interested in, or already working in, the field through a new employee resource group called FORWARD. Our mission is to support and enhance recruitment, retention and advancement of women within Otis field operations by fostering an environment where women can thrive. We achieve this through outreach, networking, mentoring, professional-development opportunities and special events. Otis FORWARD membership continues to
skyrocket globally, from our initial 12 members at its debut in spring 2017 to more than 500 today.

As part of FORWARD, we are starting to work with local Joint Apprenticeship Councils (JACs) to recruit and retain more female apprentices. For example, we established a working group to help IUEC Local 41 in Worcester and Springfield, Massachusetts, recruit more women to apply for apprenticeships in their recruitment that started in early April. We are asking our members to participate in the JAC apprentice interviews, and actively encouraging them to assist with outreach to local schools and women’s programs.

The men and women currently working and succeeding in the industry have the best experience, and, often, the most enthusiasm for attracting and retaining more female field technicians. By becoming mentors, they help ensure women technicians feel appreciated, encouraged and empowered, and are on a clear path to success.

One of our adjustors, Matt Passero, was the first male field employee to become a member of FORWARD. This is not the first time he has been part of a women’s organization. He also stepped in when his daughter’s Girl Scout troop needed a new leader. Today, he serves as a mentor to his current apprentice, tasked with pushing her to reach her full potential.

Having been in the industry for several years, Passero understands the challenges women, especially those new to the trade, face in the field. This inspired him to join FORWARD’s efforts to bring more attention to these obstacles, and, through collective and diverse experience, find ways to address and overcome them. Passero recognizes that, whether servicing an elevator or planning a Girl Scout trip, men and women can bring different, but equally valuable, perspectives.

FORWARD members are applying for positions they may not have considered in the past. As a result, Otis’ retention rate for women in field operations has improved. Passero’s apprentice, Wendy Harootunian, is a great example of this. Passero says support from FORWARD has not only increased her confidence in the field, but also encouraged her to keep growing at Otis.

After working with different companies in the past, Harootunian found Otis’ support for women in the field refreshing. She says FORWARD has shown her how far women can go at Otis. It has inspired her to continue her education, seek more responsibility and move up within the company. In fact, Harootunian is studying for a master’s degree through the company’s Employee Scholar Program with the aim of eventually moving into an Otis leadership position. Harootunian says her FORWARD mentors have not only made her feel strong and motivated, but also shown her that “the sky is the limit.” She hopes one day that she, too, can serve as inspiration and mentor other women as they join Otis.

Women make up a little more than 1% of the workforce of elevator technicians, and we believe they’re critical to filling the current skills gap.