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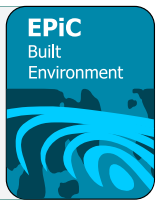

The Evolving Role of Construction Superintendents Across Project Contexts

Ethan Cornelius[1], Kenneth Sands[1], Tom Leathem[2], Richard Burt[1], and C. Ben Farrow[1]
[1]Auburn University, [2]Clemson University

Construction superintendents play a pivotal role in project success, yet academic research offers limited insight into how their responsibilities vary by company size and market type. This study analyzes 290 job postings from the Southeastern United States, categorizing them by company size (small, medium, large, mega) and market sector (e.g., civil, commercial, residential). Using MAXQDA for qualitative analysis, the research identifies common responsibilities and action verbs associated with the superintendent role. Findings show that core duties—such as schedule management, subcontractor coordination, safety enforcement, and quality control—are consistent across contexts. However, the complexity and emphasis of these tasks scale with company size and market sector. Small companies with smaller projects often require direct, hands-on oversight, while mega projects demand strategic leadership and high-level coordination; Governmental or Environmental sector projects focus on regulations, while residential sector projects focus on client satisfaction. Despite these variations, the superintendent's essential functions remain stable across the industry. These insights support the development of more targeted training programs and academic curricula to better prepare future construction leaders for diverse project environments.

Keywords: Construction, Project Superintendent, Superintendent Responsibilities, Job Posting, Site Management

Introduction

Construction superintendents are the linchpins of jobsite success, responsible for ensuring projects are completed on time, within budget, and to specification. Despite their critical role, academic literature offers limited insight into how their responsibilities vary across different project contexts.

The role of construction superintendent is demanding, requiring individuals with a strong work ethic and a thorough understanding of the construction process to perform effectively. According to Rios et al. (2020, p. 485), "a general contractor superintendent is one who controls the day-to-day operations of a construction site and is a vital contributor to a construction project's success." Mincks and Johnston (2004, p. 24) describe the superintendent as "the one responsible for the correct, timely, and profitable construction of the project by coordinating labor, material, equipment, and subcontractors during the construction process." Similarly, Schaufelberger and Holm (2024, p. 9) emphasize that "the superintendent is responsible for the direct daily supervision of construction activities on the project, whether the work is performed by the contractor's workers or those employed by the subcontractor."

Taken together, these definitions underscore the superintendent's pivotal role in overseeing daily site operations to ensure that construction projects are completed on schedule and within budget.

Existing research focuses on skills and competencies required for success, such as interpersonal communication, field experience, and project management (Gunderson et al., 2007; Gunderson & Gloeckner, 2011; Hill, 2024) but lacks specificity regarding task-based roles. Moreover, foundational studies like Tenah (1986) They are outdated and have a limited scope. Hill's (2024) recent work, while valuable, is constrained to heavy civil and commercial markets and does not account for project size.

This study addresses a critical gap by analyzing job postings to explore how superintendent roles and responsibilities differ by market type and company size. Key research questions include:

- What are the most common roles and responsibilities of superintendents in job postings?
- How does company size influence superintendent responsibilities and role expectations?
- How does the market sector influence superintendent responsibilities and role expectations?

By analyzing the roles and responsibilities of construction superintendents based on company size and market sector, this research can provide valuable insights for construction companies and educational institutions to educate and inform stakeholders about the roles and responsibilities of a construction superintendent. This research can help design more effective training programs, thus improving job performance and contributing to the overall successful completion of construction projects with highly skilled, experienced, and educated construction superintendents.

Literature Review

While the construction management literature is extensive, research specifically examining the roles and responsibilities of construction superintendents remains limited. Much of the existing scholarship tends to generalize superintendents within broader categories such as site management or project leadership. This approach often emphasizes skills and competencies rather than task-specific duties. This lack of granularity makes it difficult to isolate findings that directly address the superintendent's role. Consequently, this literature review includes a limited number of cited sources, reflecting the scarcity of focused academic research on the responsibilities of superintendents. The absence of detailed, role-specific studies underscores the need for further investigation (particularly as industry demands evolve and workforce demographics shift) into how superintendent responsibilities adapt across varying project/company sizes and market sectors.

The Aging Workforce and Demand for Superintendents

The construction industry is facing a critical workforce shortage, particularly in leadership roles, such as superintendent. According to the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC, 2024), 81% of firms report difficulty filling salaried positions, with superintendent roles among the most challenging to staff.

A key factor contributing to this shortage is the aging workforce. The National Center for Construction Education and Research (2022) reports that the average age of a U.S. construction worker exceeds 42, with many seasoned superintendents approaching retirement. Southern states (Alabama, Florida, and Louisiana) already report median workforce ages above 43, indicating a

limited influx of younger talent (Zhao, 2023a). National labor data reinforces this concern. In 2022, the median age of construction workers reached 42, surpassing that of other labor-intensive sectors. Workers aged 35–44 make up the largest group at 24.6%, while those under 25 represent less than 10%. Meanwhile, the proportion of workers aged 55 and older rivals or exceeds that of the broader labor force, highlighting a looming leadership gap (Zhao, 2023b).

Looking ahead, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) projects over 48,900 new construction manager roles by 2034, many of which require field supervision experience. This represents a 9% growth rate, which outpaced many other industries and reinforces the urgent need to clearly define superintendent responsibilities and implement targeted recruitment and training strategies to sustain leadership in a rapidly evolving construction landscape.

Skills and Competencies of Successful Superintendents

There is a broad consensus on the essential skills and competencies required for construction superintendents to succeed. These professionals must possess a deep understanding of complex construction processes, advanced project management capabilities, and thorough knowledge of regulatory and safety standards (Hill, 2024).

Gunderson and Gloeckner (2011) identified key competencies (including people skills, work sequencing, organizational and managerial abilities, scheduling, estimating, and cost awareness) with interpersonal communication emerging as the most critical. The ability to effectively interact and coordinate with subcontractors is crucial to both the superintendent's performance and the overall success of the project. Recent studies also tie these competencies to project outcomes: for instance, Esfahani et al. (2024) notes that leadership and communication have a direct impact on project success metrics.

Rios et al. (2020) report that top-performing superintendents typically pair substantial field experience with formal construction education and identify four essential hard skills, with communication rated most valuable for issue resolution and on-site coordination. They also argue that superintendents manage work across three temporal modes, future, present, and past, using forward-looking planning to anticipate conflicts, real-time situational awareness to maintain safe and efficient operations, and retrospective review to identify and correct errors (Rios et al., 2020).

Overall, research indicates that successful superintendents blend technical expertise with soft skills and experience. This hybrid skill set combines construction process expertise, planning/scheduling capabilities, safety management, and strong leadership and communication skills to meet the demands of today’s projects. As construction technologies and practices evolve, so too will the skill sets required for effective leadership in the field (Gunderson et al., 2007).

Roles and Responsibilities of Superintendents

Despite the central role construction superintendents play in project delivery, academic research on their specific duties remains limited. Tenah (1986) distinguishes between general superintendents, who organize and supervise field leadership and subcontractors while managing schedules, safety, equipment, and documentation (e.g., purchase orders, shop drawings, changes), and superintendents, who oversee foremen and coordinate labor, materials, equipment, and services to maintain schedule, budget, and quality across preconstruction, execution, inspections, and closeout (e.g., punch lists,

warranties, operating data). Both roles rely on similar information needs, particularly interpreting plans/specifications, coordinating site activities, ensuring safety compliance, and reporting progress (Tenah, 1986).

Recent studies suggest superintendent roles are broadening and becoming more management-intensive. Gunderson et al. (2007) found superintendents increasingly performing duties traditionally associated with project managers. Schaufelberger and Holm (2024) provide a comprehensive duty set spanning preconstruction planning, scheduling, and methods, site logistics (e.g., hoisting/traffic plans and mobilization), daily field coordination and documentation, equipment management, quality and safety compliance, progress reporting, closeout, and mentoring. Hill (2024) similarly notes the shift toward planning and managerial work, calling for periodic re-evaluation, while acknowledging the limits in sector coverage and the need to examine other project types and factors, such as company and project size. Collectively, these works suggest that core responsibilities persist, but their execution varies significantly by context (e.g., sector, scale, and delivery method) (Gunderson et al., 2007; Hill, 2024; Schaufelberger & Holm, 2024). While these studies offer valuable insights, much of the literature still generalizes the superintendent role. Further research is needed to clearly define and differentiate the specific responsibilities of superintendents across various project types and scales.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the roles of construction superintendents across various market types and company sizes. The primary objective was to systematically analyze publicly available job descriptions to identify recurring responsibilities and contextual variations. Job postings were sourced from Indeed and ZipRecruiter, focusing on general contracting and construction management firms. These postings were filtered to include only full-time roles with clearly defined responsibilities located in the Southeastern United States—specifically Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The study was limited to the Southeast United States due to the research team's location and practical considerations, which allowed for manageable data collection and analysis.

Data Collection and Organization

The company name, location, and responsibilities of each posting were recorded. A second spreadsheet categorized companies by estimated revenue (derived from published financial data, project-based estimates, and AI-assisted analysis) and by market sector (based on portfolio review). The AI component aggregated and interpreted publicly available information, such as financial reports and industry benchmarks, to estimate revenue ranges for companies lacking direct disclosures. While this approach improved consistency and reduced manual bias, it introduced limitations related to data accuracy and potential algorithmic bias, as estimates relied on incomplete or generalized sources of information. These factors should be taken into account when interpreting revenue classifications.

Companies were then grouped by size according to their total estimated revenue, with small companies being those having ≤ $10M in revenue, medium companies having $11–$100M in revenue, large companies with $101–$500M in revenue, and mega companies having> $500M in revenue.

Company revenue was based on publicly available data. When that was not available, an estimation was determined based on the project information displayed on the company's website.

Market types included civil, commercial, residential, industrial, institutional, and others. Markets were identified by reviewing the company's official website and project portfolio. When companies were in multiple markets, they were assigned to the market type with the highest number of completed projects based on website data. Market types considered included the following:

- Civil
- Commercial
- Energy & Power
- Environmental
- Government
- Industrial
- Institutional
- Residential
- Water & Wastewater

Job descriptions were imported into MAXQDA for qualitative analysis. Word clouds and frequency counts were used to identify key action verbs (e.g., manage, schedule, ensure), and variations of similar terms were grouped for consistency. A 'Keyword-in-Context' search extracted relevant sentences, which were cleaned and quantified to compare trends across company sizes and market types. The results presented only the keyword frequencies derived from this analysis.

Before conducting any textual analyses, 290 superintendent job postings were collected and categorized by both company size and market type, enabling structured comparisons. To ensure data integrity, postings were screened for duplication and job-type overlap. Duplicate listings from the same company or identical job descriptions were removed, and postings that combined multiple roles (e.g., superintendent/project manager) were excluded to maintain consistency in job type. After screening, 117 postings fell into the small company category, 112 into the medium category, 37 into the large category, and 24 into the mega company category. Market type classifications were determined by reviewing each company's portfolio and included commercial, industrial, residential, retail, and institutional sectors. Specifically, there were 27 postings in the civil category, 114 in the commercial category, 2 in the energy and power category, 3 in the environmental category, 6 in the government category, 33 in the industrial category, 41 in the institutional category, 58 in the residential category, and 6 in the water and wastewater category.

Results

The term "project" emerged as the most frequently occurring word in the dataset, appearing over 1,200 times. Its prevalence made it a logical anchor for deeper analysis. Using "project" as a focal point, the researchers examined the surrounding action verbs to gain insight into the specific tasks superintendents perform in relation to project execution.

What are the common roles and responsibilities of superintendents in job postings?

Regardless of market type or company size, superintendents are consistently expected to do the following:

- Manage project execution and subcontractors
- Schedule and maintain timelines
- Ensure safety, quality, and compliance

- Coordinate teams and resources
- Maintain documentation and site standards

These five action verbs – manage, schedule, ensure, coordinate, maintain – were the most frequently associated with the word "project" across all postings, appearing hundreds of times in various combinations.

How does company size influence superintendent responsibilities and role expectations?

To explore how superintendent responsibilities shift with the scale of work, Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of dominant keywords and role emphases across four company size categories. This breakdown reveals how the complexity and scope of superintendent duties evolve from hands-on oversight in small companies to strategic leadership in mega-firms. Emphasis is placed on certain words that will be highlighted in the discussion that follows.

Table 1. Variations by Company Size

Company Size	**Dominant Keywords (frequency)**	**Notable Emphasis**
Small	Project (451), Ensure (254), Work (238), Schedule (208), Site (177)	Hands-on oversight, direct supervision, daily logs, close coordination with subcontractors
Medium	Project (488), Work (273), Ensure (191), **Safety (177),** Schedule (156)	Balanced field oversight and strategic coordination, emphasis on reporting and documentation
Large	Project (167), Subcontractor (166), Work (102), Schedule (70), Safety (66)	Advanced planning, performance tracking, team leadership, risk mitigation
Mega	Project (142), Work (80), Manage (58), Schedule (48), Plan (35)	Executive-level leadership, strategic scheduling, resource allocation, stakeholder communication

How does the market sector influence superintendent responsibilities and role expectations?

When the market sector is considered, the emphasis of the role of the superintendent changes. Table 2 presents a breakdown of dominant keywords and notable role emphases by market type. This comparison highlights the unique operational priorities and contextual demands placed on superintendents within each sector.

Table 2. Variations by Market Type

Market Type (n)	**Dominant Keywords (frequency)**	**Notable Emphasis**
Commercial (114)	Project (521), Work (251), Ensure (217), Safety (180), Schedule (172)	Tight scheduling, quality inspections, client coordination

Civil (27)	Project (111), Work (84), Ensure (49), Schedule (43), Coordinate (36)	Field logistics, utility coordination, equipment management
Residential (58)	Project (203), Work (133), Ensure (104), Quality (101), Schedule (72)	Client satisfaction, milestone tracking, subcontractor coordination
Industrial (33)	Project (141), Work (93), Schedule (52), Safety (48), Manage (50)	Phased execution, workforce coordination, technical compliance
Institutional (41)	Project (152), Work (117), Schedule (63), Ensure (66), Coordinate (18)	System integration, stakeholder collaboration, milestone-driven planning
Government (6)	Project (23), Job (20), Site (17), Ensure (12), **Budget (4)**	Compliance, cost tracking, schedule control
Environmental (3)	Work (22), Project (20), Ensure (13), Quality (10), Facilitate (2)	Regulatory adherence, sustainability, site-specific operations
Energy & Power (2)	Project (7), Develop (6), Ensure (5), Schedule (2), Create (2)	Strategic planning, risk identification, technical execution
Water & Wastewater (6)	Project (28), Manage (19), Schedule (7), Ensure (11), Create (4)	Infrastructure planning, compliance, six-week look-ahead scheduling

Conclusion

This analysis of superintendent job descriptions highlights both the consistent core responsibilities and the nuanced variations that emerge based on company size and market type. Across all contexts, superintendents serve as operational leaders on construction sites, coordinating schedules, managing subcontractors, enforcing safety and quality standards, and ensuring timely and on-budget project delivery. This closely matched data in the literature review (Gunderson et al., 2007; Schaufelberger & Holm, 2024; Tenah, 1986). However, as project scale and complexity increase, the superintendent's role evolves in strategic depth and scope.

For companies that were considered "small", superintendents typically engage in direct, hands-on oversight, managing daily field activities, maintaining schedules, coordinating subcontractors, and handling documentation—often without extensive managerial support. Medium-sized companies require a hybrid approach that balances field supervision with strategic coordination. Superintendents in these settings focus on schedule development, labor management, and compliance tracking, frequently collaborating with project managers to align workflows and budgets. Medium-sized companies also introduce "safety" as a primary responsibility.

For companies that were considered "large", superintendents assume broader leadership responsibilities, overseeing multiple crews or subordinate superintendents. Their role expands to include advanced planning, performance monitoring, and strategic coordination with engineers, suppliers, and stakeholders. At the "mega" level, superintendents operate as executive-level leaders, managing complex scheduling systems, allocating high-value resources, and coordinating across departments. Their responsibilities demand elevated collaboration, risk management, and alignment with organizational and client objectives.

The dominant market sector of the company also shapes superintendent responsibilities. While safety, quality, and scheduling are universal priorities, each sector emphasizes distinct competencies. Civil projects focus on field logistics and utility coordination; commercial projects prioritize tight scheduling and client interaction; energy and power projects require strategic planning and technical compliance; environmental projects emphasize regulatory adherence and scope control; government projects demand strict compliance and cost tracking (budgeting not shown elsewhere); industrial projects involve phased execution and workforce coordination; institutional projects center on milestone-driven planning and stakeholder engagement; residential projects highlight client satisfaction and subcontractor management; and water and wastewater projects necessitate infrastructure planning and specialized scheduling.

Although variations exist in technical scope and team structure, the foundational duties of superintendents (leading field operations, maintaining safety and quality, managing schedules and budgets, and facilitating stakeholder communication) remain consistent across the industry. These findings underscore the importance of aligning superintendent skillsets with project demands and offer valuable insights for workforce development and organizational planning in construction.

The market sector findings carry important implications for construction educators. While core superintendent responsibilities are consistent, this research reveals that each market sector places unique emphasis on specific competencies. Educators often present the superintendent role as uniform across sectors, but this study shows that such generalizations may overlook critical distinctions. For example, client coordination is central in residential projects, while regulatory compliance dominates in environmental and government sectors. Construction management instructors should begin differentiating these emphasis areas when preparing students for superintendent roles. By aligning educational content with sector-specific demands, educators can better equip students to pursue superintendent careers that match their strengths and interests, ultimately improving job readiness and long-term career satisfaction.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The analysis relied exclusively on publicly available job postings, without direct input from industry professionals such as superintendents, project managers, or company executives. As a result, the data may not fully capture informal, nuanced, or evolving aspects of the superintendent role as experienced in practice. Additionally, the study does not explore the specific operational meanings of certain terms. One example is whether “schedule” refers to a document superintendents read or a task they perform, such as creating or managing schedules. These nuances were not examined in depth; therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution, and further research is needed to clarify these contextual meanings.

Classifying project sizes was also challenging due to the limited availability of company revenue data, as many firms do not publicly disclose financial details or provide comprehensive project portfolios. Some market sectors were underrepresented in the dataset, with only a small number of job postings or brief descriptions available, which limited the volume of analyzable text and reduced the reliability of frequency-based comparisons across sectors. Finally, categorizing market types presented difficulties due to overlapping sector definitions and ambiguous or incomplete information in job postings. In some cases, companies operated across multiple markets, requiring subjective interpretation based on their project portfolios.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that while the study provides a broad overview of superintendent roles across varying project sizes and market sectors, its findings would benefit from deeper validation through direct engagement with industry professionals.

Future Research

Future research should build on this foundation by incorporating qualitative data from construction superintendents, project managers, and executives through interviews, surveys, or field observations. Such firsthand insights would offer a richer understanding of the day-to-day responsibilities and contextual nuances that job postings alone may not fully capture.

Additionally, refining the classification of market sectors through standardized criteria could improve consistency and comparability across studies. Expanding the dataset to include job descriptions from a wider geographic range and over a longer time horizon would also help identify evolving trends in superintendent roles.

Finally, future investigations might explore how superintendent responsibilities vary based on project delivery methods (e.g., design-build vs. CM at-risk) or organizational structures. These avenues could reveal how different business models and contractual frameworks shape field leadership expectations, further informing workforce development and educational curricula.

Application of Research

This study offers valuable insights for enhancing construction education and workforce development. By identifying the consistent core responsibilities of construction superintendents, such as managing project schedules, ensuring safety compliance, coordinating subcontractors, and maintaining site operations and quality standards, educators can better align curricula with industry expectations.

Integrating these findings into construction management programs can help students and emerging professionals develop the competencies most frequently emphasized in job postings. Key areas such as scheduling, subcontractor coordination, communication, and budgeting should be prioritized in coursework and experiential learning opportunities. For example, outside of the common keywords “Project” and “Work”, “Schedule” was the most frequently occurring keyword across company size and market types. This suggests scheduling and its derivatives are key competencies for most superintendents. Equipping students with these foundational skills will increase their confidence and readiness to lead construction projects effectively upon entering the workforce.

Moreover, understanding that superintendent responsibilities remain largely consistent across various company sizes and market sectors, with only moderate contextual variations, can foster adaptability among graduates. This broader perspective prepares students to transition seamlessly into diverse construction environments, enhancing both their immediate employability and long-term career development.

Generative AI Statement

To enhance writing clarity, generative AI tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. ChatGPT-4o (OpenAI) was employed to support sentence restructuring, grammar refinement, and readability improvements. It was also used to verify project revenue. Grammarly was additionally

used to check for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and stylistic consistency. These tools helped improve the clarity and flow of the writing, but did not contribute to the intellectual content, analysis, or interpretation of the research. Full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and interpretation of the work remains with the author(s).

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