

**2024-25 ASHRAE President Dennis Knight, P.E., BEMP, Fellow Life Member ASHRAE
State of the Society Address Manuscript With Slide Numbers
*“Empowering Our Workforce: Building a Sustainable Future”*February 10, 2025**

Dear friends and colleagues.

In Indianapolis I shared that this year, my wife Shirl and I marked our 50th wedding anniversary – a milestone that began with a Polaroid camera capturing our youthful faces and a drive-thru honeymoon meal of two hot dogs. I also let you in on the secret to our lasting relationship. Investing in one another, staying committed and having countless meaningful conversations along the way.

This personal reflection brings me to our theme for this year: *"Empowering Our Workforce: Building a Sustainable Future."* As a successful marriage thrives on shared dedication and dialogue, the future of our industry relies on dedicated investment in people, steadfast commitment and the strength of open dialogue.

Since we last met in Indianapolis, I've had the privilege of engaging with many ASHRAE members and industry leaders worldwide. I've participated in eight Chapters Regional Conferences, connected with more than 1,100 leaders from chapters, regions, industry, government and academia, across 11 countries including U.S., Canada, Brazil, India, Pakistan, the UK, Japan, Denmark, Sweden, Cyprus, and Greece – and 13 U.S. states from South Carolina to California. These interactions have been far more than just meetings; they've been invaluable opportunities to listen, learn and collectively shape the future of our industry.

But perhaps most inspiring has been the chance to engage with over 1,500 students from our student branches in those 11 countries. Their enthusiasm and innovative ideas remind us why investing in the next generation is crucial. These conversations – with our members, industry leaders, academics and government officials – have reinforced a critical truth: we face a workforce development crisis.

The numbers still tell a compelling story – HVAC systems worldwide will triple from 2 billion to 6 billion by 2050 and nearly 2.5 trillion square feet of existing buildings need to be renovated. This unprecedented growth demands a larger, more diverse, and highly skilled workforce. Yet, paradoxically, we struggle to attract new talent. To address this challenge, it’s critical to start early by engaging with our children about the opportunities that exist in this career path. By inspiring the next generation, we can build a pipeline of passionate and skilled professionals ready to meet the demands of this dynamic industry.

Why is this fast-growing industry—with its direct ability to address global challenges such as resiliency and public health—experiencing difficulty attracting new professionals? Part of the answer lies in perception. We need to clarify our message to emphasize our vision for a sustainable future, where buildings are energy-efficient, healthy and built to endure and thrive in the face of evolving demands.

During my presidency, we’ve launched three key initiatives. Our *Career Conversations* video series has been a resounding success, featuring over 60 inspiring stories shared by ASHRAE members at various stages of their careers. These videos provide personal accounts of their career journeys, why they chose this field, and the opportunities they’ve found in the HVAC&R and building sciences industry. The series was created to introduce, inspire, and invite others to explore this rewarding profession and showcase the authentic voices of our members. You can watch these incredible stories on ASHRAE’s YouTube channel and gain a deeper appreciation for the impact of our industry.

In addition to our Career Conversations series, we also learned through the nine finalists for the prestigious CIBSE ASHRAE Graduate of the Year Award that our young, emerging professionals can clearly articulate why our industry is vital – not just as a career choice, but as an essential part of creating a resilient and sustainable future.

The CIBSE ASHRAE Graduate of the Year Award celebrates the exceptional talent and promise of young professionals to advance building sciences and sustainability. The finalist for the 2024 award, showcased fresh perspectives and technical excellence. They represent our next generation of industry leaders.

This Society Year also saw our first-ever Women in ASHRAE Leadership Symposium in Chicago, along with the debut of the Young Engineering Student in ASHRAE EmpowHERment Award recognizing a student who has made significant strides in advancing the role of women in the field through breaking barriers and inspiring others. The award honored a young professional who demonstrated outstanding leadership, mentorship, and impact within ASHRAE and has a vision for a broader impact for the building industry through STEM careers.

Additionally, the recognition amplifies the importance of mentorship and the creation of supportive networks within ASHRAE and in the workplace. This is one more way in which our members are contributing to the development and growth of our workforce.

For our second initiative, we established new Member Resource Groups to strengthen connections and foster a sense of belonging within the Society. These groups are designed as affinity groups, bringing together members who share common attributes, interests, or experiences. They provide a supportive space for collaboration, mentorship, and engagement, within the Society and the broader industry. By simplifying and expanding opportunities for members to connect in meaningful ways, these groups play an important role in creating an inclusive and connected ASHRAE community. Our Member Resource Groups are creating powerful connections. At our Young Professionals with Children MRG event in Indianapolis, participants were amazed to discover the vast networking opportunities within ASHRAE. As my good friend and ASHRAE Presidential Member Tim Wentz (one of the facilitators) said, 'You need to be in the room' – a simple phrase that captures how ASHRAE membership opens doors and builds careers through meaningful professional relationships.

Finally, in our third initiative, we're making meaningful investments in professional development and modernizing our education delivery platforms to align with the evolving demands of the industry.

As technology transforms HVAC&R, innovations like artificial intelligence and intelligent systems are driving greater efficiency and sustainability. ASHRAE is harnessing these advancements to enhance our educational resources and member support. A significant step forward is the development of a unified learning platform that will integrate ASHRAE eLearning, instructor-led training, and self-directed learning into a single, user-friendly, web-based system. This will streamline access to training materials, replacing the need to navigate multiple platforms.

Additionally, our Publication and Education staff are exploring AI tools to make ASHRAE’s extensive intellectual resources more accessible and relevant. A pilot project is underway to test an AI-powered language model that will assist members in searching and utilizing ASHRAE standards and handbooks more effectively, ensuring timely and reliable support for members, industry, governments, and the public.

In Indianapolis, I shared with you that when I was 16, an engineer named Fred Howard visited my high school drafting class and offered me a job as a "Power Plant Piping Systems Designer." This opportunity, born from a company's commitment to workforce development, changed the trajectory of my life.

Let me now share an inspiring story that exemplifies the power of investing in people.

This amazing story, relayed to me by our esteemed board vice president, Devin Abellon, demonstrates how a chance encounter can ignite a passion for our industry in young minds.

At the 2024 Region X CRC in Tempe, Arizona, Devin found himself in an elevator lobby with ASHRAE member Nikola Kravik and a young woman named Emilia, a mechanical engineering student from San Diego State University, and her mother. Emilia and her mother were at the hotel for other reasons and had never heard of ASHRAE. What began as a simple explanation of the CRC awards dinner, evolved into an impromptu showcase of the exciting world of HVAC&R and the building sciences.

Devin watched as a diverse group of ASHRAE members, including a young female engineer, a manufacturer's rep and a contractor—passionately sharing with Emilia their experiences and the opportunities our industry offers. The enthusiasm was contagious, and Emilia was intrigued, and her mother was delighted at the prospect of her daughter discovering a meaningful career path.

Following this encounter, Devin connected Emilia with our San Diego chapter. Her excitement had already inspired several classmates to attend. Today, I'm thrilled to report that Emilia is now the treasurer of university's newly established ASHRAE student branch. In addition, Emilia’s classmate, Emma, has secured a position as a mechanical designer at a prominent firm in San Diego.

This story beautifully illustrates the impact of sharing our passion for ASHRAE and the HVAC&R industry. It's about creating welcoming environments and actively inviting young professionals to join our ranks. This is precisely what I envisioned when I challenged our members to "shout it from the rooftops!" Let's continue to inspire the next generation, building not just systems, but futures.

Globally, I have had the honor of chartering our new Region XV, participating in the inauguration of a newly redefined Region-at-Large, and charting a landmark Nordic Chapter. These milestones set the stage for continued growth in membership and the advancement of our mission.

We've engaged with over 100 business leaders, some representing companies with more than 100,000 employees, aligning industry goals with workforce needs and ASHRAE’s workforce development programs.

The Workforce Development Summit in New York City was a resounding success, producing a real-time roadmap for addressing workforce challenges. This summit, tied to our building decarbonization conference in New York, brought together stakeholders to discuss strategies for attracting talent to our industry. The workforce development roadmap has been distributed to our councils, committees and the planning committee and is available for download at ashrae.org/president.

The critical importance of workforce development, highlighted by both the theme and the global demand for skilled professionals, led the planning committee to make it a central initiative in ASHRAE’s new strategic plan.

Looking ahead to the next six months as we move toward the end of this Society Year and beyond, I plan to continue to take our message to the streets every day and continue to meet with chapters, members, policy makers and industry representatives from around the world. ASHRAE will be represented at ACREX 2025 - South Asia's largest HVAC&R exhibition in India and the CLIMA 2025 - Italy's leading international scientific congress. In addition, we plan to create a student branch advisors forum for our more than 400 student branches to facilitate collaboration and cooperation among the many professors helping to advance research and technology within our industry. Finally, we are planning an event at Clemson University with our student branch there to host an audience of around 400 young people and career technical educators and professors from k-12 school districts, community colleges and universities from within Region IV to showcase the power of awareness and storytelling to introduce more people in my home state of South Carolina to ASHRAE and HVAC&R.

We’re delighted that we have guests from the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers – also known as SMART – which we are working with on training programs and joint chapter activities.  We are excited about this partnership, as it highlights the critical role of sheet metal workers in meeting design intent and fostering collaboration between trade professionals and design engineers. I’m also excited about their work on various Standards Project Committees and Technical Committees, as well as IAQ advocacy efforts. With over 150 training centers across the U.S. and Canada, this partnership holds significant potential for strengthening workforce development and addressing future challenges in building performance and aligning curriculum with industry needs.

As we look to the future, I call upon each of you to continue to be passionate ambassadors for our industry. Share your stories, engage in conversations, and inspire the next generation of professionals. We need to demonstrate to the world what we do and the profound impact our industry is making today – and the even greater potential it holds is in the future to address indoor environmental quality, sustainable development and resiliency.

Remember, “our lives succeed or fail, gradually then suddenly, one conversation at a time. The conversation is the relationship.”

I urge you to start these conversations with students, colleagues, employees, potential ASHRAE members, and even your family and friends. Tell them why this industry is not just a profession but a community of role models, mentors, and collaborators who inspire and support each other.

We are having an impact and making a difference now. However, we will need an expanded and more diverse workforce to meet the growing challenges ahead.

Let’s take pride in our accomplishments, tell our stories, and grow our workforce. Together, we can build a workforce to drive the sustainable future we all envision.

Thank you.