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# Diversifying to Ride Out Real Estate Cycles



**SHAUN LOVER**

Title: President, Columbia Construction Co.

Age: 42

Industry experience: 23 years

**BY STEVE ADAMS**

BANKER & TRADESMAN STAFF

The pursuit of jobs in Greater Boston's space-hungry life science sector and a steady diet of work in the academic world has fueled growth for Columbia Construction Co. One of the 10 largest construction firms in Massachusetts, the North Reading company had an annual volume of over \$450 million in 2018. Its president, Shaun Lover, got his introduction to the building industry as a Northeastern University coop at Turner Construction and worked on projects including the Seaport East office tower before joining Columbia as a superintendent in 2003. He was named the 94-year-old company's president in 2017.

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**Q: What was the impetus for your move to Columbia Construction in 2003?**

**A:** One of the executives here, [Vice Chairman] Jim Marsh, was a former Turner guy, and he did a little recruiting. I live in New Hampshire, so it worked out well to be a little more north of the city, and I came to Columbia as a superintendent, and after a few years moved into project management roles.

**Q: What percentage of Columbia's business is repeat customers?**

**A:** Our whole company is built on 85 or so repeat clients, or a referral. That's what we try to do. We've focused on the health care and life science markets. We've always been in those markets, and Columbia has done a ton of hospital work over the years. We made sure we put a real focus on that, learning from the recession. We wanted to make sure we were as diverse as we could be for the next inevitable downturn.

**Q: What's Columbia's largest current project?**

**A:** We're working on a \$200 million project for Siemens Healthineers in Walpole, a three-year staged project [for construction of an advanced manufacturing and R&D facility]. It's scheduled for completion next year.

**Q: Does the firm's hospital work experience translate well to life science projects?**

**A:** Health care and life science are really two different buildings and two different client bases, but both provide great opportunities for people who are really technically focused. Once you become an expert in that field, the list of competition dwindles pretty dramatically. It's complicated work. It's reputation-based. Once you do a good job and word spreads, it tends to repeat itself.

**Q: Is Columbia still feeling the effects of the National Grid backlog?**

**A:** There's still definitely a backlog. We had mechanical systems that we had to circumvent. We had a couple in particular that were going for final inspections and startup, and had to work around it. Most clients were impacted. If you're waiting for natural gas you do have to purchase or rent different types of equipment, and that's what we did. We actually rented equipment just to get through the process until we could get a full connection.

**Q: What's the potential for the growth of Net Zero developments?**

**A:** Our second Net Zero building was for Harvard: the ZeroHouse [the headquarters of the Harvard Center for Green Buildings and Cities]. They are using it almost as a living laboratory and studying the components as they move on with their research.

**Q: Does Columbia have a target for expanding in specific building sectors?**

**A:** Certainly life science and health care. There's no more room in Cambridge, and there are a lot more class A landlords starting to move out into Somerville and Watertown and Waltham. There is huge potential on the life science side and the health care side. Things are continually changing in the regulations and in-hospital pharmacies have to be upgraded.

In the downturn in 2010, we tried to jump into the downtown world. We have a special project division group that worked in Boston and Cambridge. The corporate market was hit hard in 2009, and we looked at it as a fresh start. We were lucky as a company that we had several great clients: Hobbs Brook Management, Martha's Vineyard Hospital, Berkeley Investments at the Waltham Watch Factory and the IRS building in Andover, which was a \$100 million economic stimulus product. We were lucky to win it, which kept our people busy. As far as the downtown world, we had a few clients and it was time to refocus on our client base there. We took time to meet those folks and find out what each company stands for. When the economy started to pick back up, we had some established relationships.

**Q: How do you decide which projects to bid on in a busy construction market like this one?**

**A:** We don't chase everything and not every project is for us. We try to look for partners who share the same philosophy. We want to be able to provide input upfront and we look for clients who value us as a team member. We're not what I would consider a plan and spec hard bid contractor. We like to be honest with the clients and understand their risks.

**Q: Columbia employs a full-time sustainability director – what are his responsibilities and how has this position changed the company's approach?**

**A:** We've actually done 27 LEED-certified projects: three platinum, 12 gold, seven silver and five certified. Conor McGuire, our sustainability director, helps with that formal process. But I would say more and more, even on projects that aren't pursuing LEED, Conor has his stamp on it. We try to bring him in on any sizeable opportunity and see if he can have any impact on the design early on. One of the things we realize is a lot of clients want to do the right thing for their people and the environment. Some of them just don't know how. It's our job to educate and guide them. ◀

## LOVER'S FIVE FAVORITE LEADERSHIP BOOKS FOR MANAGERS:

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|----------|--|----------|-------------------------------------|----------|--|----------|-----------------------------------|----------|--|
| <b>1</b> | "The Making of a Manager"<br>by Julie Zhuo | <b>2</b> | "Leadershift"<br>by John C. Maxwell | <b>3</b> | "Trillion Dollar Coach"<br>by Eric Schmidt,<br>Jonathan Rosenberg,<br>Alan Eagle | <b>4</b> | "The Energy Bus"<br>by Jon Gordon | <b>5</b> | "Raise Your Game"<br>by Alan Stein Jr. |
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