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White Paper

AI IN THE FIELD: HOW METAL BUILDING ERECTORS ARE PUTTING AI TO WORK

Practical lessons from Fleming Construction Group, Rainwater Construction Company, and Briner Building

Presented in partnership with the Metal Building Contractors and Erectors Association (MBCEA) and Western States Metal Roofing

Executive Summary

The metal building industry is unusual in that AI is reshaping it from two directions at once: as the technology behind a construction boom (data centers are largely built as metal building systems), and as an operational tool contractors are already using day to day. Leaders from Fleming Construction Group, Rainwater Construction Company, and Briner Building, three self-performing erectors, joined a Metal Coffee Shop webinar, presented in partnership with the Metal Building Contractors and Erectors Association (MBCEA) and Western States Metal Roofing, to share how their teams are actually using AI in proposals, estimating, contract review, scheduling, and client-facing visuals, along with the guardrails they wish they'd put in place sooner. The throughline: start with a closed, paid model, write usage guidelines before you scale adoption, and never send AI output out the door without owning it yourself.



Why this Matters Right Now

It's difficult to have a conversation in metal building construction today without AI coming up, and not just as an abstract trend. Data centers, one of the biggest sources of current demand in the industry, are predominantly built as metal building systems. That means AI is driving business two ways simultaneously: it's the reason a lot of erectors have full pipelines right now, and it's a tool those same erectors are starting to use to run their businesses.

For self-performing erectors specifically, there's an added layer of confidence: AI is not, in the near term, replacing steel erection in the field. The advantage goes to whoever uses it most effectively in the office (in proposals, estimating, scheduling, and document review), while the physical work stays a human skill.

AI AS A DEMAND DRIVER

Data centers, one of the biggest sources of current demand, are largely built as metal building systems

Result: Full pipeline for many erectors right now.

AI AS AN OFFICE TOOL

- Proposals and Presentations
- Estimating and Data Analysis
- Contract and Document Review
- Scheduling and Checklists
- Client-Ready Renderings

In the field the work stays human: AI is not replacing steel erection in the near term

Figure 1. Ai is reshaping the metal building industry from two directions at once.

Where Erectors Are Putting AI to Work Today

Proposals and Presentations

The simplest starting point for most teams: feed in company background and project specifics, the way you'd write an email, and let AI produce a first draft. Loading a company's actual colors and fonts means everything generated afterward comes out on-brand by default, with no manual reformatting required.

Estimating and Data Analysis

Dropping a full erection spreadsheet in and asking for patterns (budgeted man-hours against actual, broken out by area) turns a task that used to take a project manager most of a day into something that runs in minutes. It doesn't replace the PM's judgment; it hands them the analysis already done.

Contract and Document Review

This is where the paperwork burden of working under large general contractors gets lighter. Teams are loading a checklist of their own non-negotiable terms (flow-down provisions, pay-if-paid clauses, and similar risk items) and having AI flag them automatically across scope documents, bid packages, and spec books, then comparing scope documents against baseline specifications to catch conflicts before they become change orders.

Scheduling and Checklists

Loading a project's plan schedule alongside current progress lets AI flag risk early (running ahead on wall installation but behind on roof, for instance), the same read a project manager would eventually get

to, just faster. It's also a fast way to generate the routine checklists (project closeouts, standard SOPs) that otherwise eat up administrative time.

Renderings and Visualizations

Perhaps the most visible use case shared in the conversation came from Brian Harshbarger of Briner Building: turning rough, hand-drawn sketches into client-ready renderings through iterative prompting ("add a dock, remove the truck") in real time. Facing a meeting with a Fortune 500 client the following week, Harshbarger produced a polished rendering in about 30 minutes, in place of a roughly $15,000 outside rendering engagement.



Example shared by Brian Harshbarger, Briner Building, ahead of fortune 500 client meeting.

Figure 2. One client rendering two paths: an outside firm vs. Ai in-house.

Getting the Guardrails Right

Every team on the panel converged on the same starting recommendation: pay for a closed model rather than using a free, open one. An open model treats what you feed it as training data for everyone else; a closed, paid subscription keeps proprietary project information, NDAs, and client data contained. One firm even runs signed NDAs through AI to check that a proposed use doesn't violate its terms, which only works because the underlying model is closed to begin with.

The second lesson came from experience, not theory: several teams described an early phase of just telling employees, "use AI," without any structure, what one contractor called "the wild west." The fix wasn't slowing adoption down; it was sequencing it: get the paid, closed version in place first, then define what it's approved for, rather than the reverse. A short written usage policy, even an informal one, made the difference between scattered experimentation and adoption that actually compounds.

Access itself is worth deciding deliberately, too. Briner Building, for example, limits access to two people company-wide and restricts use to specific categories (presentations, document review, and operations) rather than opening it broadly from the start.

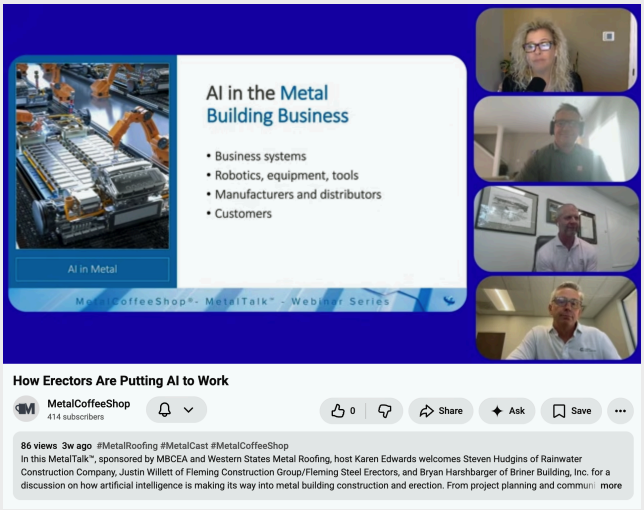
What's Next

The panel's clearest prediction was about manufacturers, not contractors: whoever compresses lead times fastest (from a standard six-to-ten weeks down to days) changes the competitive landscape for

everyone downstream. If order-to-delivery time collapses across the industry, brand loyalty matters less than speed, and erectors will need to be ready to move at whatever pace their manufacturing partners set. Several panelists expect meaningful movement on this within the next 12 to 18 months.

Getting Started: A Practical Sequence

- Move to a closed, paid subscription before broad rollout, not after.
- Write a short usage policy: what it's approved for, what it isn't, and who has access.
- Start with one use case (proposals are a common entry point) before expanding.
- Upload company branding (colors, fonts, standard language) so outputs are usable without rework.
- Treat every output as a first draft. Push back, ask for revisions, and verify everything.
- Revisit your usage guidelines periodically as your team's comfort and use cases grow.



About this Conversation

This paper draws on a live Metal Coffee Shop webinar featuring Steven Hudgins (Rainwater Construction), Justin Willett (Fleming Construction Group), and Brian Harshbarger (Briner Building), three self-performing erectors speaking candidly about where AI is helping, where it isn't, and what they'd do differently.

This Metal Coffee Shop Podcast was presented in partnership with the Metal Building Contractors and Erectors Association and Western States Metal Roofing.
