SMARTBUILD CEO Zulq Malik Calls for Human-Centered AI in Construction at CONEXPO-CON/AGG 2026

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SMARTBUILD Construction Solutions Founder and CEO Zulqernain ?Zulq? Malik addressed construction leaders at CONEXPO-CON/AGG 2026 with a message that artificial intelligence in construction must focus on people first. Speaking to industry professionals gathered at North America?s largest construction trade show, Malik offered his insight on how AI should support workers on jobsites rather than create additional complexity.

During his presentation, Malik focused on what he described as a growing gap between how technology is designed and how construction teams actually work. While many discussions about AI center on technical capabilities, Malik pointed out the importance of building tools that fit the daily experience of the people who use them.

?Many conversations about AI focus on what the technology can do,? Malik said during the session. ?The real question is how that technology fits into the day-to-day experience of the people using it on the jobsite.?

Malik explained that construction has traditionally approached technology as a transactional tool rather than an experience that supports workers in their daily tasks. Systems are often introduced to collect information such as time entries, safety reports, and documentation. However, those systems rarely provide meaningful value to the workers who enter the data.

According to Malik, this approach contributes to the perception that construction is slow to adopt new technology.

?When people say construction doesn?t adopt technology, I challenge that idea,? Malik said. ?Construction adopts tools that are useful and built for the job. When technology helps people work more easily, adoption happens naturally.?

Malik?s perspective is formed by more than three decades of experience in the construction industry. He began his career as a project coordinator and later worked within project management and leadership roles before founding his own construction company in 2005. During that time, he experienced firsthand the operational challenges confronted by smaller contractors competing with larger firms with broader infrastructure.

Those challenges led Malik to explore ways technology could help improve construction workflows. In the early days, before cloud computing became common, Malik began experimenting with simple digital processes to reduce administrative work and improve the flow of information between teams.

Those early efforts eventually led to the creation of SMARTBUILD Construction Solutions, a construction technology company focused on improving communication, coordination, and documentation between the field and the office.

During his presentation, Malik used examples from outside the construction industry to illustrate how experience-focused technology has already transformed other sectors. He described how companies in industries such as automotive and entertainment have built systems that interact naturally with users and provide a more engaging experience.

Many vehicles today include voice-enabled digital assistants that allow drivers to control navigation, communication, and other functions simply by speaking. Malik suggested that similar interaction models could improve how construction teams share information on jobsites.

?People naturally communicate through conversation,? Malik said. ?When technology allows workers to speak instead of type, it removes friction and makes it easier to capture information.?

Communication gaps remain one of the most persistent challenges in construction projects. Malik explained that much of the information used to make project decisions flows through a small number of individuals responsible for documentation. At the same time, hundreds of workers may observe site conditions, progress updates, or safety issues throughout the day.

As a result, valuable information is often lost before it reaches project leadership.?There may be hundreds of people walking a jobsite every day,? Malik said. ?Each of them sees things happening in real time. Yet most project decisions are based on information coming from only one or two people responsible for reporting.?

Malik believes conversational technology and AI tools can help close that gap by making it easier for workers to share information while work is happening. Instead of typing on mobile devices or filling out forms, workers

could report updates verbally, and software systems could automatically organize the information.

This approach decreases the time required to complete documentation and increases the amount of information captured during a project.

In some cases, Malik noted, safety documentation that previously required 15 to 20 minutes can be completed in just a few minutes when workers provide updates verbally.

?When systems respect how crews actually work, people are more willing to participate,? Malik said.

Malik also discussed how younger workers' expectations will shape the future of construction technology. Many new entrants to the workforce have grown up using digital tools that provide immediate interaction and feedback. Malik believes construction companies will need to design systems that align with those expectations to attract and retain talent.

?Future workers will expect technology that interacts with them the same way the rest of their digital world does,? Malik said.

Despite rapid advancements in automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence, Malik emphasized that people will remain central to the construction industry.

Although autonomous equipment and advanced analytics are becoming more common, Malik said human judgment, collaboration, and experience will remain essential to the success of projects.

?Technology should help people work better together,? Malik said. ?The goal is to support the human side of construction, not replace it.?

SMARTBUILD?s presence at CONEXPO-CON/AGG underscores broader industry discussions about how technology can improve communication, coordination, and decision-making across increasingly complex projects. The event brings together contractors, manufacturers, and technology providers from around the world to share ideas and investigate innovations molding the future of construction.

Malik concluded his presentation by emphasizing that the next generation of construction technology should focus on helping workers share information more easily, collaborate more effectively, and make better decisions across projects.

?Construction has always been built on people,? Malik said. ?Technology works best when it helps those people do their jobs with greater precision and assurance.?

About SMARTBUILD Construction Solutions

SMARTBUILD Construction Solutions develops technology created to improve coordination, communication, and documentation between the field and the office. Built by construction professionals, the company concentrates on practical tools that align with real jobsite workflows and support teams across all phases of construction projects.

Website: smrtbld.com

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SMARTBUILD

SMARTBUILD recognizes the unique needs of construction projects and stakeholders. Backed by over 50 years of combined field experience, they've developed purpose-built construction tech tools to support teams from concept to closeout.

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