

market rankings, forecast, long-term energy scenarios, rates, etc.

Joy: **Labor Price Increases:** Our unit price increases kept pace with our cost increases over 2023-2025.

**Geographic Trends:** Our growth prospects match the survey trends with the exception of Pacific Northwest moving to the #3 slot.

**MAGA Markets:** Industrial Growth & Mining is our biggest opportunity for growth followed by Environmental Remediation, Brownfields & Liability-Driven Work. We do see the Data Center trend in the market and with our E&C partners, but we are currently not active in the space.

**EBJ: What was your original inspiration to get into the industry in the first place, and what circumstances led to you taking on a senior management role?**

Joy: My original inspiration to get into the industry came from wanting to be part of work that creates a visible, lasting impact. I was drawn to the combination of problem-solving, teamwork, and the opportunity to contribute to projects that improve communities and the environment. Early in my career, I enjoyed being in the field, learning the operational side of the business, and seeing firsthand how strong planning, safety, and execution can make a real difference in project success.

As my career progressed, I naturally became more involved in leading teams, mentoring others, and helping solve larger operational challenges. Those experiences showed me that I enjoyed not only the technical and project side of the work, but also helping build successful teams and processes. The progression into a senior management role came through a combination of experience, opportunities to lead increasingly complex projects, and a desire to help shape the long-term direction and culture of organizations that I was lucky enough to be part of. It has been rewarding to contribute at a broader level while still staying connected to the people and projects that drive the industry forward. ■

## HELIX ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGES CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT WITH PRICING DISCIPLINE AND TIGHT PROJECT EXECUTION

**HELIX Environmental Planning Inc.** is a California-based, employee-owned environmental consulting firm specializing in planning, permitting, natural and cultural resource management, and habitat restoration services for infrastructure, transportation, and land development projects. HELIX operates at the intersection of regulatory complexity and project execution, helping clients move critical projects forward while managing environmental risk.

**Shelby Howard serves as President and Chief Executive Officer** of HELIX and he leads the company's strategic direction with a focus on disciplined growth, strong and accountable culture, financial performance, and long-term value creation for HELIX's employee-owners.

**EBJ: How has business been so far in 2026 and what external factors have played into your short- or long-term business planning and strategy here in Q2 2026?**

Shelby Howard: Business has been very strong in 2026. We had a successful Q1 with greater than 20% revenue growth compared to Q1 2025, along with improvements in our profit margin, utilization, multiplier, overhead rate, and our book-to-bill ratio. We are also seeing a strong increase in proposal demand and teaming requests for private and public projects. Looking ahead in 2026 and beyond, we are seeing strong revenue projections and continued demand for our services.

Several external factors are shaping our near-term execution and longer-term strategy. Inflation, interest rates, and rising energy and utility prices continue to increase the costs of doing business, which places greater emphasis on pricing discipline and project execution.

Several of our public clients are facing uncertainty around infrastructure funding, including the approaching 2026 authorization horizon for IIJA-era programs, which is contributing to some project start delays. At the same time, artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies are creating disruption in how work gets performed and delivered, with implications for efficiency, pricing models, and client expectations.

Strategically, we are tightening companywide forecasting and capacity planning, strengthening accountability, and expanding fixed-price work thoughtfully with clearer scopes and stronger controls.

**EBJ: What have you found to be the most useful, productive or impactful application of AI platforms, first for you personally and second for your company or your team?**

Howard: Personally, the most useful and impactful application of AI platforms has been the efficiency gains with synthesizing inputs, pressure-testing my reasoning, and improvements with my messaging. I use Microsoft CoPilot regularly (less like an author and more like an editor-in-chief) to analyze information, provide alternative points-of-view, perform agentic functions, and scenario modeling. The benefit for me has been speed to clarity rather than outsourcing judgment and critical thinking.

At HELIX, we are approaching the adoption of AI as both a shift in management discipline and a rapidly evolving technology landscape. We are supporting the use of AI where our client contracts allow to improve efficiency, while also strengthening governance, improving how we manage our data, and ensuring employees are trained on the appropriate use of these tools as they continue to evolve. More broadly, we see this as one of the defining challenges for environmental consulting firms: how to help employees adopt new technologies without diluting

their professional judgment and accountability, while also addressing the broader ethical considerations and expectations that come with their use.

While the full impact of AI is still emerging, the most meaningful benefits to date have come from embedding AI into repeatable workflows, improving document summaries, reducing hidden rework, and streamlining overhead tasks. The time saved is being reinvested into higher-value work, including more thoughtful analysis, stronger deliverables, and better client service. We are also excited about the AI platforms we are using for proposal development which are improving access to historical pursuit data, reducing the time spent searching for past pursuit information, and empowering our Marketing team by creating a more structured knowledge base of pursuit information.

**EBJ: As a California based company, how insulated or isolated do you believe the market is in areas your company focuses?**

Howard: California is a strong market that rewards firms that combine regulatory depth with speed, clarity, and execution discipline. California is often described as insulated, but I'd frame it as California being structurally resilient but operationally volatile. The resilience is based on the size and scale of California, the state's complex environmental requirements that are largely driven by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and the continued demand for infrastructure and housing throughout the state.

The volatility comes from the challenges of public budgets, political priorities, procurement cycles, and the growing push to streamline approvals. Further volatility comes from forces outside of California, including inflationary pressures, high interest rates, supply chain challenges, and federal funding cuts. These external pressures reduce the level of insulation and isolation of the California market.

Another way to view the "insulation" question is from the capability perspective. In California, the durable advantage is not simply being located here; it's being able to navigate complexity without becoming

a bottleneck and moving projects forward while still protecting clients with sound documentation and risk management.

**EBJ: Please review the EBJ Outlook Survey result summary tables and make some observations that occur to you on market rankings, forecast, long-term energy scenarios, rates, etc.**

Howard: Several themes stand out that are consistent with what we are seeing. First, the industry appears to be settling into a moderate but stable growth environment. The 6–7% gross revenue growth forecasts suggest a normalization from the stronger post-COVID rebound years, with continued expansion but less margin for error. Operating margin data shows a wide dispersion of outcomes, with firms either improving significantly or facing margin compression, which reinforces that execution and pricing discipline are increasingly separating top performers from the rest of the market. Near-term performance is increasingly tied to how effectively firms manage cost, risk, and execution.

Second, inflationary pressures remain a defining dynamic. Billing rates have increased steadily, but generally in line with or only slightly above labor cost growth, indicating that firms are still working to maintain margins rather than expanding them. This aligns with what we see across the industry with continued upward pressure on wages and competition for talent driving cost structures.

From a market perspective, the data highlights a shift toward infrastructure, energy, and liability-driven work, with work for water utilities remaining strong. Data centers, grid investment, and broader energy infrastructure all rank highly, which is in line with our perspective and the prioritization of AI that we are witnessing across a variety of sectors. While the long-term projections for renewables show continued growth in renewable generation share, the near-term renewable projections recognize policy and market constraints, alongside increasing expectations for nuclear and other firm power sources. Through the California lens, this is slightly different than our perspective because the state's energy storage, renewable targets, and de-

carbonization goals continue to drive the near-term renewable needs.

**EBJ: What was your original inspiration to get into the industry in the first place, and what circumstances led to you taking on a senior management role?**

Howard: My initial interest in the industry grew out of my background in biology and the opportunity to conduct biological field work in support of local projects. I joined HELIX in 2005 as an entry-level biologist, which allowed me to conduct biological studies for Southern California infrastructure projects that had tangible impacts within my community. That hands-on connection between technical training and applied work was a strong early motivator for me.

Over time, I came to appreciate that environmental consulting sits at the intersection of science, policy, and project execution in a way that's difficult to fully understand in an academic setting. That broader perspective, the complexity of the work, and the opportunity to shape how projects are designed and mitigated became key factors in what has kept me engaged in the industry.

My path into senior management was driven by a shift from project-level decisions to a greater focus on the overall performance of HELIX. I became increasingly focused on building strong teams, improving execution, and creating alignment between strategy and results. That progression naturally led to broader leadership responsibilities, and ultimately to my current role, where the focus is on growth, performance, culture, and continuing to create long-term value for our employees. ■

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