

# ASU alum at forefront of innovating AI in the construction industry

**Eric Cylwik, director of innovation at Sundt, sees AI as a tool for easing the labor shortage**

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News  
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Three years ago, Eric Cylwik wowed a room full of construction executives when he presented an AI-generated illustration to show how the technology wasn't on the horizon — it was already there.

"All of a sudden, they realized this stuff is coming way faster than they thought it would be," he said.

As the director of innovation for Tempe-based Sundt Construction, Cylwik must anticipate and prepare his company for game-changing trends, and he sees artificial intelligence as an important way to help alleviate the shortage of labor in the construction industry.

Cylwik credits his fearless embrace of innovation to his time at Arizona State University, where he earned a degree from [The Design School](#) in 2009.

"The academic depth and breadth here was just overwhelming, and that's what drew me in and connected me with the community," he said.

"It showed me a much wider view of the world than I started out with."

He started in the School of Art but the studio classes were not for him, so he switched to majoring in design studies with an emphasis in digital visualization.

"This idea of communicating visually and solving 3D puzzles was super interesting," he said.

Cylwik was researching some software he liked and came across an article posted by Tempe-based Sundt Construction, which was using it. He emailed an employee mentioned in the article and was invited for an interview.

"I brought my portfolio of all the 3D stuff I'd done. And I was like, 'If I wanted to get a job here, what would I do?' And they were like, 'You'd say yes to the job offer we're giving you.'"

So Cylwik started working at Sundt during his second year at ASU, part time during the school year and full time in the summers.

He was using 3D modeling to make the complexities of construction projects understandable to people who were not experts.

"I was working at the stage in the project that was, 'We don't know how we're going to build this,'" he said.

"I would create these visuals that would explain the construction narrative and demonstrate why we selected this form work or why we had to custom engineer this shoring solution that would prevent this trench from collapsing or whatever it happened to be."

One of Cylwik's first projects at Sundt was ISTB 4 on the ASU Tempe campus.

"We had to dig down for the lower-level research spaces, but you can't undermine the road next to it. So you drive these huge nails into the soil and then put a plate on them. But there were utilities under the street, so I had to work with the teams that were figuring out where to put the nails so you don't go through a storm drain or a water line.

"It was some fun, complicated things that you could only do through 3D," he said.

He also did several highway construction projects and a complicated bridge replacement in Portland, Oregon.

Cylwik has been director of innovation at Sundt for the past three years.

"Part of my role is looking at things that are disruptive — the innovation coming into the industry — and advising our executive committee on how to pull levers in the company to prepare us for when that disruptive innovation comes through," he said.

Like AI.

"Sundt is not going to be the world's leader in artificial intelligence because that's not what our mission is," he said.

"But it's important that we're partnered with the right people so they can have our insights and develop the world's best products. But we also need to make sure that we're able to leverage them appropriately."

AI is not going to displace construction workers, he said.

"The construction industry at large has a major people shortage, and this is going to help us alleviate that. But by no means does this reduce our need for the people that we have today," he said.

He expects AI to make employees more productive.

"It's like if you had a research assistant assigned to every construction engineer. Instead of our project engineers looking through a thousand pages of written specifications, they can now interact with an AI component that will help them sift through those thousand pages and focus on the two

pages they need.

“But the engineers still have to have the knowledge and education and experience to know that, ‘Yup, that’s the right spot.’”

One of the most promising uses of AI is in combination with robotics, an advancement Cylwik discussed in a recent Forbes [magazine article](#).

“AI has historically been thought of as a knowledge-management tool, but robotics have gotten a lot better,” he said.

In the article, he discussed Sundt’s partnership with Bedrock Robotics, a company founded by former engineers of the Waymo automated ride-share vehicles. Sundt is helping the company develop and test its AI-assisted excavators.

“In Tempe, I see Waymos everywhere. The data demonstrates that they’re safer and you have more predictable outcomes, and construction wants that,” he said.

Safety is one example. Construction equipment can have cameras that beep when they detect a person nearby, but because there are many people at construction sites, the beeping can be constant.

“But you can’t have a Waymo beep every time there’s a person nearby or there’s another car moving because that is the environment that Waymos operate in,” he said.

“So you have to understand not where people are, but also what they’re doing.”

The Bedrock excavators can assess a nearby person’s “engagement” — whether they’re aware of the equipment or looking at their phone.

“They’re able to keep a lot more attention focused fully around them and there are no blind spots,” he said.

While the construction industry is actively trying to recruit employees to be equipment operators, nobody wants to do endless repetition. That’s another area where AI-powered robotics can help.

“We have some projects where you’ll have a million cubic yards of dirt, which might be two years of somebody’s time to go out there and move it. And it’s literally 10 hours a day, five days a week of an excavator sitting there doing the exact same repetitive motion loading trucks. We post a job opening and they just stay open,” he said.

“We’re looking at how you take the operators and upskill them so they can interact with these autonomous pieces of equipment. It’s about identifying where we need hands-on creativity to be able to solve those challenges.”

Cylwik engages with students frequently during visits to ASU, where he’s been a guest lecturer and serves on an AI advisory team to the [Del E. Webb School of Construction](#). Sundt hires many ASU graduates.

“One of the things I look for is students who can understand a problem and connect that with a modern tool. AI absolutely fits that bucket,” he said.

“The people we're hiring right now are reporting to people who, when they were their age, didn't have AI. And so there are hundreds of opportunities every day for our incoming employees to do something different to develop or deploy a new tool.”

Cylwik also credits his time in the [ASU Leadership Institute](#) development program for his ability to embrace innovation.

“It was really interesting to look under the hood to see how ASU has been so successful,” he said.

“It gave me the opportunity to ask the question, ‘How do I replicate that at my business?’ It's helped me to see that regardless of what changes with AI, our mission and our purpose as an organization doesn't change. Just like the ASU Charter doesn't change with AI.”

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Eric Cylwik started working at Tempe-based Sundt Construction when he was a second-year student at ASU. He's now the director of innovation for the company. He's shown at ISTB 4 on the Tempe campus, one of the first construction projects he worked on. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News