

Wanted: A skilled work force

Lots of jobs await those who have the skills and many do not require a college degree.

BY ELAINE STUART

Record low unemployment has a downside. “We have 110,000 jobs in the want ads and only 60,000 people to fill them. We can’t get companies to come to Wisconsin if we can’t fill their demands for workers,” says Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson.

Wisconsin faces an extremely tight labor market despite having put thousands of people who once were on welfare in jobs and having a high graduation rate for high schoolers. The state has tackled the issue through several new programs. An innovative grant program encourages recent Wisconsin high-school graduates to attend state technical and occupational programs for their postsecondary careers. Beginning in July 2000, a student is eligible for up to \$1,000 in grants for two years of study at a Wisconsin Technical College System Board college.

The Wisconsin measure helps high school students realize there are career options that don’t require four years of college.

“Wisconsin made it possible for kids within three years of high school graduation to go to technical college for an associate degree close to tuition free,” says Gene Kussart, special assistant to the governor, Wisconsin Office for Building Tomorrow’s Workforce.

“They can go to the University of Wisconsin for \$10,000 a year or to technical college for free. The purse string is one way of getting the attention of parents and students,” Kussart says.

Other states are in the same boat. “Skilled workers are badly needed all over the country,” Thompson says.

No relief in sight

Low unemployment, an aging baby-boom work force, a growing demand

for high-tech job skills and a lack of skilled workers are combining to create a tight labor market for the foreseeable future. That is the view of Richard Judy, co-director, Center for Workforce Development, Hudson Institute.

“We aren’t taking work-force development seriously enough,” Judy says. He commends Wisconsin for addressing the issue.

The U.S. unemployment rate of 4.1 percent is the lowest in 30 years. Judy says the U.S. population is aging rapidly, as baby boomers move toward retirement. Canada finds itself in a similar situation. Meanwhile, there are relatively few young adults ages 25 to 34 to take the place of retiring baby boomers. Because of population trends, many of the new entrants into the U.S. work force will be Hispanics, which bodes ill for states with low Hispanic populations.

Judy says these demographic trends are occurring at the same time that technology and globalization are boosting the demand for skilled workers. Six of the top 10 fastest growing occupations for 1988 to 2008 are in the computer field.

Although workers need better high-tech skills, U.S. students score below many other countries on international mathematics and science assessments, according to *The National Education Goals Report, Building a Nation of Learners 1999*. Moreover, only 36 percent of high school seniors in 1994 met performance standards set by the Goals Panel. Only 16 percent of seniors in 1996 met the panel’s mathematics achievement performance standard.

Judy says, “Here’s a scary statistic: 60 percent of new jobs in the early 21st century will require skills possessed today by only 20 percent of today’s work force.”

Nor is the United States alone. Canada also is addressing a shortage of skilled workers. Francois Legault, Québec minister of state for education and youth, says, "Half the jobs require skills taught in vocational and technical programs, but only 30 percent of students graduate with vocational or technical skills."

A high-tech solution

Cisco Systems is tackling the shortage of high-tech workers by partnering with states, universities and schools. John P. Morgridge, Cisco Systems chairman, says 400,000 high-paying high-

says schools "bring the classrooms, computer labs, instructors and the willingness to support it."

Morgridge says other subjects could be taught using the same method of delivering a codified curriculum over the Internet and testing students frequently on their mastery of the content. Students in the Cisco program are tested every week.

"There are tools to address the skills shortage," Morgridge says.

A labor source

Veterans are an often overlooked source of highly skilled labor, says

denial requirements typically are based on traditional education, training and experience. Thus state licensing and certification rules may make the transition to the civilian work force difficult.

Ohio has had success in easing the way for veterans to obtain commercial drivers' licenses and obtaining federal licenses for aircraft mechanics. Maryland is helping veterans with licenses and certification for health care fields and South Carolina with law enforcement certifications, Borrego says.

Options to college

While good jobs exist for those with vocational and technical skills, many young people are not training for those jobs. Some 40 percent of high-school graduates enroll in four-year institutions, but only half of them manage to graduate. Too many parents and children see college as the only path to a good job, Kussart says. "Kids in school don't realize what choices they have. There are few entrees on the table when there should be thousands." ★

Employment and total job openings, 1998-2008

By education and training (numbers in thousands of jobs)

<i>Education and training category</i>	<i>Number in 1998</i>	<i>Number in 2008</i>
First professional degree	140,514	160,795
Doctoral degree	1,908	2,215
Master's degree	996	1,228
Work experience plus bachelor's or higher	940	1,115
Bachelor's degree	17,379	21,596
Associate degree	4,930	6,467
Postsecondary vocational training	4,508	5,151
Work experience in related occupation	11,174	12,490
Long-term on-the-job training	13,436	14,604
Moderate on-the-job training	20,521	21,952
Short-term on-the-job training	55,125	62,701

Source: Employment Projections, Bureau of Labor Statistics

tech jobs are going begging. To create more skilled workers, Cisco is giving equipment to schools and delivering a curriculum on the Internet to train high school juniors and seniors in computer networking. Since the program began in 1997, it has expanded to 3,000 schools in 50 states and 50 foreign nations. In two years, 50,000 students are taking the course.

Students who complete 280 hours of program material and test out can be certified as Cisco associates and earn up to \$30,000 annually after graduating high school. The four-semester program is on the principles and practice of designing, building and maintaining computer networks. Morgridge

Espiridion "Al" Borrego, assistant secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training with the U.S. Department of Labor. "One in 10 have good technical skills. They also have people skills, good attitudes and show up on time," Borrego says of those who are departing military service.

Many veterans pick up skills in the military, but are not certified or licensed for civilian work. An Interagency Task Force on Certification and Licensing of Transitioning Military Personnel is working with states to set up pilot projects to certify and license those leaving the service. Although members of the military may have the skills needed to perform a job, civilian cre-

Resources

Much of this article is based on sessions on the work force presented at the 1999 Annual Meeting and State Leadership Forum of The Council of State Governments in December.

More on Veterans' Employment and Training Services is available on the U.S. Department of Labor site on the Web: www.dol.gov/dol/vets/public/credentials.

More on the Cisco Networking Academy Program is available on the Web: www.netsystech.com/warp/public/779/edu/academy.

More on the Wisconsin program is available on the Wisconsin Web site for the Wisconsin Technical College System: www.board.tec.wi.us/ or e-mail washboj@board.tec.wi.us.

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