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Hands-on skilled trades begging for trained workers

by Jake Arnold, Special to the Oregonian

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College isn't the only path to a decent job. For those who don't have the temperament, finances or grades for college, the skilled trades offer a chance to make a good living.

Skilled labor is generally defined as trades in which the worker must learn a craft through apprenticeships or technical schools, but a career that does not require a four-year college degree. Trades -- such as carpenter, welder, mechanic and machine operator -- often generate above-average incomes.

Before the recession, some employers worried about finding enough skilled workers to fill jobs, says Art Ayre, state employment economist for Oregon.

But the recession is battering every segment of the economy, throwing once-optimistic outlooks for skilled trade openings into doubt.

"We are in uncharted territory," says Ayre. Still, he points out, "there is always churn in the economy," opening up jobs as people move on for a variety of reasons.

Meanwhile, fewer young people are entering some trades than are leaving as the work force ages.

As an example, Portland General Electric is expecting about 45 percent of its line workers to be eligible for retirement in the next 10 years, says Maureen Shaw, supervisor of PGE work force planning and diversity. It takes three to four years of apprenticeship to train a journeyman line worker, who earns about \$35 an hour.

Top jobs

Resources

lmatchskills.org

www.emp.state.or.us/jobs

getintoenergy.com

The Oregon Employment Department, studying the best use of government

training dollars, released a report on the jobs with the best combination of availability and salary. Using a complex formula, it created a ranking of the most high-demand, high-wage occupations.

Top 10 rankings

1. Registered nurses
2. Welders, cutters, solderers and brazers
3. Physicians and surgeons
3. Physical therapists
5. Plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters
5. Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses
7. Automotive service technicians and mechanics
7. Machinists
7. Medical and clinical laboratory technologists
10. Firefighters
10. Medical and health services managers

Top 10 excluding health care

1. Welders, cutters, solderers and brazers
2. Plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters
3. Automotive service technicians and mechanics
4. Machinists
5. Firefighters
6. General and operations managers
7. Wholesale and manufacturing sales representatives, nontechnical and scientific
8. Industrial machinery mechanics
9. Water and liquid waste treatment plant and system operators
10. Marketing managers

The full report can be found at qualityinfo.org/pubs/op4t/op4t.pdf

"In the next 20 years, no lineman will be out of work," Shaw says.

The Workforce Alliance, a training advocacy group, estimates that what it terms "middle-skill occupations," jobs requiring extra training but not a four-year degree, make up 52 percent of Oregon's jobs but that only 47 percent of Oregon's workers have the necessary training.

"There aren't enough people with the right skills," says Graham Slater, research administrator at the Oregon Employment Department.

Stimulus boom

Some analysts see a coming boom for skilled labor. Stimulus packages, both

state and national, are promoting so-called shovel-ready projects that rely on heavy-equipment operators, welders, plumbers, electricians and the like.

"The projected structural construction over the next 20 years will be at a pace the world has never seen, by some estimates," says Wyatt J. Kilmartin, director of Ridgid Branding. Ridgid is a leading supplier of professional grade tools.

"Add to that the broken furnaces, clogged drains and investments people will make in their homes, and it makes for a busy day in the skilled trades," Kilmartin says. "Especially when you consider that 20 percent of the current work force is expected to retire in the next four to five years."

Studies show people often aren't aware or interested in the skilled trades. Interest is often dependent on exposure to the trades.

"Students who want to go into the trades usually have a relative in the trades," says Mike Taylor, director of ACE Academy in Portland. The academy provides programs for junior and senior high school students interested in the architecture, construction and engineering fields. It prepares students for both college-oriented careers and skilled trades.

A candidate for the trades, Taylor says, is someone who is a hands-on, kinetic learner, "someone who needs to be active, someone who needs to be doing something, someone who needs to be involved."

However, one of the biggest appeals of a skilled trade, Scott Giltz will tell you, is earning a good wage quickly. Giltz is the dean of technical and career education at **Clackamas Community College**.

The median hourly wage in Oregon in the second quarter of 2008 was \$15.74. Such skilled trade arenas as manufacturing (\$18.80); transportation, warehousing and utilities (\$18.98); and construction (\$20.53) did markedly better.

"These are not flash-in-the-pan jobs," says Giltz. "These are ongoing jobs with flexibility and potential for mobility."

Journeymen in most trades will have their credentials recognized in other states.

Physically demanding

Giltz points out that the distinction between blue collar and white collar is breaking down as all types of careers require ongoing education. Emerging technologies are a rich vein for skilled labor.

A wind turbine technician can earn \$35,000 to \$55,000 a year. "But you have to be willing to scale a 300-foot tower," Giltz says.

There's the rub. Skilled trades can be dangerous, physically demanding and especially hard on older bodies. Some have environmental issues, and many of the industries are cyclical, raising the threat of layoffs.

But they present a chance to work outside an office and often to see the results of a day's labor. There's a potential for growth and new challenges.

"Technicians evolve to be leads and supervisors and managers to lead newer people coming in," Giltz says. "You might go in as a welder, but you're not going to be a welder forever."

Skilled workers also can take their skills and open their own businesses.

Nick Beko, 26, of Oregon City has such plans. Beko is seeking a certificate of completion in machining and manufacturing technology at **Clackamas Community College**. He hopes to become a machinist, which can lead to a business that can often be run out of a home or garage. And he fits the profile for the skilled trades.

"I'm such a hands-on person," he says. "I love creating things, to build things."

The skilled trades are mostly a young man's game, but Rose Sambrano is proof there are opportunities for anyone.

Sambrano, 54, has worked at PGE for 28 years in a variety of capacities; now she is in the apprenticeship program for meter installers.

"There are some challenges physically -- I'm only 5 foot 2 -- but I can do the majority of the work myself," she says

She took a pay cut to start the apprenticeship, but as she moves up levels, she makes more and expects to better her former pay when she is a journeyman.

"It's a job for anybody who likes to work outside, who likes to work with their hands."