



http://www.eagletribune.com/news/companies-struggling-to-recruit-train-skilled-workers/article_93bfac21-a8ec-5dbe-a248-f4ced51d1d62.html

Companies struggling to recruit, train skilled workers

By Christian M. Wade Statehouse Reporter Jul 31, 2015



BOSTON — After being laid off from a sheet-metal factory, Rob Pedrosa at age 32 returned to the classroom.

Pedrosa lost his job in July of last year and couldn't find another one. So the Beverly man signed up for training at the North Shore Career Center, where he hoped to pick up skills demanded by high-tech manufacturers who are struggling to find workers.

"The skills I had just weren't transferable to electronics," he said. "So I had to reinvent myself."

After seven months of electrical engineering classes at North Shore Community College, he landed a job with Krohne Inc. in Peabody, where he assembles components for water and sewer meters.

With the economy rebounding, the job market is improving and employers across the state are hunting for new blood. But their jobs outmatch the skills of many prospective candidates — a gap that the state and businesses hope to fill with training and vocational programs.

Gov. Charlie Baker has made workforce development a key point on his agenda. He signed an executive order in February creating a special cabinet of top officials focused on job skills and educational training, and he's filed legislation to create a statewide workforce development council.

Labor Secretary Ronald Walker said part of the Baker administration's goal is to align education, jobs and workforce training so that schools and regional workforce centers prepare people for existing jobs.

"We want to help those individuals who are still looking for work, while creating a system that better meets the needs of employers who are now struggling to find talented workers," Walker said in an interview.

The chronically unemployed represent another concern, he said.

"The unemployment rate is down to 4.6 percent — the lowest ever — but yet we still have 160,000 people out of work," Walker said. "And clearly there's a skills gap keeping these many of people from finding a job."

In the Merrimack Valley and North Shore, technical high schools, colleges and others are creating training programs in advanced manufacturing — which includes the aerospace, medical device and pharmaceutical industries.

Mark Whitmore, executive director of the North Shore Career Center, which has offices in Salem, Mass., Gloucester and Lynn, said the skills gap spans the state's workforce from blue-collar workers to professionals.

"We get a lot of career-changers who walk through the door and a lot of individuals who are trying to change from entry-level jobs to more advanced positions," he said. "For a variety of reasons, their skills haven't kept up with the skill demands that many businesses are looking for these days."

The center counseled more than 10,000 job-seekers last year, about 6,000 fewer than a year earlier. He said 65 to 90 percent find work, depending on how much training they need to get employed. Some land jobs in a few weeks, others have to undergo months of retraining before getting hired.

State and federal funds pay for the training. The state spent more than \$42 million in the last budget year on workforce development and training, career centers and employment programs, according to the nonprofit Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center.

Baker boosted spending on job training by \$6 million in the current year's budget.

Whitmore said his center works with community colleges and vocational schools to retrain workers for manufacturing jobs or other industries. The programs train job-seekers to use high-tech equipment and machinery, he said.

"That's going a long way to help us close the gap," he said.

Jael Pena, 18, who graduated from Salem High School last year, realized he didn't have the 21st century skills needed for a job in manufacturing.

He went to the career center in Salem and was recently hired by a manufacturing company in Danvers that is training him to operate its machinery and equipment.

"High school didn't prepare me for this kind of job," he said. "This helped get me on the right path."

A recent report by the New England Council, which lobbies Congress on behalf of the region, highlights the skilled labor crunch in the advanced manufacturing industry.

The report, conducted with the consulting firm DeLoitte, found that Massachusetts has 147,000 advanced manufacturing jobs. That's more than any other New England state, or about 3-1/2 percent of its total workforce.

But the report also suggests that the state has shed 24,000 advanced manufacturing jobs since a previous study five years ago, as the number of those positions throughout New England continues to grow.

Overall, the report notes 6 of 10 open production jobs in the United States aren't filled because of a talent shortage, according to a survey of more than 150 executives. That translates into 105,000 jobs in New England over a 10-year period.

"What we have heard repeatedly is that the skills gap is a big problem," said Emily Heisig, a spokeswoman for the council. "Companies have jobs but not enough skilled workers to fill those positions. It's a concern for the entire region, not just Massachusetts."

Mary Sarris, director of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board, said the "tide has turned" for employers who were flush with job candidates during the height of the recession.

"The unemployment rate has dropped, and suddenly employers are experiencing a real crunch finding the right people," she said. "Companies are looking for specific skills that are at a premium in the labor market."

She said annual surveys of businesses in the region suggest the skills gap is most evident in healthcare, financial services and light manufacturing.

"The problem is that we've gone several decades without training people to work in manufacturing careers, even as the industry has made a comeback, particularly in the northeast corner of the state," Sarris said.

Language barriers are another issue, said Rep. Marcos Devers, D-Lawrence, who wants the state to put more money toward English programs to help recent immigrants find employment.

"There are lots of highly skilled workers — engineers, plumbers, architects and doctors — who've immigrated here seeking employment, but the language barriers have kept them from finding jobs," he said.

Lawmakers earmarked \$2 million in this year's budget for English programs in economically challenged cities like Lawrence and Salem, both of which have large numbers of immigrants who are seeking employment.

Baker vetoed the earmark, but lawmakers on Wednesday voted to restore it.

Arthur Chilingirian, executive director of ValleyWorks Career Center in Lawrence and Haverhill, said the job skills gap could begin to have a negative impact on the state's economic recovery if the problem isn't fixed soon.

"I'm talking to employers who say they're giving work away because they can't find skilled workers," he said.

Pedrosa, for one, said he's confident that switching to electronics was the right decision.

"It's never too late to change careers," he said. "This field has a promising future, and I want to be a part of it."

Christian Wade covers the Massachusetts Statehouse. Reach him at cwade@cnhi.com

0 comments

Sign in

1 person listening

	+ Follow	Share	Post comment as...

Newest | Oldest

Eagle Tribune Events

SAT 8 Salem 101: General History Tour
Salem Historical T... | Salem, MA

FRI 7 Open Mic Night @ Kelley's Restaur...
Haverhill, MA

FRI 7 SHUFFLE MODE BAND
Palmer's Restaurant... | Andover, MA

FRI 7 Babies and Books (Up to 24 month...
Nevins Memorial Li... | Methuen, MA

 FRI SAT SUN MON TUE WED
7 8 9 10 11 12

[🔍 See all events](#) [➕ Add your event](#)