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Filling the 'forgotten middle'

New report finds shortage of workers for increased openings in jobs requiring more than high school, less than a college degree

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More education is better than less in a tough job market, but it's worth remembering that a college degree isn't the only ticket to a good-paying job.

A new study shines a spotlight on the large "forgotten middle" of the labor market, where occupations from dental hygienist to truck mechanic require more than a high school diploma but not necessarily a four-year college degree.

Many of these occupations pay better than the median wage, and they can't be outsourced, the study notes.

These positions account for nearly half of all employment in Illinois, and they are projected to represent nearly 1 million job openings during the decade ending in 2014, yet there is a looming shortage of workers to fill them, according to "Illinois' Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," scheduled for release Monday by the Workforce Alliance, a non-profit, Washington, D.C.-based coalition of community, education, labor and business leaders.

The report is part of a national campaign called Skills2Compete that advocates one of the most ambitious agendas since the GI Bill sent 8 million returning service men and women to school in the 1940s and '50s.

The goal is to guarantee access for all workers to schooling beyond high school, through associate degrees, apprenticeships and occupational certificates.

"At the heart of the campaign is this vision that every worker should have access to at least two years of post-secondary education and training that can be pursued at whatever pace makes sense to the workers," said Andrea Ray, Midwest field director for the Workforce Alliance. "It's a vision, but it's also a framework that state and federal policymakers can use as they look at economic priorities and ways to channel investments."

Advocates will brief the Illinois delegation in Washington on the report Tuesday.

The campaign takes a fresh look at the notion that the labor market is dominated by low-skill service jobs at one end and higher-paying jobs that require college degrees at the other.

This barbell image of the economy ignores the fact that about 45 percent of U.S. job openings between 2004 and 2014 will fall in the large middle range of skill requirements, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That compares with 33 percent of openings in high-skill occupations and 22 percent in low-skill service occupations.

In Illinois, middle-skill jobs will account for 47 percent of all openings through 2014, while 43 percent of non-college-degree workers have some post-high school schooling, the study says.

Among the fastest-growing middle-skill occupations are health technicians, whose employment nationally has more than doubled since 1986, to more than 1 million. Wages also have grown rapidly.

For instance, inflation-adjusted pay for radiology technicians increased 23 percent between 1997 and 2005, according to national report released last year by Skills2Compete. Radiology technicians earned a median \$48,400 in 2006.

Of 30 middle-skill occupations listed in the Illinois study, all but one, emergency medical technicians, paid more than the state's median wage of \$31,637 in 2006.

And all but eight are projected to experience double-digit employment growth during the decade ending in 2014.

Among those experiencing the fastest growth are dental hygienists, with a 35 percent growth rate and 2006 median earnings of \$63,100; heating and air-conditioning installers, 23.6 percent growth and \$42,500 earnings; and paralegals, 24.3 percent and \$43,900, respectively.

Other fast-growing categories include computer specialists and repair and maintenance workers in industries such as manufacturing.

"We're seeing really strong demand for people with middle skills in manufacturing," said Ray Prendergast, executive director of the Jane Addams Resource Corp. in Chicago.

His organization recently tripled the number of graduates in a 14-week program to train unemployed adults to work as CNC, or computer numerically controlled, machinists. Starting wages average about \$13 per hour, but experienced operators earn as much as \$25 per hour and \$60,000 annually with overtime.

"They can make a good living as a CNC machinist, but they can also move into other areas," Prendergast said. "The work is going to get done somewhere, and if we don't fill these jobs here, it's going to get done elsewhere."

Gene Cottini, manager of training and development services for S&C Electric Co., which employs 1,900 at its Chicago headquarters, said the decline in vocational programs that prepared high school students for skilled trades, coupled with demographic shifts, made it harder for the city's manufacturing plants to find workers.

"The result is a pretty dramatic shortage," he said. "There's a misperception that manufacturing is a dying industry. Low-skill tasks go overseas, but there has to be a foundation of skilled employees to keep high-tech manufacturing in the city."

His company has openings for precision machinists, electrical and mechanical engineering technologists and other salaried positions.

"We'd like to see people become more aware of the programs available at City Colleges [of Chicago] and community colleges and take advantage of them," he said.

At Caterpillar Inc., headquartered in Peoria, job opportunities that increasingly require education beyond high school include manufacturing logistics, materials planning, process planners and systems technicians, said Christopher Glynn, president of Caterpillar University.

"High school students preparing to enter the workforce must realize they will be competing for jobs globally, and that to

be competitive they will need post-secondary training," he said. "Everyone will not necessarily need a four-year college degree, but all will need the knowledge, technical skills, ability to learn and the willingness to work with a diverse population."

Carrie Thomas, associate director of the non-profit Chicago Jobs Council, said investment in education and training is urgent in times of economic turmoil.

"Every time there's a spike in unemployment is an opportunity to reinvest in workers," she said. "Not every sector is suffering. Initiatives around energy efficiency and the green economy will continue."

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