



## Erick Ajax: We're ready to hire, but there's a shortage of workers with the right skills

By Erick Ajax  
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A New York Times article last week highlighted a route that many unemployed Americans are taking to try to re-enter the labor market: Job training. The piece profiled several individuals who had completed training but failed to secure employment, and concluded that federal investments in retraining often don't produce results. It's a conclusion that's out of touch with the realities of many Minnesota employers.

Even now, employers just like my metal stamping company are ready to hire but unable to find workers with the right sets of skills. A national study this year by Deloitte, The Manufacturing Institute and Oracle found that 51 percent of companies report a shortage of skilled production workers.

Prior to the recession, Minnesota was experiencing a skills shortage that will resurface as the economy picks up, particularly our middle-skill jobs that require training beyond high school but not a four-year degree. In 2007, about 49 percent of Minnesota's jobs were in middle-skill occupations, from licensed practical nurses and radiological technicians, to claims adjusters and paralegals, to auto repair diagnosticians and green heating and cooling system installers.

For many manufacturers, the mismatch continues between the kind of skilled workers that are needed and the ranks of the unemployed. We want to hire people who can operate sophisticated computerized machinery, follow complex blueprints and demonstrate higher math proficiency than was

previously required of our typical technicians. Public investment in targeted job training today will be less expensive than continuing to extend unemployment benefits or paying higher social-welfare costs longer term for lower-skilled workers or others whose jobs will be gone or changed after the recession.

Job training alone can't solve joblessness, but it has to be part of the solution, particularly to help ensure that we have the skilled workforce that we need after the recession. For example, public investments in job training will upgrade the skills of environmental remediation technicians who will then reclaim shuttered auto plants; the carpenters and welders who will rebuild those shells into new energy-efficient factories; and the machinists and technicians working for companies like mine who will use new, computer-controlled machinery to create products for export.

Training developed in collaboration with specific industries also has proven results. For example, Minnesota's "M-Powered" Program brings together the Precision Metal Forming Association, Hennepin Technical College, and HIRED — a Twin Cities social service agency. M-Powered prepares lower-income workers and workers seeking advancement for good-paying careers in the metal forming manufacturing sector. Trainees take part in a 12-week industry-specific course at the technical college. They also receive career counseling, mentoring and job placement assistance. To date more than 300 men and women have graduated from the M-Powered program. Many are on excellent career ladders, employed at Twin Cities metal forming companies, including my factory.

Fortunately, policymakers have rejected the assumption behind the New York Times article. Recognizing the vital role of job training in an economic recovery strategy, on July 19, members of the U.S. House passed the SECTORS Act with a unanimous bi-partisan vote. The act supports training developed in collaboration with industry partners, a

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model that ensures individuals can obtain skills that have currency in the labor market now and when hiring picks back up. Minnesota Rep. John Kline, ranking Republican member of the House Education and Labor committee, was key in getting House leadership on both sides to support moving the bill forward.

The SECTORS Act now moves to the Senate. Fortunately, Minnesota Sen. Al Franken sits on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committee that will review the bill. Sen. Franken truly understands the need for workforce development and especially public investments in job training.

Job training alone will not solve our economic challenges. But if we want all Minnesotans to be a part of a recovery, policymakers must invest in specific strategies that have been shown to effectively train workers in skills that have currency in current and emerging industries. It's an economic necessity for Minnesota's businesses and families.

Erick Ajax is a third-generation metalworker and co-owner of E.J. Ajax in Fridley.

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