

Special Report on Poverty: Filling the job skills gap

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Mark Romanchuk, president of PR Machine Works in Ontario, finds it hard to identify employees who are qualified to work in his machine shop. / Dave

It sounds counterintuitive, but there are employers who can't find workers -- at least, the right workers.

"That's the irony of this thing, we have high unemployment and job openings that are going unfilled," said Mark Romanchuk, president of PR Machineworks in Mansfield.

In Ohio, there are tens of thousands of laid-off workers with skills or experience that have little or no value in today's job market. The converse is there also are potentially tens of thousands of jobs in this state going unfilled because employers can't find or attract the right people. This discord is sometimes called "the skills gap."

"Every single company in this area is having problems (finding qualified workers)," Romanchuk said. "It's a huge impediment to

Cecil Gerkin of Port Clinton was one of about 150 people laid off from Silgan Plastics at the end of 2010. He had worked there 29 years. In July, the 51-year-old high school dropout got his GED.

"I knew I had to get my GED because (employers are) a lot more picky nowadays than they were 30 years ago," he said.

Gerkin knows he needs more education. While he improved his marketability, he was still looking for work.

Romanchuk, who also is the chairman of the Mansfield- Richland Area Chamber of Commerce board, said about 35 manufacturing companies in the Mansfield area surveyed in 2010 were forecasting about 300 jobs openings staying vacant.

"I don't believe that has changed," he said.
"If anything it's gotten bigger."

The skills gap might be overlooked because the names of jobs haven't changed, but what is expected of them is only fundamentally the same, said Mark Tomlinson, president of the Society of Manufacturing Engineers.

"What is a machinist? Traditionally, a machinist would be someone probably who could manually move the axis of a lathe, or the cutting parts of a tool -- that would be a machinist," Tomlinson said. "A machinist today has to understand how to program in a coding language and run that program and make the machine move in a bilateral manner up to five axes at a time."

"They're machinists, but they're not machinists as we would think of them in the '70s or the '80s," he said.

A contributor to joblessness

While the skills gap might be a maddening part of the jobs crisis, it's just that: a part, not the whole pie.

In Ohio, 491,000 people were out of work in October and only about 147,000 online advertised openings in November, according to the Conference Board, a business-focused research group.

That doesn't even include the underemployed or those uncouneted masses who stopped looking for jobs, known as discouraged workers, because they didn't think they'd find one.

The skills gap isn't new either. It first appeared in the 1970s, Tomlinson said, which resulted in the proliferation of vocation schools and community colleges.

It will cover new people and as of yet unknown skills as technology moves forward, he added.

Tomlinson said filling those positions might have a snowball effect on the rest of the economy.

"The fact that those jobs are going unfilled means that productivity is going unmet," Tomlinson said.

Slowed production puts a damper on the economy and might be slowing job creation in other areas, he said.

According to the National Skills Coalition, Ohio doesn't have a shortage of high-skill labor. There is a surplus of low-skill workers, roughly the same as the deficit between what's needed for middle-skill and what's available.

They estimate that the training necessary to transform 5 percent of the work force -- about 300,000 people -- into middle-skill labor would require at least \$1.4 billion more than what was spent in 2009.

When a roomful of homeless women at the Marion Shelter were asked why they're here, one of the first answers was a lack of jobs.

Sandy McLurg, 50, has a history of working in food production and other assembly line work.

"I've worked since I was 16 years old, but the only thing I can land now is seasonal or temporary," she said.

While she's concerned her criminal history might turn employers off, McLurg thinks her hands-on experience should more than make up for her lack of formal education.

Cindy Hines runs the GED preparation class at Vanguard-Sentinel Career Center in Fremont. She said similar experience doesn't just automatically translate as it might have in years past.

"It saddens me that people's skills aren't as valued. Back then you could job jump. If you didn't like Atlas (Industries), you could go to Chrysler ... it's not like that anymore," said Hines, herself a former Atlas employee.

Jason McManes, supervisor at the Richland County One Stop Employment and Training Center, said a segment of the out-of-work population is waiting for old jobs, or something like them, to come back. That's not going to happen.

"There are jobs out there that they don't want to do or don't pay as much as they are accustomed to," he said. "The irony is if they are holding out for a job that paid more, there's no hope for that (right now)."

Maybe the most frustrating component of the skills gap is that a number of jobless people are out there with skills in demand, but lack the ability to communicate what it is they can do for a prospective employer.

McManes said some people don't know how to draft a resume because it's been so long since they were out of a job. Maybe they were working on a machine for years without knowing what it's

technical name was, which makes it difficult for anyone outside of that particular shop to know what they're talking about.

Are we ready for the next big thing?

Unfortunately, Ohioans might be watching the skills gap unfold in real time in the state.

Energy development corporations have spent billions buying the drilling rights in the eastern half of the state. They're gravitating to Ohio because of something called the Utica Shale, a rock formation thousands of feet below the surface that is the source of oil and natural gas.

In November, Chesapeake Energy, the largest player in the Utica Shale game, hosted a job fair in Canton, where it recently has opened an office, according to the Akron Beacon Journal.

Spokesman Pete Kenworthy said that the company was looking for maintenance technicians, electronics technicians, field supervisors and equipment operators. This also was the first year that Chesapeake hosted a recruiting day at Ohio State University.

The combination shows Chesapeake is looking to place both middle-skill and high-skill positions.

A dozen students recently graduated from the first short-term training program for aspiring roughnecks -- drill or pump operators, also known as roustabouts -- at Zane State Community College in Zanesville. Ten of the 12 are already employed, according to Paul Brown, president of the college.

"After 80 hours (of education), they will be able to go and work on the oil rigs and make \$60,000 a year," Brown said.

More than 200,000 jobs could be created in the next decade from development of the shale. But if Ohio fails to provide a skilled workforce, out-of-state companies will harvest Ohio resources with out-of-state workers.

"If we take a wait-and-see attitude and gear up for this next year, we'll already be losing thousands of jobs (to workers) they'll bring in from other areas," Brown said of work force training programs.

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