

Published: January 16, 2011 3:00 a.m.

## Skilled labor hard to find

### Despite jobless rate, companies struggle to hire workers with specialized training

Sherry Slater | The Journal Gazette

FORT WAYNE – With unemployment topping 10 percent in most of northeast Indiana, you'd think employers would have an easy time filling job openings.

But you'd be wrong.

Some companies are finding most applicants don't have the skills needed to operate specialized equipment or, in some cases, don't have basic math or communication skills.

The lack of qualified applicants is forcing some local employers to spend thousands of dollars over several months to fill each open position and keeping other area companies from reaching full potential.

The skills shortage is so bad that some companies are scouring the country to fill positions that call for special training.

Rae Pearson, founder and president of Alpha Rae Personnel Inc., said her staffing firm was contacted recently by a Maine company looking for a utility engineer.

The local entrepreneur also has seen skills scarcity in the Fort Wayne area, including for clients in aerospace and other industries. Confidentiality agreements keep her from naming them.

Pearson sees a disconnect between the skills many unemployed, blue-collar workers have and the skills employers now require.

"Of all the people in the country who are unemployed," she said, "a lot of people haven't specialized."

The need is so pressing that Warsaw's orthopedics industry has created an organization to address demand for skilled workers.

OrthoWorx also tackles infrastructure, technical support and cultural issues identified by companies that build one-third of the world's orthopedic devices. The organization works with high school and technical school programs to create courses and training programs.

But orthopedics isn't the region's only industry affected by a skilled-worker shortage.

A report released in October by workforce advocacy groups found that more than 487,000 "middle-skill" job openings are projected for Indiana by 2016.

Those are jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree, including construction trades, trucking, public safety, administrative support and high-tech manufacturing.

The "Indiana's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Meeting the Demands of a 21st-Century Economy" report was released by Washington-based National Skills Coalition in partnership with the Indiana Institute for Working Families, a program of the Indiana Community Action Association.

About 55 percent of existing and future Indiana jobs are considered "middle skill," according to the report. But state and federal policymakers have focused much more attention on college and university programs than on training for middle-skill workers, the report's authors said.

"Indiana has made significant investments in education and training for its workforce," the report said. "However, those investments have not kept up with the demand of middle-skill workers."