

## **Editorial - Middle-skill positions going unfilled even with high jobless rate**

*Published: Saturday, August 27, 2011 at 8:49 p.m.*

Even during a recession, jobs are available – for those with the right skills. And as the South’s governors heard last weekend, the region is short on a very important group of potential workers: those qualified to fill middle-skill positions that require some training beyond high school but not necessarily a four-year degree.

Most of these jobs pay decent wages but call for specific skill sets. They include computer support staff, medical technicians and a variety of tradespeople. Despite persistent high unemployment in what has been a long, dark economic downturn, employers say they’re having difficulty filling a number of jobs.

According to a study by the National Skills Coalition, more than half of the jobs in North Carolina are classified as “middle skills” fields. But only 43 percent of job-seekers possess the necessary skills. In those fields, employers can’t find enough workers to fill vacancies, even now, when the unemployment rate is 10 percent.

One obvious solution is retraining out-of-work residents for these jobs, and it’s an area where the government could do more. People who have been jobless for months often can’t afford to pay to go back to school. They’re spending what savings they have for more immediate needs such as keeping a roof over the family’s head and other day-to-day living expenses.

But some programs exist to aid with tuition, and some programs require only a few weeks or months of study to become proficient.

The key is connecting victims of the economy with those resources, and finding ways to help provide tuition assistance for displaced workers. It’s more than a matter of suggesting that a former manager who was making \$50,000 a year retrain as a nurse’s aide, a job that generally pays much less. That doesn’t do the worker or the economy much good – he or she is still in a financial hole and therefore less able to buy the products that help businesses remain profitable and keep other people employed.

We shouldn’t strive for a work force that settles for less. But a number of skilled jobs pay well and offer opportunities for advancement or self-employment.

The global economy is changing at such a rapid rate that today’s in-demand skills may be obsolete tomorrow. We must do a better job of encouraging people who have jobs to update their skills and even attempt to change fields entirely, and help them have the means to do it.

Doing this does not negate the value of a four-year degree; in fact, many university graduates take advantage of technical training. Both are valuable tools, and no one who seeks a higher education should be discouraged by those who view colleges

only as job-training factories.

But we can and must do better matching our current and future work force with the skills they will need to get and hold down good jobs. As part of our national economic policy, government should provide adequate incentives and assistance to achieve that goal.

After all, it is not only cheaper but better for both society and the individual to help someone become a gainfully employed taxpayer than to allow jobs to go unfilled and people to languish.

Copyright © 2011 StarNewsOnline.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.