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## 'Middle-skill' jobs hold promise for the future

BY BOB DUNN / FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Linda Cowan is the director of the Whatcom County Tech Prep Consortium, which assists high school students with developing curriculum programs to help foster career opportunities.

Q: Where, if anywhere, is job growth in the area going to come from?

A: The growth is going to be in "middle-skill" jobs. Middle-skill jobs are jobs that require more than a high school education, but less than a four-year college degree. Even for these types of jobs, people need to definitely have a solid education and strong training whether it's certifications, associate's degrees, apprenticeships or specialized training from the military. The baby boomers are retiring and that's where a lot of these jobs are coming from.

Q: What are some "middle-skill" jobs?

A: In our state, one of the biggest growths is in carpentry, which seems odd when you see what's going on with the economy. And construction, in the broad sense - all facets of construction, especially in infrastructure: roads, schools, large industrial commercial construction projects.

Other big areas are nursing and health care, transportation, installation and repair work.

Q: What are some essential skills for people entering the market or considering changing careers?

A: Now, technical literacy is absolutely essential in almost every line of work.

Also, strong communication skills, whether it be through writing or some other means.

Math and science backgrounds; many jobs now require it, but not all will.

The ability to be a team player; we live in a multicultural world now, being able to work with others.

Being able to speak another language, that's a door opener. If it comes down to two otherwise equally qualified candidates, being able to speak another language that someone else can't may give you a leg up.

Also, not being afraid of technology is a big help. When you look at iPods, cell phones, things like MySpace and Google and being able to find ways to use technology like that in creative ways in the workplace.

Q: What are some things that people who are already employed do to help insulate themselves from changes in the market?

A: Whatever you can do to stand out and make yourself more employable is to your benefit. Even simple things like showing up on time and showing up every day. People who know what it means to put in a full day's work for a full day's pay are more valuable to an employer. Employers are looking to streamline the workplace. One employee might be assigned multiple tasks, Someone who is willing and able to demonstrate that kind of flexibility is going to be more valuable to an employer.

Q: What kind of skills should people who are working on their education consider concentrating on?

A: STEM skills. Those are science, technology, engineering and math. We need to spend more time improving those skills. Jobs that utilize people with those skills are the kind of jobs that support innovation industries. Washington is strong in that, there's a lot of employment, especially in the greater Seattle area, but there's also a lot of that type of work in Whatcom County, but on a much smaller, entrepreneurial scale, one or two person small businesses.

Q: What kinds of training can people take advantage of if they're not already in a middle-skill field?

A: We live in a really terrific corner of the state where we have access to technical and community colleges within a few miles of each other. There are many low cost or no cost options, if you just need to get yourself to learn some new basics or brush up on existing skills.

You can choose to take a class at Bellingham Technical College that may take a few months or you can choose a longer, two-year degree program. Fifty-three percent of all Washington state high school graduates will be enrolled in a Washington state technical or community college.

People can significantly reduce the overall cost in getting themselves a college education by starting at a technical or community college and we're lucky in Whatcom county that we have both and a university as well. The doors are wide open in this county, there are also online classes that people can take on their own time, whether it's at two in the morning or two in the afternoon and work on their own time.

Colleges in this county and across the state are trying to open their doors because so many jobs require education after high school. I also would want parents to know that there are terrific opportunities for jobs that don't require four-year degrees and there are also many employers that are willing and able to provide for tuition costs as part of their benefits package.

School doesn't end at the 12th grade. Education is life-long.

*Bob Dunn is a Bellingham freelance writer.*