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Despite Recession, High Demand for Skilled Labor

By [LOUIS UCHITELLE](#)

Just as the recession began, Chris McGrary, a manager at the Cianbro Corporation, set out to hire 80 “experienced” welders. Only now, 18 months later, is he completing the roster.

With the unemployment rate soaring, there have been plenty of applicants. But the welding test stumped many of them. Mr. McGrary found that only those with 10 years of experience — and not all of them — could produce a perfect weld: one without flaws, even in an X-ray. Flawless welds are needed for the oil refinery sections that Cianbro is building in Brewer, Me.

“If you don’t hire in a day or two, the ones that can do that,” Mr. McGrary said, “they are out the door and working for another company.”

Six million jobs have disappeared across the country since Mr. McGrary began his quest. The unemployment rate has risen precipitously to 9.4 percent, the highest level in nearly 30 years, and most of the jobs that do come open are quickly filled from the legions of seekers. But unnoticed in the government’s standard employment data, employers are begging for qualified applicants for certain occupations, even in hard times. Most of the jobs involve skills that take years to attain.

Welder is one, employers report. Critical care nurse is another. Electrical lineman is yet another, particularly those skilled in stringing high-voltage wires across the landscape. Special education teachers are in demand. So are geotechnical engineers, trained in geology as well as engineering, a combination sought for oil field work. Respiratory therapists, who help the ill breathe, are not easily found, at least not by the Permanente Medical Group, which employs more than 30,000 health professionals. And with infrastructure spending now on the rise, civil engineers are in demand to supervise the work.

“Not newly graduated civil engineers,” said Larry Jacobson, executive director of the National Society of Professional Engineers. “What’s missing are enough licensed professionals who have worked at least five years under experienced engineers before taking the licensing exam.”

While these workers might be lured away by higher offers in a robust economy, they should be more plentiful when overall business demand is as slack as it is now.

For these hard-to-fill jobs, there seems to be a common denominator. Employers are looking for people who have acquired an exacting skill, first through education — often just high school vocational training — and then by honing it on the job. That trajectory, requiring years, is no longer so easy in America, said

Richard Sennett, a [New York University](#) sociologist.

The pressure to earn a bachelor's degree draws young people away from occupational training, particularly occupations that do not require college, Mr. Sennett said, and he cited two other factors. Outsourcing interrupts employment before a skill is fully developed, and layoffs undermine dedication to a single occupation. "People are told they can't get back to work unless they retrain for a new skill," he said.

None of this deterred Keelan Prados from pursuing a career as a welder, one among roughly 200,000 across the nation. At 28, he has more than a decade of experience, beginning when he was a teenager, building and repairing oil field equipment in his father's shop in Louisiana. Marriage to a Canadian brought the Pradoses to Maine, near her family. And before Mr. Prados joined Cianbro, an industrial contractor, he ran his own business, repairing logging equipment out of a welding and machine shop on the grounds of his home in Brewer.

The recession dried up that work, and last December, he answered one of Mr. McGrary's ads. "I welded a couple of pieces of plate together for them and two pipes, and they were impressed," Mr. Prados said. In less than two weeks, he was at work on Cianbro's oil refinery project, earning \$22 an hour and among the youngest of Mr. McGrary's hires, most of whom are in their mid-30s to early 40s.

The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) does not track how often Mr. Prados's experience — applying for a job and quickly being offered it — is repeated in America in the midst of huge and protracted unemployment. A bureau survey counts the number of job openings and the number of hires, but the data is not broken down by occupation.

[The Conference Board](#), a business organization in New York, comes closer. In a monthly count of online job openings — listed on Monster.com and more than 1,200 similar Web sites — it breaks the advertised openings into 22 broad occupational categories and compares those with the number of unemployed whose last job, according to the bureau, was in each category. In only four of the categories — architecture and engineering, the physical sciences, computer and mathematical science, and health care — were the unemployed equal to or fewer than the listed job openings. There were, in sum, 1.09 million listed openings and only 582,700 unemployed people presumably available to fill them.

The Conference Board's hard-to-fill openings include registered nurses, but the shortage is not as great as it was before the recession, particularly in battered states like Michigan and Ohio, said Cheryl Peterson, a director of the American Nurses Association.

"Until the downturn, it was easy for experienced registered nurses to find employment right in their communities, in whatever positions they wanted," Ms. Peterson said. "Now it is a little more difficult because the number of job openings has fallen and we have more retired nurses, in need of income, coming back."

That does not hold for nurses who have a decade of experience caring for critically ill people, particularly in hospital recovery rooms, said Dr. Robert Pearl, chief executive and chairman of the Permanente Medical

Group, a big employer of medical professionals. “There are probably more nurses recently trained than there are jobs for them,” he said, “but for those with the highest level of skill and experience, there are always openings.” And at \$100,000 in pay.

That is also the case for geological engineers like Diane Oshlo, who was hired last month by Kleinfelder, a professional services firm headquartered in San Diego that takes on big projects, like the environmental cleanup work Ms. Oshlo is doing in Corpus Christi, Tex., at the site of an inactive oil refinery. Engineers like her, skilled in petroleum, are in short supply, and those who are also professional geologists are even rarer.

That made Ms. Oshlo, 50, a hot prospect when she decided to relocate from Chicago, where she had lived for years, doing similar work for a similar firm. Margaret Duner, a Kleinfelder recruiter, spotted her résumé when it arrived in the spring in response to a job ad, and quickly brought her into the hiring process. “Diane stood out,” Ms. Duner said.

Two other firms to which Ms. Oshlo sent résumés also quickly offered work. What swayed her was not the \$65,000 salary — there will be raises and bonuses soon, Ms. Duner said — but Kleinfelder’s willingness to pay to move her to Corpus Christi.

“I told the two others I couldn’t wait,” Ms. Oshlo said. “They offered roughly the same pay, but they weren’t sure about the relocation package.”

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