

Better training could help fill technical jobs

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California must improve adult education and community college programs to help laid-off workers retrain for technical positions that will open up in the next several years due mainly to retirements, according to a report issued Monday.

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The study, titled "California's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," uses federal data to look at current and projected employment in the state.

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It divides jobs into three categories: 25 percent that can be done with a high-school diploma, 35 percent that require a bachelor's degree or higher, and 40 percent that require a post-high-school certificate or two-year degree.

Issued by a coalition including labor and business interests, the report looks at what it will take to retrain adults already in the workforce for that 40 percent of middle-skills occupations such as licensed vocational nursing, heating and air-conditioning installation, and paralegal work.

Although the report comes at a time when high unemployment has created a glut of workers, it anticipates that when the economy recovers in a few years, employers could be hobbled by a shortage of skilled technicians.

Any fix to the current unemployment crisis or the long-term skills shortage would probably have to include more money for community colleges and adult education programs that have been cut because of the state's budget crisis, but the authors say part of the solution involves changing how education is delivered.

"Adults who have been laid off because their industry has gone away can't wait two years to get a degree or certificate," said Virginia Hamilton, executive director of the California Workforce Association, a group involved in retraining.

Hamilton said night or weekend courses that allow adults to work or job hunt while they add skills could help.

Pamela Kan, president of a manufacturing company in Pittsburg, said the report urges a renewed emphasis on the middle layer of California's education system, between the K-12 and the state's four-year colleges and universities.

"We have this very strong culture in this state of four-year college or nothing after high

school," said Kan, whose firm, Bishop-Wisecarver, makes moving parts for instruments like MRI machines.

Kan's roughly 50-person firm faces a challenge common to employers in this middle-skills category. Her most experienced employees are Baby Boomers who will eventually retire, and she must find or train replacements from adults in the workforce.

Right now the recession makes unemployment so high that employers find it easy to hire even in strong industries like health care.

But as the state economy recovers over the next few years, retirements will accelerate - up to 60 percent of the jobs in the years ahead will be replacement openings - and California companies are likely to face shortages in this middle-skills category.

The report argues that now, when so many unemployed Californians need retraining, is the time to start retooling the educational system to help adults gain the credentials to move into these occupations.

The group put no estimate on the cost of beefed-up training, but occupational training programs leading to jobs in medical technician specialties, for instance, are more costly to offer than academic courses leading to degrees.

"People are dying to get into these programs, but there aren't enough slots," said Jennifer Hermann, human resources director for UCSF Medical Center.

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