

# Herald & Review

## Skills in the middle

By CHRIS LUSVARDI -- H&R Staff Writer  
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DECATUR - Employers such as Union Iron Works in Decatur are seeing what could be a gloomy picture as they look to the future.

They're faced with developing plans to replace workers from the baby boomer generation who are planning on retiring in the next few years, said Cheryl Scholtz, Union Iron Works' human resources director.

Putting a plan into place isn't as easy as it might seem, she said, because skilled workers can be hard to come by.

"There's a lot of knowledge that comes from people with years of experience," Scholtz said. "It's not just book knowledge. It's experience as well, and you're taking that and it's going out the door. It's a challenge for employers to replace that."

A report released Monday suggests the problem isn't just limited to Union Iron Works. Employers across the state are in need of what are considered middle skill

workers, those with more than a high school education but less than a four-year college degree.

Half of the Illinois labor market is made up of middle skills workers, and that trend likely will continue, said Andrea Ray of the Workforce Alliance, the group leading the study. More than 1 million middle skill job openings are anticipated between 2004 and 2014, Ray said, particularly in the health care, manufacturing and transportation sectors.

"This is a state-level trend," Ray said. "What the report shows is, whether it's Decatur or Chicago or Champaign, that the demand for middle skill workers is high, and it will remain high for the foreseeable future."

The Workforce Alliance has led the launch of a campaign called Skills2Compete Illinois to raise awareness about the need to increase access to skills and education for adult workers. The campaign is set to address state and national lawmakers about the goal of having a skilled workforce, and some of its members will be in Washington, D.C., today to meet with the Illinois Congressional Delegation, Ray said.

Other employees in Decatur are dealing with similar issues as Union Iron Works.

"The skills we need aren't available," said John Jackson, vice president of operations for Barton Manufacturing. "If we don't have workers, we'd be all service oriented here, rather than manufacturing based. Manufacturing needs those middle skills."



Herald & Review/Stephen Haas  
A student is seen welding from behind a plastic curtain during a welding class at the Decatur Area Technical Academy.

Barton and Union Iron Works are among those who realize training is important, and they can't wait for somebody else to do it. The businesses are stepping up to help in the process by creating programs to train potential employees.

The businesses offer on-the-job training once workers are hired, but potential employees sometimes need to update their skills before being hired. To give those who might not otherwise have access to the training that would lead to more desirable jobs, Barton and Union Iron Works partnered with Workforce Investment Solutions, the Decatur Area Technical Academy and others to train those who want to be welders.

"They're helping us build a pool," said Robyn McCoy, executive director of Workforce Investment Solutions. "They're so invested in this. They're recognizing their applicant pool is in need and are happy to help."



Herald & Review/Stephen Haas  
Quinton Gause, left, and Austin Colbeck listen to instructor Keith Cusey during a welding class at the Decatur Area Technical Academy

and set an example for his two children, ages 10 and 2.

"I don't like being average," Parker said. "I want my kids to feel the same way. This has given me a lot more confidence that I can go out and get more skills."

Parker wants to be able to move up and feel like he's accomplished more. But first he feels he needs to develop the skills that will allow him to do so by finding a job.

"It's getting fierce out there with the way the economy is going," Parker said. "You need all the edge you can get anymore."

Leaders of the welding training program, which has 11 students, are looking to build on the opportunities it has provided for future sessions.

"They are getting prepared to enter the workforce," said Rocki Wilkerson, coordinator of the adult education program at the technical academy. "We're not asking them to go to four years of school."

Union Iron Works hopes to have some of the students apply for jobs there after the program ends Oct. 10. It's the beginning of what Scholtz hopes is a way to help meet the company's needs.

"To be able to have half a dozen applicants, it's well worth it," Scholtz said. "We need to be looking to the long term. Sometimes, it's about survival."

But having the jobs and training available isn't enough. The jobs must fit the needs of the employees as well, giving them the chance to be successful and raise their families.

"I hope this gets me out of the restaurant business and into something where I feel like what I'm doing is worthwhile and I can keep my head above water," said student Dawn Brown, 31. "I was always thinking you needed a bachelor's or master's to be in the middle class. I was always just thinking I'd be lower."

Brown has two children, ages 13 and 9, to care for but found it hard to do so on a minimum-wage job. Classmate Tom Parker, 36, of Morrisonville wants to keep learning