

Qualified workers increasingly scarce for middle-skill jobs

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There's a stark difference between the apprenticeship program that Ron Hansing completed for Crystal Lake Local 117 in the 1970s, and the program that aspiring electricians complete today.

"Applicants are not as proficient as they were in the past," said Hansing, a veteran electrician who now directs the apprenticeship training program. "We find ourselves having to put on some kind of remedial math class to get everybody up to speed."

According to a study released last week, that skill gap is part of a growing trend among workers with a high school diploma but no four-year degree, known as middle skill workers.

The study was conducted by The Workforce Alliance, a public policy advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C.

The report predicts that between 2004 and 2014, positions for middle skill workers – such as police officers, dental hygienists and construction workers – will comprise about 45 percent of the job market. But during this time, there won't be enough qualified workers to fill these positions.

"There's a shortage of people who have ... the technical skills, the math skills, computer skills," said Andrea Ray, regional field director for the alliance.

The study claims that it's because the work force will continue to take on an hourglass figure through at least 2014, with the number of high- and low-end employees increasing, and the number of middle skill workers steadily decreasing.

For many McHenry County employers, this means that finding applicants who meet hiring expectations will become more difficult.

"We're not having an issue finding the high school graduates without college, but it's the skill level," said Pam Allen, vice president of human resources for Sage Products in Cary.

Allen said she had noticed a definite decline in basic communication skills among job applicants such as business writing, and even in comprehension, especially as the baby boomer generation begins to retire and younger generations of workers apply for boomers' jobs.

"It's going to be tougher and tougher to find entry level workers," Allen said. "We are all acutely aware of that."

Sharon Caulfield, vice president of Swederski Concrete in Spring Grove, said the skills decline was not just bad news for employers, but for workers, too.

"There's just not as large a future for these people," Caulfield said. "They've only got the skills to be a laborer with no advancement."

Ray said that middle skill workers often could not learn the skills needed for advancement because they already were working without these skills.

"In many cases, there's a Catch-22," Ray said. "It's hard for them to work at the same time as they need to update their skills."

The McHenry County Workforce Network tries to help workers overcome that situation by paying for advancement training through the Federal Workforce Investment Act. The federal dollars pay for training and retraining employees in high growth areas, such as McHenry County, director Julie Courtney said.

"One of the things we're trying to do is identify what is needed and get people trained," she said.

Last year, 550 people received aid, many of whom were middle skill workers, she said.

Breakdown of jobs and workers in Illinois in 2004

High skill jobs: 31 percent

High skill workers: 34 percent

Middle skill jobs: 51 percent

Middle skill workers: 43 percent

Low skill jobs: 18 percent

Low skill workers: 23 percent