



The issue: The people drought

More focus needed on looming worker shortage

By REGISTER EDITORIAL BOARD

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It's not clear whether either candidate for governor really grasps how profoundly the playing field is about to change.

In the next few decades, Iowa will face a threat to our state's economy unlike anything experienced before.

We're not talking about the exodus of educated young people that has been a fact of life in Iowa for generations. The new threat is something more.

In the past, despite the out-migration of college graduates, enough people remained to fill the jobs in Iowa's factories and offices. That's about to change.

As members of the baby-boom generation begin to retire in the next few years, there simply won't be enough younger people in Iowa to replace them – even if the state somehow manages to stem the out-migration.

It's estimated that Iowa will have 150,000 more jobs than workers by 2012, and it could get much worse thereafter. Rather than new businesses coming to Iowa, the specter is of businesses leaving Iowa because they won't be able to hire enough workers.

This is a conundrum neither candidate for governor has adequately addressed. Both offer more or less traditional economic-development proposals intended to lure jobs to Iowa, perhaps in the belief that if they bring jobs, workers will follow.

That's a dubious assumption, especially when the potential worker shortage due to the retirement of the baby-boom generation is not limited to Iowa. Many states will be scrambling for workers in a few years. The new economic competition among states will be less about attracting jobs than it will be about attracting working-age people.

As a starting point, both candidates are smart to focus on strengthening education. Skilled workers won't stay and promising recruits won't come without top-notch public schools, community colleges and universities that train Iowans to compete against the best minds in the world.

Otherwise, though, while the platforms of both candidates contain some elements meant to make Iowa a more attractive place to live, they tend to be mentioned almost as afterthoughts. Whoever becomes governor will need to shift gears, so that drawing people to Iowa becomes not just the ancillary part of an economic-development strategy, but the core of it.

Bottom line: Another “no decision”

Neither has separated himself by laying out a clear strategy to address this threat to Iowa’s economic future.

The Register asked each of the candidates three questions about the future workforce shortage. Here are their written responses:

Iowa doesn’t have enough high school students in the pipeline to replace all the workers who are expected to retire in the next few decades. What would you do to draw more people to Iowa, so a serious shortage of workers can be avoided?

JIM NUSSLE, REPUBLICAN

Iowa’s people and quality of life should be our trademark. We have an opportunity to promote our strong quality of life as long as we are an attractive place to live, work, go to school and someday retire. There’s no reason Iowa cannot be the “Education Destination,” more attractive for job creators and entrepreneurial businesses, lead the nation in access to affordable, high-quality health care or provide a friendly climate so our seniors can retire here in dignity.

CHET CULVER, DEMOCRAT

By making the alternative-energy industry the primary focus of our economic-development efforts, we will make Iowa a leader in the high-paying jobs of the future that attract talented people and their families to our state. We will attract millions of dollars in new federal and private-sector funding for research and development of energy technologies and target existing research funding toward this exciting industry to keep Iowa’s college graduates here. High-paying jobs in growth industries, combined with Iowa’s strength in education and excellent quality of life, will bring families to our state and encourage them to stay.

Iowa’s workforce has been called at once its greatest asset and its biggest liability. An asset because of Iowans’ work ethic; a liability because businesses worry about a shortage in the number of workers. What would you do to develop a larger and more skilled workforce in Iowa?

NUSSLE

I want our state to be the “Education Destination” so we can grow Iowa and create limitless opportunities for generations to come. We must connect education to occupation so our students receive an education aimed at the career fields of the 21st century and our current workforce is being properly training to continue providing businesses with qualified workers. I have proposed the creation of Iowa Job Skill Centers and Iowa Achievement Academies that will boost collaboration between Iowa high schools, colleges and local businesses to ensure that both non-college and college- bound high school students have access to career development, job training and internships. I have also proposed the Learn & Earn College Program to provide access to essentially free in-state, undergraduate tuition at any Iowa college for middle and low-income Iowans who stay in Iowa for seven years post-graduation.

CULVER

A skilled workforce begins with excellence in education. I will work to expand early-childhood education – studies show that investing in early education pays off many times over in the future success of our children. I will raise teacher pay and make college more affordable by expanding scholarship opportunities, using targeted loan forgiveness for those who remain in Iowa in areas of critical need, and

expanding access to college credits in high school. I will also facilitate strong public-private partnerships at our community colleges so that they are offering training programs specifically designed to meet the skill needs of the state's employers.

What's the point of trying to create more jobs in Iowa if there aren't going to be enough working-age people in the state to fill the jobs we've already got?

NUSSLE

With Iowa's people, strong work ethic, cost of living and exceptional quality of life, there's also no reason we cannot grow Iowa and provide a better place for young Iowans and future generations. We can grow if we look toward the future by creating an environment that fosters entrepreneurial growth and provides exciting opportunities for new industry. I want the jobs of the future to be created in Iowa, so our talented, productive people can invest their capital, add innovative value, become an entrepreneur and start a new business or exciting career. There is tremendous economic opportunity by taking the lead on exploring new, innovative ways to capitalize on our valuable resources. We will be the leader in the new energy economy by bringing together American innovation and our incredible potential for renewable resources.

CULVER

My plan ensures that Iowa's economy thrives by relying on our traditional strengths in education, agriculture and manufacturing, while jump-starting new technologies and attracting industries and jobs that provide good wages and benefits. With that focus, we will not only create exciting job opportunities that keep our children at home here in Iowa, but we will also attract new families to our state. Iowa is the best place in America to raise a family – that's why Mari and I are raising our two kids here. Creating great jobs will bring new families here to experience and contribute to Iowa's terrific quality of life.

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