

Training needed for mid-level jobs, study says

By Robert Gavin, Globe Staff | July 14, 2010

Leading Massachusetts industries will need nearly 400,000 workers over the next six years to fill new and existing jobs for workers with mid-level skills, from technicians to licensed practical nurses to manufacturing operators, requiring the state to place greater emphasis on vocational training and education after high school, a study concludes.

These “middle skill” jobs will account for nearly four of 10 openings through 2016, with many paying above the \$60,000-a-year considered sufficient to support a family in Massachusetts, according to the study, to be released today by a coalition of business, labor, and worker training groups.

The positions, which require post-secondary education and training, but not a four-year college degree, are critical to the state’s economic growth, according to the study. Without middle skill workers, companies can’t bring their innovations to market as products and services.

“We need engineers and research scientists,” said Angelo F. Sabatalo, corporate director of organizational development and training at Nypro Inc., a Clinton plastics maker, “but as we move into the production environment, middle skill jobs are at the core of our business.”

Middle skill jobs are found across industries and include occupations such as computer support specialists and engineering technicians; radiation therapists and surgical technologists; paralegals and claims adjusters; and carpenters, mechanics, and heavy truck drivers.

The need for such workers is expected to increase as the economy improves and baby boomers retire over the next decade, according to the study, which was based on data from the US Labor Department.

Before the recent recession, some industries were already experiencing shortages of middle skill workers, according to the study. Such positions account for about 45 percent of employment in Massachusetts, but only about 32 percent of Massachusetts workers have the training and education to fill those jobs, according to the study.

Shire PLC, a biopharmaceutical firm expanding in Lexington, plans to hire about 600 workers, many of them positions such as manufacturing operators, quality control technicians, and maintenance mechanics, said Suzanne Bruhn, senior vice president for strategic planning and program management. About half of the jobs have been filled.

“Biotech and biopharmaceutical companies with products in development or commercialization have the kind of jobs that fit the middle skill definition,” she said. “But historically, they have been challenging to fill.”

Bruhn said part of the problem is there hasn’t been public support for the training and education needed for these kind of jobs. The study calls on the state to guarantee Massachusetts residents access to at least two years of education and training after high school, but does not estimate the cost of such a guarantee.

The state could increase its investment incrementally to achieve this goal, said Loh-Sze Leung, director of SkillWorks, which uses public and private money to fund workforce development programs in Greater Boston, and is a study cosponsor. Community colleges and other training providers also need to design programs that allow working adults to gain skills to qualify for these jobs — programs that are shorter in duration, held on nights and weekends, or taught online.

“These programs should be accessible and doable, and a worker should be able to say, ‘I can finish the program, and it will have meaning in the labor market,’ ” Leung said. “It’s really important that we send a message that not all jobs in our economy are at the high or low end.”

Nancy Snyder, president of Commonwealth Corporation, the state’s quasipublic workforce development agency, said money alone is not enough. Business, government, and educators must collaborate to determine which jobs and skills are needed.

“It’s not just throw money at post-secondary education and training,” she said. “We have to invest where we see consistent demand for workers.”

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