

Study by National Skills Coalition, SkillWorks and the Workforce Solutions Group shows shift toward "middle skill" jobs

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Jim Kinney, The Republican



File photo by Don Treeger / The Republican

HOLYOKE - Joseph L. Peters, president of Universal Plastics.

HOLYOKE – Universal Plastics here has a new machine capable of making molds for its heat-formed plastic products in house so the company doesn't have to depend on an outside vendor.

The next step is getting people trained to work the machine and making sure there is a pool of potential workers capable of grasping the high-tech skills required to operate an increasingly sophisticated array of machinery in area factories, says Joseph L. Peters, Universal Plastics' president.

"Where it used to be that you could bring a guy in off the street who had no training whatsoever," he said, it's no longer the case.

More than 396,000 jobs requiring more training than a high-school diploma – but not a four-year college degree – are expected to open in Massachusetts between now and 2016, according to a recent study released by the National Skills Coalition, SkillWorks and the Workforce Solutions Group.

Such "middle-skill" jobs will make up about 38 percent of all job openings between now and 2016, according to the report.

Loh-Sze Leung, executive director for SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive WorkForce in Boston, said the National Skills Coalition is an organization of 14 public and private groups advocating for more job-skill training programs and more government investment in vocational training and community college programs.

For example, she said, the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund created in the 2006 stimulus bill needs \$18 million to \$21 million a year, but there is no money in the state's current budget, she said.

She pointed to programs that help prepare low-skilled hospital employees for more highly-skilled jobs as an example of what the programs can accomplish.

Middle-skill jobs include medical-related jobs such as X-ray technicians as well as skilled building trades such as plumbers and electricians and machinists who work at today's highly technical manufacturing industries.

Peters said the machines his employees use to trim excess plastic from finished thermoformed products are, for all intents and purposes, robots.

"We have to do more with less," he said. "That's what everybody sees as the future of manufacturing now," said Peters, who also serves as chairman of the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County. "For the most part manufacturing is doing more with less."

Universal Plastics had 75 employees in the summer of 2008, Peters said. But the recession forced him to cut back. He's been able to hire back five employees thus far in 2010 for a new total of 55 employees.

Patricia H. Crosby, executive director of the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment in Greenfield, uses the example of a recent graduate of a manufacturing program at a vocational high school who got a job running a sophisticated German-built knife-making machine at Lamson & Goodnow in Shelburne Falls.

"You have got to be able to program that machine," Crosby said. "In fact, dating back to 10 years ago, you could see this project emerging. Everybody was getting the message that you have to go on to college, but hey weren't getting the message that it doesn't necessarily have to be a four year degree."

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