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Help wanted, skills needed

These local businesses' No. 1 need? High school graduates with skills

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Colby Lutz, a Southern Oregon University sophomore and part-time Brammo technician, checks out the company's electric-powered motorcycle, Enertia. Companies like Brammo say their biggest employee need is for so-called middle-skilled workers, often in technical areas.

Bob Pennell

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By **Greg Stiles**
Mail Tribune

As Brammo Motorsports prepares to throttle up production of its Enertia electric motorcycle, the Ashland manufacturer is in a hiring mode.

Strange as that term may sound in the current economic climate, there are plenty of Southern Oregon firms eyeing the future during the downturn.

What they're finding isn't all together encouraging, but working together with the Job Council and Rogue Valley Workforce Development Council, companies such as Brammo Motorsports, Hunter Communications and Carestream Health are paving the way for a new generation of skilled workers to handle so-called middle-skill jobs.

While many skilled workers are currently hunting for new positions, employers anticipate a shallow pool of talent once the economy turns the corner.

"We're finding people with electrical and mechanical background," says Brammo human-resources manager Hillary Smith. "They're manufacturing employees coming from other parts of the valley that may have lost positions; but what they are lacking is high-paced production."

The Oregon Workforce Alliance this month issued a report, titled "Skills2Compete," which says more than half of all jobs in the state fall into the middle-skill category— jobs for people with a high school diploma and some additional training. The report cites hands-on, well-paid career fields, including health care, law enforcement and emerging green jobs. However, it concludes, the state has failed to adequately encourage technical education and training for its future work force. It calls for greater investment in middle-skill job training.

"Too few current employees and way too few emerging employees, graduating from high school, are getting the necessary skill-training to be part of our work force," says Ron Fox, executive director of Southern Oregon Regional Economic Development Inc. "To me, it's a sad commentary. Today, 35 percent of our high school graduates go on to two- or four-year academic or technical education. Yet, 50 to 60 percent of the jobs in the workplace today, and those expected in the future, require middle skills."

Like Brammo, Hunter Communications is gearing up for hiring in the next year or two.

Chris Cahill, the company's technical director, hopes to hire savvy workers, who won't have to be taught the basics. "I'm looking for somebody coming through these programs that will be getting knowledge of what they want to do," Cahill says.

"If I'm looking for a network technician, I'm looking for someone that has gone through a class that specifically teaches them the underlying protocols and whatnot so they actually have a definite concept of how a network works."

He points out the difference between a recent high school-graduate and those of 20 years ago is dramatic. "Basically, kids these days are so flooded with technology that they are anesthetized to it and there isn't a lot of interest," Cahill says. "Go back 20 years ago, if I got my hands on a personal computer, that's all I wanted to do and mess with when I was coming out of high school."

As a result, technical training has declined and the pool of qualified applicants has shrunk.

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"That's why a group of employers, working towards the same thing gets together," Cahill says. "We need people with exact skill sets."

Rogue Valley Workforce Development Council — a group of business, educational and government agency representatives — created PowerUp in 2007 as a vehicle to develop training to turn the underemployed into well-paid employees. The idea is to match up a worker's interest with a company that provides corresponding work.

Jim Fong, the Job Council's executive director for Jackson and Josephine counties, says the program is designed to create opportunities for both employers and workers.

"Job-creation, increased market share or survivability of companies is the goal," Fong says. "We're trying hard to identify the companies that are going to lead us out of the recession and have a demand for employees."