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[Oct. 16](#) | [Oct. 15](#) | [Oct. 14](#) | [Oct. 13](#) | [Oct. 12](#) | [Archive...](#)
[Home](#) > [BizTimes Daily](#) > [Archives](#) > October 15, 2009 [Single Page](#) | [Multiple Pages](#)

Wisconsin needs to train workers for 'middle skill' jobs in recovery

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[Previous](#) | 2 of 8 | [Next](#)

In what will play a major role in Wisconsin's economic recovery, more than 426,000 "middle-skill" job openings - those that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree - are projected for the state by 2016, according to a new study released today by The Workforce Alliance (TWA) and the Skills2Compete-Wisconsin campaign.

However, to unleash the full economic benefits of the "Forgotten Middle-Skills Jobs," Wisconsin will need to continue to invest in proper training and education for its workforce, the report stated. While the recession is stifling current employment growth, the report projects that middle-skill jobs (including new jobs and replacement) would account for 46 percent of all openings between 2006 and 2016.

The report notes that funds from federal economic recovery legislation, especially the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), are also expected to create more than 1 million new jobs across the country - especially in industries dominated by middle-skill occupations such as construction, manufacturing and transportation.

"This is really an important time for Wisconsin to invest in training," said Andrea Ray of TWA. "If Wisconsin seeks timely economic recovery and long-term prosperity, the state must ensure that its workforce has the necessary education and training to meet the labor demands of the future. The national recession provides a time frame for businesses and the state to be strategic, evaluate labor and skill needs, and train and prepare for the jobs that are expected to grow."

The report predicts shortages in manufacturing and health care will increase. The middle-skill jobs expected to grow by 2016 in Wisconsin include police and sheriff's patrol officers, carpenters and registered nurses.

Tim Sullivan, chief executive officer South Milwaukee-based Bucyrus International Inc. and chair of the Governor's Council on Workforce Investment, said the report highlights his ongoing priorities.

"We've experienced shortages in skilled workers for years. While the current recession limits our ability to grow, we know that when the economy bounces back we will need a strong, skilled workforce to sustain growth and keep our company moving forward," Sullivan said.

The analysis for the study was performed by TWA using data from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, American Community Survey and state labor market data from the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

"This is a federal call to action that speaks directly to Wisconsin's strengths. The President (Barack Obama) has called on all Americans to obtain some form of postsecondary education or job training and has backed that up with commitments to invest in technical colleges and other middle-skill training opportunities," said Sarah White of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, a lead partner in the Skill2Compete-Wisconsin campaign.

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