



The Republican.

Economist sees gap in skills to compete in regional economy

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SPRINGFIELD - Pioneer Valley workers are aging, and young people entering the workforce may not be getting the education and training they need to take advantage of tomorrow's opportunities, says an economist who is studying labor markets across the state.

"If we don't have that labor supply, firms are going to adjust," Paul E. Harrington of Northeastern University's Center for Labor and Market Studies said. That adjustment could include moving outside the area or failing to grow when there may be demand for their services.

Harrington addressed a crowd of 250 business and educational leaders yesterday at Western New England College in a seminar titled "Massachusetts in Demand: Accessing a Skilled Workforce in Western Massachusetts."

Harrington said that in Springfield, for example, one in five residents ages 16 to 24 is idle, not in school, not working and not in the military.

"Who would put a dollar into training a high school dropout? Not a business," Harrington said. "Because all you know about that kid is that he's a dropout."

David C. Gadaire, executive director of CareerPoint, a one-stop job center in Holyoke, said his agency is on a pace to break a record and service 14,000 job seekers this year.

"There is a skills gap between what the employers are looking for and the skills the workers have," Gadaire said. "We are seeing the impact of that every day."

Douglas M. Hagopian, vice president of Hoppe Tool in Chicopee, wasn't at the conference but said he could use 10 highly qualified people immediately at his precision manufacturing plant.

"I think we are all looking for Mr. Perfect. Mr. Perfect and Mrs. Perfect aren't out there," he said. "So we're all getting creative."

At Hoppe Tool, that means identifying people doing low-skilled jobs in shipping or assembly who would do well in machinist training and then getting those people into training on the job and at night school.

Coincidentally, Hoppe Tool was one of five businesses named yesterday by the state, Associated Industries of Massachusetts Manufacturing Institute and the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership to take part in a Next Generation Manufacturing Initiative. The goal of the initiative, which involves a \$15,000 assessment of the individual companies' business practices, is to help those involved find ways to "reinvent themselves" to remain competitive and accelerate their growth.

Hoppe Tools, founded in 1941, began as a manufacturer of gauges used in firearm production at the Springfield Armory. Today, it manufactures parts and assemblies for commercial aircraft and military equipment.

Manufacturing employees at Hoppe start at \$13 an hour and work their way up to \$23 an hour for an experienced machinist, Hagopian said. But those workers must have good math and English skills in order to do the training, Hagopian said.

Harrington, the economist, said the statistics from February show the highest number of Hampden County job vacancies are in the accommodation and food, professional and business, and education sectors. Some of those industries, like food service, have vacancies because of high turnover and low wages, he said.

Other industries, like utilities and transportation or manufacturing, have trouble finding skilled workers, he said.

Manufacturers like Hoppe are using more technically advanced equipment and fewer - but more skilled - workers, Harrington said.

He said it's important to get high school students working and learning job skills like taking instructions and being on time. It's also important they learn about vocational programs they can take in high school and the career paths open to them.

The number of two-year associate's degrees awarded at Springfield Technical and Holyoke community colleges increased 9 percent from 1996 to 2006, Harrington said. That bucked a state trend, but the number of associate's degrees awarded in business and technical fields decreased while the number of arts and humanities degrees increased. Those students will have to work harder to fit themselves into the employment picture, Harrington said.

Suzanne M. Bump, state secretary of Labor and Workforce Development, said yesterday's conference is part of a series across the state. She expects to bring Harrington to Hampshire and Franklin counties in the fall.

In Hampden County, the next step is to get industry and education talking about what has to be done to bridge these skill gaps, she said.

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