

Help Wanted

Demand for skilled tradespeople is growing as retirements, population flight thins the ranks of community builders

By Joyce M. Miles

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james neiss/staff
photographer in demand:
Mathew L. Smith, 20,
works on a welding project
at BOCES. Welders are in
demand locally and across
the country as the baby
boomer retirement cycle
begins and fewer young
people pursue the trade.
**None/Lockport Union-Sun
& Journal** (Click for larger
image)

Tried to find a plumber lately? Or an electrician?

A welder or a machinist for that matter?

The ranks of skilled tradesmen who helped build the American dream are thinning steadily. The trend has been in play for a while but, with baby boomers now hitting retirement age, it's becoming more pronounced.

In Western New York and across the country, many business watchers say, building boomers are not being replaced by new workers quickly enough to stave off trouble, especially in ventures that are already hard-hit by global competitive pressures.

In some measure, Calamar Chief Executive Kenneth Franasiak says, the problem can be chalked up to the dream itself.

"It's called the 'American dream phenomenon.' Normally you see generations move up the skill sets ladder. As parents, we vow our kids will do better than we did," he said, "do things differently than we did."

For legions of blue-collar talents who made miracles with their hands, in dirty factories, lousy weather and hours that weren't at all convenient, doing well by the kids has meant putting them on the college path. Better to be the manager or the boss, the doctor or the lawyer, than just another one of the guys, the thinking goes. weren't at all convenient, doing well by the kids has meant putting them on the college path. Better to be the manager or the boss, the doctor or the lawyer, than just another one of the guys, the thinking goes.

As the search for betterment works its way through the generations, schools are supporting and even insisting on the college track. Non-stop bad news — plant closings, downsizings and the "de-industrialization" of America — make the old blue-collar professions seems like the last thing you'd ever want to get into, even if you're not college-bound.

The consequence, over time, is that when we're struggling with huge changes and in need of tradespeople, artisans and engineers — the brains and brawn that help get us where we want to go — they're in short supply.

There's more than a little irony in the cultural push away from trades.

"You'll make more money as a carpenter than if you have a marketing degree, but the dream philosophy takes over," Franasiak says. "We see it all day long (at Calamar), individuals whose children won't be actively involved in the pursuit they're doing."

A shortage of electricians — who can make an exceptionally good living after five years of apprenticeship — is becoming acute, according to David Roll, local chapter manager of the National Electrical Contractors Association.

“Unfortunately there are better opportunities elsewhere, but there are still opportunities here. There’s building going on and we need (labor),” he said. “There’s a shortage in construction trades generally over the past five years and it’s projected to get worse.”

At the Audubon Industrial Park in Amherst, civil structures builder Watson Bowman Acme Corp. has a sign posted outside its facility: welders wanted. It’s the first time in the company’s 50-year-history that it’s taken to advertising this way, according to President Rick Patterson. The traditional ways of finding welders and welder-fitters, by newspaper advertising and temporary agencies, doesn’t turn up any prospects.

“We cannot find skilled labor through normal (means). ... Recruiting is hard because as industries leave, skill sets leave. People who’ve been laid off move away or abandon their trades. People don’t recognize there’s still a need for these skills.”

Acme’s sign has drawn one applicant so far, a person who’s not a certified welder but, if he fares well in pre-testing and background screening, will probably be taken on and trained internally, Patterson said. Acme is looking for five welders and welder-fitters now.

Pivot Punch in Lockport also has used the “wanted” sign to find labor, human resources director Mary Brochey said. The company that’s had little turnover through the years is finding that as boomers retire, it will struggle to maintain a top-notch workforce. That’s a necessity now more than ever, she said, since competition is fierce and mistakes can cost dearly.

“We’ve found it harder and harder to find people with experience and skills,” Brochey said. “The work force is aging ... and we’re starting with people who are pretty green.”

At Pivot, which manufactures punches and dies, the entry-level wage is about \$9 an hour; with experience and time, it’s risen as high as \$20 an hour, Brochey said. A similar scale is in place in welding generally in the area, according to Patterson. Apprentice electricians start out at \$11 an hour, get incremental raises throughout their apprenticeship and, once they become journeymen, fetch a rate of \$27.70 an hour in Niagara County, plus benefits.

Despite wages that far surpass many service jobs, the trade labor pool remains shallow, and that can’t be blamed on the dream phenomenon alone. Even employers who desperately need help expect to see certain elemental traits in applicants. What they’re finding is too many hopefuls lack the math, computing and communication skills required for making and fixing things. Just as bad, some say, too much of the pool is saddled with drug problems, criminal records or just plain bad attitudes.

The skills gap

College preparatory study promoted by high schools isn’t preparing kids for work in any workplace, let alone skilled places, says Bob Martin, president of the Western New York Technology Development Center Inc.

“General technical education for all workers is an issue. Too many people are lacking the math skills, the written and verbal communication skills, the team building and understanding of what’s important from a business perspective,” he said. “We’ve got people who want good jobs, and employers who want good workers, but there’s a gap there.”

Weak math skills are a chronic complaint of industrial employers.

“It’s amazing how many people don’t pass the pre-employment test” at Pivot Punch, Brochey said. “They might be able to read to one-eighth on a scale but chances are they can’t figure to the thirty-secondth.”

Jack Tillotson, co-owner of Custom Laser in Lockport, has seen the skills gap too. In his relatively new, high-tech industry, laser cutting and etching, he doesn’t expect to find experienced technicians, but the green ones who come in looking for training at least need math and computer skills and some mechanical inclination.

They’re not plentiful, Tillotson said.

"There are opportunities for people who have the basic skill sets and want to grow with a company," Tillotson said. "We're finding it's a bit harder to find them."

While many employers and industry watchers applaud higher state Regents standards, they're concerned the push is cutting off career exploration for kids, especially the ones who won't be going to college. Traditional teaching is more academic than practical, and that makes it tough for kids to embrace, according to Jerald Wolfgang, director of the WNY Regional Education Center for Economic Development.

"All students need good science and math backgrounds in order to achieve ... but the real world uses for what they're learning in school don't seem to make sense to them," he said. "If you want to build cornices (for a house) for example, you have to figure the angles. That's geometry. We're not showing kids why it matters."

Reading, writing and verbal presentation are important skills in all kinds of workplaces, including auto repair shops, says Carolyn Bova, principal of Orleans Career & Technical Education Center in Medina. From BOCES Auto Tech Prep partner Paul Mullane, she knows auto technicians are not just mechanics who fix stuff anymore. In a competitive environment, they dissect highly technical manual text, write out clear work orders and explain to customers, plainly and accurately, what's going on with their vehicles.

Quoting Mullane, she says, "the difference between a mechanic and a technician is the ability to write a comprehensive sentence."

A majority of kids are underserved when the education system focuses on the college track exclusively, Wolfgang suggests. Nationwide, statistics show, one-third of all youths drop out of high school; another third graduate with practical skills below an eighth grade level; and among the third who go on to college, half quit within a year.

"Two-thirds of our young people are not going to college. What are they going to do?," Wolfgang said. "They could have jobs, if someone would direct them (into vocations) early on."

BOCES students have a higher high school graduation rate than non-vocational students, Wolfgang says, and nearly 50 percent are going on to college or technical schools afterward. Among the other half, according to BOCES placement coordinator Roger Amati, youths with skills training in machining, welding, HVAC, construction and electrical contracting should have no trouble landing a job. These are the types of industries calling on BOCES most frequently for referrals, he said.

The attitude gap

Something schools can't teach as a course of study is conduct — and industry experts say it's a serious problem with younger workers. Absenteeism, tardiness, drug use and a more lax work ethic further cut the depth of the skilled labor pool.

"There is no one factor in the (skilled labor) shortage, and work ethic is a whole other issue," says Richard Pederson, a placement specialist with Flexible Staffing in Tonawanda. "Math, science and computing require discipline, which seems to really be lacking in kids today. They don't want to work too hard. They want to watch TV, play video games, go to parties. Life's all about having a good time."

One Town of Lockport-based industrial employer who didn't want to be identified says kids coming out of high school now seem somewhat better prepared for work and study, but the twenty- and thirty-somethings who've crossed his path have been tough to manage. Tardiness is common, he said, and some seem unwilling to go beyond the scope of their specific jobs when needed, i.e., pack a box or help out in other ways when they're not running a machine. Overall, he said, his company's best employees are the more mature ones who've come from closed or downsized plants. They pitch in and cooperate knowing it matters to the greater good, because they lost their livelihoods once and don't want it to happen again.

At Kohler Machine Products, owner Sam Bonetto is hanging tight, trying to weather economic trends that took his company's employment from 80 in the 1990s down to 15 now. Worker absenteeism makes it harder, he said.

"Every day we know there's an issue with personnel. I don't want to put down youth but ... everything you've been hearing, it's real," he said. "Coming to work is the No. 1 thing an employer wants. Small

companies don't have that extra person just standing around if you don't come to work and production gets stymied by attendance problems."

Dismaying to vocational trainers is the prevalence of drug-test failures and lying about criminal histories on applications. In his organization's skill-training partnerships with employers, Wolfgang has found about one-third of potential hires don't get past the application process because of background trip-ups. When he worked with Seneca Niagara Casino to train gaming workers, he said, the rate was 50 percent.

The perception gap

Industries of all types are looking for the best and brightest people to come aboard and, to Wolfgang, parents are the first people that the skilled trades have to reach in order to show industry is an opportunity, not a step down in life.

"Technology is changing and the trades are not the same as they were 30 years ago. They're focused on teamwork, productivity, higher skills. It's not just working with your hands, it's thinking, being creative and solving problems," he said. "There's good paying work in these fields and they'll be here no matter what. We need to get parents to realize, 'here's a way your kid can stay in Western New York.'"

Joanne Colmerauler, director of the Choices in Technology program at Erie Community College, agrees the trades need to better promote themselves as providers of advancement and good living. The factory floor, especially, needs an image overhaul, she said.

"Everybody's picturing these dim, dark, dirty places that are going out of business. That's not the case," she said. "(Newer) plants are bright, spacious, they're scrupulously clean. ... All these kids get a liberal arts degree because that's what they were supposed to do and they end up working at Delta Sonic — and the machinists (in computerized work) come to work in ties and khakis."

The challenge to conventional wisdom doesn't stop there, suggests John Craig, director of the Tech Prep program at Niagara County Community College.

"The pressure to avoid (trade work) is ironic, considering tradespeople probably are better off in 10 years than the kids who ended up saddled with debt and entry-level jobs," he said. "We have to get away from the mindset that four years of college is the only path to success. ... Young people should be encouraged to explore (trades). You can always go back to college later."

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