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## Workers with right training may be hard to find

Short on Skills

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Clay Holtzman](#)

Washington's jobless workers are not the only ones depending on community and technical colleges to help pull them out of the Great Recession.

Employers count on the colleges' training programs to produce workers with the skills employers will need once they start growing again.

"When we start hiring, are the people who are qualified going to be ready?" said Rosemary Brester, owner of aerospace manufacturing firm **Hobart Machined Products Inc.**, based near Issaquah.

Brester said she will need machine operators, programmers and assemblers.

"These are not entry-level positions," she said.

Yet retraining enrollments — up 70 percent from last year — are overwhelming the state's \$1.1 billion-a-year work force development system, which a recent state study report calls too complex and not good enough at listening to business needs.

Another new report warns of an imminent shortage of skilled workers for several fields because the state is not training enough of them.

By 2012, Washington companies will need 1,300 more accounting and bookkeeping professionals than are projected to be available.

And the trend is projected to last for years, according to a study by the Washington State Workforce Training and Coordinating Board, which oversees a work force development system encompassing six state agencies and nearly 20 programs. The board is charged with ensuring that training programs are in line with the economy's needs.

Why hasn't this skills gap drawn more attention? The recession's chokehold on hiring has obscured the problem, the report authors said, but the shortage will become painfully apparent once hiring picks up.

"Certainly, skills gaps are more severe when the business cycle is in a boom period — unlike now," said Bryan Wilson, deputy director of the coordinating board.

A broader analysis of the work force training system, ordered by Gov. Chris Gregoire last year, identifies problems with the system that include complexity, record demand, insufficient funding, the need for better coordination with employers and the lack of labor market data to predict job trends. The draft report, from the trio of state agencies responsible for work force development, was due to be presented to Gregoire Dec. 15, but its release has been indefinitely postponed on the grounds, state officials said, that they first want to see how much funding Congress provides for next year.

To be sure, officials close to the work force development system say that Washington's community colleges and private career colleges are succeeding in training thousands of students for tomorrow's jobs.

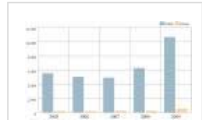
About 81 percent of students retrained for new lines of work in the 2007-08 academic year found new jobs, officials say. And many are pulling in salaries nearly equal to what they made before, according to the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

"I think the community colleges respond very quickly to the needs of employers in their communities," said Gary Chandler, vice president of government affairs at the Association of Washington Business, a statewide lobby.

But as entire herds of occupations — from car salespeople to newspaper reporters — are dramatically thinned, many experienced workers are thrust into worker retraining, which is the section of the work force education system focused on those who have been laid off and those whose professions have dwindled.

This fall, the state's community and technical colleges enrolled the equivalent of about 10,650 full-time students in retraining programs, 70 percent more than the prior year. About one-quarter of those students study basic office skills such as bookkeeping; another quarter train for health-related professions; and the remainder go for a mixture of occupations.

That crush of demand has exhausted funding, in part because meaningful training in the latest skills often requires up-to-date facilities and equipment — not just textbooks and chalkboards.



Enrollment in Washington's worker retraining programs jumped last year in both state-supported community and technical colleges and at private career colleges. Here are the student totals.

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"If we were just looking at the dollars, we'd just run English classes," said Malcolm Grothe, executive dean of **South Seattle Community College**.

Jim Crabbe, director of work force education for the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, said retraining programs are filled beyond capacity, serving far more people than the state is funding and trying to place workers in an extremely competitive job market.

But he said concerns about colleges being too slow to adapt to changing skills needs are "overblown."

"Colleges look at all of that when they look into their crystal ball and try to figure out the best program mix," said Crabbe.

Overblown perhaps, but trends in the labor market do add to the complexity of retraining efforts. For decades, major employers such as Boeing and Microsoft created enough new positions that retraining programs could concentrate on their needs.

Today, more openings come from smaller employers with specialized needs, said Keith Marler, director of worker retraining at South Seattle Community College. That requires more retraining programs that serve small groups of students — who are hired in small batches.

"We get one or two hired at a time," Marler said.

Community colleges, local work force development councils and other agencies that receive public funding are typically required to solicit the opinions of local employers when developing retraining programs.

Marlena Sessions, CEO of the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, said her organization is focusing retraining efforts on green business, manufacturing, video games and maritime industries.

In some instances, the outlook for specialized labor is so desperate, Sessions said, that competitors — such as Jacksonville, Fla.-based Crowley maritime company and Seattle-based Foss Maritime — have openly discussed their future operations in the other's presence in the hope of encouraging more workers to enter the industry.

Within three to five years, Sessions said, skilled maritime tradespeople will be retiring in large numbers, leaving shipbuilders short of critical labor.

The complexity of the vast work force development system is also a problem, according to the statewide analysis performed for Gregoire. State officials defend the system and point at the broad number of funding sources as a reason behind the bureaucracy.

"It is a complex system, but I don't think it is needlessly complex," said Eleni Papadakis, executive director of the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board.

The report also says the state must better coordinate how its various offices and centers reach out to employers to determine their needs, an effort the authors termed "insufficient."

Wilson, from the training and education coordinating board, said the system's greatest need is increasing its ability to accommodate skyrocketing demand.

"The immediate issue is, how do we increase capacity for retraining and support people while they are in retraining?" Wilson said.

Program managers agree that until hiring picks up, enrolling the unemployed in college-based retraining programs is the most important improvement the state can make to the work force development system.

"We will get them jobs no matter what," said Marler, at South Seattle Community College. "What we are frustrated with is we can't get them in the door fast enough."

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