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Blue-collar jobs harder to fill as boomers age Stan Luxenberg

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Finding skilled carpenters is a constant problem for Lee Zaretsky, president of Ronsco Inc., a Manhattan-based subcontractor that specializes in hanging drywall for office buildings. In the past year, Mr. Zaretsky managed to locate five employees through Nontraditional Employment for Women, a Manhattan nonprofit that prepares workers for jobs in construction and other blue-collar fields. But he's still looking for workers.

"We are always scouting for motivated apprentices who are eager to move up through the ranks," says Mr. Zaretsky.

For years, policy makers have focused on looming shortages of highly skilled workers, such as computer programmers. But as the war for talent begins in earnest, some of the worst shortages are showing up in the fields referred to as middle-skilled, such as carpentry.

"Jobs for plumbers and nurses are not leaving the city because they can't be outsourced," says Gwen Rubinstein, research director of the Workforce Alliance, which recently released a study on middle-skills jobs. "But not enough young people are being trained to fill slots that will become vacant as the baby boom generation retires."

After a city Department of Small Business Services survey found that many of the shortages were in unexpected fields, such as phone representatives for financial services firms, the department began expanding its career centers to train people. Potential workers are screened, assigned to training programs and placed in jobs. The department currently places about 4,300 employees every quarter, up from 127 in the quarter ending in April 2004.

Manufacturers hurting

One of the striking results of the survey was the difficulty manufacturing companies were having finding workers. While the number of New York manufacturers has long been declining, the surviving businesses face shortages of people with the right skills.

"Companies that process ethnic foods are enjoying strong growth in the city," says Robert Walsh, commissioner of the Department of Small Business Services. "These companies need drivers, forklift operators and mechanics."

In 2007, the department awarded businesses \$4.2 million worth of grants that can pay for training costs. In some cases, the grants help cover tuition at community colleges. In other instances, the cash is used to develop training programs that the businesses run themselves.

Paying for classes

Hendrickson Custom Cabinetry, a South Bronx-based company that makes specialized products for high-end apartments, recently won a \$10,000 grant to train its production staff. The cash helped pay for classes that the company ran for its cabinetmakers. "Training is a constant problem for us," says Lisa Hendrickson, co-owner of the company. "Colleges don't give degrees in cabinetmaking, and experienced craftsmen rarely come knocking at our door looking for jobs."

The nature of government funding, however, makes the future of some of these efforts uncertain. Mr. Walsh says that the city's efforts are supported by funding from the federal Workforce Investment Act, and Congress has been cutting the budget for the program. Mr. Walsh does not expect to increase placements any time soon unless he finds more money.

The shortages of workers, meanwhile, are expected to persist. The Workforce Alliance study found that in 2000, 46% of all jobs in New York City called for middle-level skills. In 2014, the number is expected to be roughly the same: 44%.

IN DEMAND

Fast-growing jobs, 2004-2014:

Medical assistants +32.7%

Tile and marble setters +21.6%

Bill and account collectors +15.7%

Pest control workers +12.1%

Source: New York state Department of Labor


New York state employment by skill level, 2014

High skills 34%

Low skills 22%

Middle skills 44%

Source: Workforce Alliance

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