

Op-Ed: Central Illinois mirrors national trend: A shortfall of skilled labor

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There's good news and bad news this Labor Day. The good news first. It is the American worker who has built our nation, providing it with one of the world's highest standards of living. The United Nations reports that America is the most productive nation in the world. It outpaces all 27 nations of the European Union, Japan and Switzerland in the amount of wealth created per hour of work. That's a performance worth celebrating.

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But America can't maintain its standard of living without skilled and knowledgeable workers. The bad news is that the talent America needs to maintain this prosperity is no longer in our pipeline.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that during the next five years, 40 percent of the skilled labor force will retire. There are not enough replacement workers to fill the jobs being created. More alarmingly, the Bureau states that a serious lack of skilled workers began in 2005. This deficit is expected to grow.

How did this happen?

Twenty-five years ago a blue-ribbon panel issued a report entitled “A Nation At Risk” alerting us that our children were not being adequately prepared for the future. It warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.”

Few took this seriously. After all, people were working and the economy was growing. Consequently, the “rising tide of mediocrity” has created little pain, until recently.

But here are the consequences:

- The U.S. high school graduation rate is 70 percent, which hasn't improved in 40 years. In 17 of America's largest cities the graduation rate is less than 50 percent. That means America, once the world's leader in college and high school graduation rates, has tumbled to seventh and 16th, respectively.
- Of those entering a college degree program, 55 percent will never finish.
- Based on their reading and math skills, half of the nation's high school graduates are unfit to work in the new economy.

Locally, Illinois Central College - which has been a lifesaver for students wanting to improve their economic marketability - finds that 70 percent require remedial math and 50 percent need remedial reading. Unfortunately, 40 percent don't stick with the program.

Meanwhile, Peoria's Workforce Network projects a shortfall of 6,898 skilled workers for our region by 2012. That's not some abstract number.

John Balkema, corporate employment manager at Caterpillar Inc., says that his company “must search the nation for qualified engineers and for men and women with the aptitude and attitude to become machinists, welders and assemblers.” Other local employers say the same thing.

Experiences in the Peoria area mirror what's being reported by the National Association of Manufacturers. In their survey, 80 percent of the employers indicated that “they were suffering from a shortage of qualified workers.” Almost half reported that their employees “are inadequate in such basic requirements as attendance, timeliness and work ethic.” A third said that their employees had “insufficient skills in reading, writing and communicating.”

The growing wage gap in America that draws headlines, elicits outrage and provides fodder for political speeches about trade restrictions and protecting jobs from leaving the country misses the target. America's wage gap, as should be clear by now, is fundamentally a knowledge and skills gap.

There's been a dramatic change in the world of work over the last decade. Ten years ago a high school dropout - assuming that she or he wanted to work - could find work in 65 percent of American jobs. That figure today is estimated to be about 10 percent. In our region, 16.7 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds do not have a high school degree. That's nearly 5,500 individuals, of whom about 3,000 live in Peoria County.

Yet even a high school education will not suffice to earn a decent wage in the new economy, because the overwhelming majority of new jobs in America will be high-skilled jobs that require training and education beyond high school. This new world of work requires knowledge and skills never dreamed of before. Chris Glynn, Caterpillar University president, captures that reality in one sentence: "The Caterpillar D-10 tractor," he says, "has more computing power than the Apollo spacecraft that first landed on the moon."

Rapidly changing technology, standards of excellence and global competition have impregnated every work environment. Businesses and industry need men and women with not only aptitude but the right attitude - a willingness to learn, an ability to work with others, and a desire to engage in both mental and physical work.

It's exactly what Dan Silverthorn, executive director of the West Central Illinois Building Trades Council, says his group looks for in applicants to its apprenticeship programs. Those who complete the four-year work-study program can secure average salaries of \$65,000 a year or more, plus benefits. Silverthorn projects a need for 350 high skilled welders in the coming year. "But," he says, "we can't find them around here."

The skilled worker shortage is more attitude than aptitude. Indeed, it's cultural. The Carpenters Union has a Latin motto that should be in the home and classroom of every child: *Labor vincit omnia*; work conquers everything. It just might replace the nation's current motto, which is reminiscent of the Roman Empire: *panem et circenses*, best translated as handouts and entertainment.

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