

DOL efforts seek to train for skilled trades

Ask almost any HR pro who works for an American manufacturer: How hard is it to find skilled tradespeople? They'll probably tell you they're short-staffed because there aren't enough qualified applicants.

From digital tool and die makers to semiconductor technicians to old-school trades such as plumbers and electricians, people who know how to work with their hands as well as their heads are in short supply.

Part of the reason: Demographics, as baby boomers age out of the workforce.

A bigger problem, however, is that more and more young people are choosing career preparation that emphasizes obtaining a four-year university degree instead of a path that leads from high school to an apprenticeship to a trade. That's despite the fact that apprenticeships don't require tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, as college degrees often do. In fact, apprentices usually earn healthy paychecks (and benefits) while they learn.

Fortunately for struggling employers, the U.S. Department of Labor is actively seeking ways to encourage more people to obtain trades training. Efforts run the gamut from featuring apprenticeship opportunities on the agency's main web page to making traditional college financial aid programs available to students who want to pursue job training instead of a four-year degree.

Another recent Labor Department proposal has also received lots of attention, albeit mostly negative. The department is seeking to expand vocational training that's available to high school students by loosening federal regulations that prohibit older teens (16- and 17-year-olds) from using hazardous equipment.

Known as the Hazardous Occupations Orders, the rules have long prohibited apprentices and student learners from receiving extended, supervised training in certain dangerous jobs such as roofing and operating chain saws. A draft proposal urges loosening those restrictions.