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Young people: take a look at the trades

By: Cathy Herholdt , Journal Newspapers

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Good wages and plenty of jobs await those who pursue training in a trade

High school and college students with undecided career paths, take note: there are some good-paying jobs with benefits that need workers in Washington State. For those who are willing to work hard and learn a trade, and who aren't sure the increasingly high cost of a college education will offer the return of a high-paying job, a skilled trade might be the path for you.

According to sources in the trade industries and state labor experts, there are plenty of jobs for carpenters, mechanics, electricians, heavy equipment operators, aerospace manufacturers and healthcare workers, many of which pay over \$40,000 a year and offer full benefit packages.

With more baby boomers reaching retirement age and a cultural push toward the majority of young people seeking four-year college degrees, our state is seeing a decline in skilled workers for certain jobs.

"We're getting workers from out of state to fill the gaps," said Rick Bender, president of the Washington State Labor Council. "There are some real good opportunities with apprenticeships for young people." Apprenticeships allow those learning a trade to earn about 50 percent of journey level wages while working and going to school at night. Classes are also paid for by the union. "A finish carpenter (for example) is worth their weight in gold," said Bender.

According to Bender, only 25 percent of students who go to college actually get a bachelor's degree. "We need to focus on the other 75 percent," he said. Bender would like to see the system make it easier for those who complete an apprenticeship to go on and get a degree, if they choose to do so. He recently traveled to Germany where the Siemens Corporation, one of the world's largest electrical engineering and electronics companies, trains 10,000 apprentices every year, half of whom go on to get an electrical engineering degree. "If (apprentices here) want to go on (to college), they should have that opportunity, with no roadblocks," he said.

Workforce Development Council of Snohomish County CEO Sue Ambler's son did just that in the construction field. He chose his career at 17, having been exposed to the trades at a young age and earning a scholarship for construction management. He's doing much better financially than many others his age who went to a liberal arts college, for example.

Redefining success

So why haven't high school counselors, or parents for that matter, encouraged more young people to pursue careers in the trades?

"Everybody wants their kids to be successful," said Sue Ambler. "In our society, success equals a four-year university. Apprenticeships are the original four-year degree," noted Ambler, who believes parents of young people who could be earning \$34 an hour as a journey level carpenter sometimes have the mindset that their kids are "smarter than that." But many who pursue college have trouble finding a good-paying job after receiving their coveted four-year degree.

Ambler believes that exposing high school students to the job opportunities in the trades will attract more future workers to those fields. "If every single student were getting an equivalent academic

education, and were exposed to the trades, you'd have people with options," she said. "I'm taking it as a personal mission for myself to visit elementary schools and PTAs with this message."

Ambler hopes to encourage parents to be proud of their children who choose a two-year degree or apprenticeship after high school. "They're not coming back and living at home. They can afford to live on their own," she said.

Ambler, who has a master's degree in education and experience as a private business owner, believes our culture needs to change its attitude that those who go into certain trades don't use their education. She stresses that math, reading and writing skills are vital to many occupations.

Industries with the greatest need

Health care is one industry where skilled workers with two-year degrees and training are in incredibly high demand. Russell Podgorski, sourcing and recruitment manager at Providence Everett Medical Center, is constantly searching to fill the 380 to 400 openings in his organization. "It's a serious issue right now," said Podgorski, noting that within the next 10 years, the shortage of nurses in this country will reach crisis levels, with 350,000 vacancies nationwide. In addition to RNs, physicians, pharmacists, rehabilitation professionals, medical lab techs and physical, occupational and speech therapists are also needed. "There's just a plethora of opportunity out there," said Podgorski. With a two-year degree, health care jobs offer good pay and benefits. "It's very rewarding work and there are a variety of options you can choose."

According to the Washington State Employment Security Department's Spring 2007 Job Vacancy Survey Report, nursing aides, home care aides, and licensed practical nurses were among the top 25 jobs in April. The median hourly wage offered for health care practitioners was \$23.

Auto dealerships in Washington State have taken a proactive approach to attracting new mechanics by collaborating with Shoreline Community College's Automotive Training Center. In fact, in order to meet the demand for qualified entry-level technicians, the college will expand the training facility with a 26,000 square-foot new building, paid for in part by the local auto dealerships. About 30 students graduate every year with an associate degree from one of four programs: General Motors (ASEP), Chrysler (CAP), Honda (PACT) or Toyota (T-TEN).

Don Schultz, former dean of the program and current director of development and education for the Puget Sound Automobile Dealers Association, says that trained technicians earn an average of \$42,000 a year, and up to \$50,000 to \$60,000 over time.

High school juniors and seniors who express an interest in the auto industry can work in dealerships through the Automotive Youth Education System. Those who attend Shoreline's program after high school are hired by a company when they start. They attend school for 11 weeks, then work at the dealership for 11 weeks on a rotating basis for seven quarters. "It gives them an opportunity to earn while they learn," said Schultz. "It's an incredible opportunity for the student," which is why there is a waiting list for the program and the expansion of the facility is occurring.

At the Ballard Shipyard, an aging workforce and lack of affordable housing nearby contribute to some businesses struggling to find skilled, reliable workers. While Doug Dickson, general manager at Pacific Fishermen, works directly with the unions to hire workers for his business, which employs approximately 70 people servicing fishing vessels and high end yachts, he admits, a good electrician can be hard to find these days. He can't afford to pay as much as the downtown businesses that are hiring for many of the same jobs: iron workers, welders, electricians, etc. Commercial electricians earn more than marine electricians.

"If Todd (Pacific Shipyards) has a big job going on, it's harder to find someone," he said. Others who come to work for him discover they're just not suited for shipyard life.

But a lack of affordable housing in Seattle is a problem for many workers. "Living-wage housing does not exist," said Dickson, which leads to long commutes from outlying areas and high fuel costs.

Ballard Oil Co., Inc. President and General Manager Warren Aakervik says, "There isn't a trade that isn't lacking." He's constantly looking for qualified transport drivers who have a clean driving record and no alcohol or drug convictions, which is hard to come by, he said. New requirements and stricter testing standards for service technicians has also made it hard to find and keep qualified employees.

Hiring those who are willing to commit to a training program and stick with the job long term is difficult. But you'd think for wages like \$50,000 to \$70,000 plus benefits, a retirement plan and profit sharing, more people would be willing to do the work. "Everybody wants to make a lot of money doing nothing," said Aakervik. "It gets cold on this marine fueling dock in the winter."

Aakervik also believes the solution, at least in part, involves exposing young people to all the opportunities in the trades that are out there. For now, he's doing his part. All four of his grandsons — one who attends Ballard High School — are working for him at Ballard Oil.

For more information on specific jobs and wages in Washington State, as well as interactive tools to compare occupations, visit www.workforceexplorer.com.

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