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Thursday, January 10, 2008

Editorial

Technical skills are vital to state's future

New survey shows thousands of jobs are waiting for those qualify

The Detroit News

Two new studies underscore the importance of education -- particularly technical education -- for Michigan residents looking for more financial security. One of the studies also indicates that jobs are going begging for lack of skills on the part of applicants.

A survey of clients of the Accident Fund, a worker compensation insurance firm, found that small to mid-size Michigan firms would like to hire new workers, but have doubts that they can find enough qualified applicants. More than two-thirds of those firms surveyed indicated that they had had trouble finding workers who met their requirements in the past year.

The survey was taken by the polling firm EPIC-MRA. Ed Sarpolus, vice president of the firm, says employers were looking for math and science skills, but also communications ability. The survey noted that as many as 30,940 jobs in the small to mid-size business sector could go unfilled.

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Another study, done for Automation Alley, a business and government group in southeast Michigan with a focus on supporting and growing the region's technology industry, noted that salaries for skilled workers grew even though the number of jobs in the region shrank as a result of the state's economic slowdown.

The study, performed by the Anderson Economic Group, reported that from 2004 to 2005 there was a 5.1 percent increase in the average wage in the industry even as employment fell. The study also said the region is losing lower-skilled jobs to other states and countries.

The clear implication is that there is a significant financial return to a solid technical education. While Automation Alley employees made up about 15 percent of all private-sector workers in the region, their firms accounted for 23 percent of the region's private-sector payroll, indicating the high-wage nature of the sector.

The Automation Alley study also noted that while employment fell in Automation Alley industries 6.1 percent from 2004 to 2005, the total number of firms declined only by 1.4 percent.

From this, analysts at the Anderson group concluded that firms in the technology industry could be in place to rehire staffers if the economy rebounds.

One of the strengths of Automation Alley, the study concluded, is that three-quarters of all of the science and engineering graduate students in the state are located within its region, which includes Wayne, Washtenaw and Oakland counties. It also includes such public schools as the University of Michigan, Wayne State and Oakland, as well as private institutions such as Lawrence Tech and Detroit Mercy, all with graduate programs in science or engineering.

The study added that the universities in the region for three years running spent more than \$1 billion annually for research and development, an increase of more than 50 percent over such spending 10 years ago.

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The Automation Alley universities did more than two-thirds of all such spending by Michigan's universities.
 The importance of a good technical education for this state's future -- and for job opportunities for students -
 - can't be overemphasized by parents, educators and political leaders.

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