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HOUSTON AT WORK

Demand up for skilled trades

*Job market good
but training is key
to new employment*

By ALICE ADAMS

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A strong demand in the manufacturing and service industries has companies in Houston and surrounding communities scrambling to find individuals with skills and training in the areas of welding, heating-ventilation-air conditioning, pipe fitting, plumbing, masonry, electrical and machining.

Marque Sika, account manager for Skilled Craftsmen of Texas, an industrial staffing firm specializing in semi-skilled and skilled workers, said the market is booming for skilled trades personnel.

"We're looking for welders, fitters, machinists, assembly techs, warehouse people, mechanics and many other classifications," she said.

"There's so much work, it takes more to find skilled workers, particularly good machinists."

Sika said job prospects for those in the skilled trades are much improved from those available a year ago.

"Skilled Craftsman specializes in placing skilled trades personnel who work in companies that manufacture parts required to maintain refineries, plants and other aspects of the oil and gas industry."

"We also hire people from the field to work in our office, so our customers needs are well understood by experienced trades personnel," she said.

Looking over job orders received during the past few weeks, Sika said Skilled Craftsman was seeing work available in pipeline and a strong demand for all skilled people.

"There is more work than there are people to fill those positions, and companies want those with the best skills. We think recent changes in the economy have ignited the demand for skilled trades people."

The demand for skilled trades is up and is expected to continue to be strong for some time.

"The Houston market is very good for all skills right now, and we expect this trend to continue through the end of the year and into 2006," said Jerry McGrew, manufacturing placement specialist for Resource Manufacturing — a subsidiary of Staffing Solutions.

McGrew is responsible for recruiting personnel to work in the manufacturing industry's skilled trades.

"We are seeing computerized numerical control machinists in greatest demand right now, and they're making anywhere from \$15 to \$21 an hour, on average," McGrew said.

Machinists — especially tool and die makers — are in particularly high demand, McGrew said. "The problem is nobody knows about it. It's not a vocational trade that's been publicized."

Conversely, jobs and training opportunities for welders in Houston are highly visible. Still, there is a shortage of workers.

"All industries use welders and machinists, and in Houston most of the demand is found in oil- and gas-related businesses," McGrew said.

The demand for all industrial trades has been growing, from warehouse and forklift operators to material handlers, machinists, welders and others.

"The industry definitely is picking up compared to where it was six months ago."

Certification a plus

Some companies are willing to take entry-level or crafts people-in-training, but certain positions require certifications.

"Companies may require an American Society of Mechanical Engineers certified welder," Sika said. "We also have jobs that require certified welders and some have to be able to do X-ray tests."

Machinists also are in demand due to growth in the manufacturing sector.

Training for skilled trades positions is available at



JERRY POWERS: AC Studios

HOT JOB: North Harris College Welding Instructor Russell McDonald, above, demonstrates techniques to the students he prepares to work in the many area industries looking for those in the skilled trades.

many area community colleges.

San Jacinto College and North Harris College are just two of the area welding programs that give students basic certification and knowledge.

"There is good money to be made by just making the effort to receive training. An entry level welder can make anywhere from \$10 to \$13 an hour. With more skills, the pay can go to \$18 an hour or more, depending on certifications, skills and experience," Sika said.

She said some companies will take people with basic mechanical skills and train them to meet their needs.

Work-study programs

Richard Shaw, secretary-treasurer of the Harris County AFL-CIO Council — a council of 76 unions, said opportunities for jobs and for training are available throughout the Houston area.

"We offer apprenticeship programs and joint apprenticeship training programs, which are a combination of employers and building trade unions offering jobs to people who work and attend training classes at the same time," Shaw said.

"This is a work-study concept that is literally centuries old."

Shaw said it is difficult to learn the needed skills and concepts without combining classroom work and on-the-job training.

"We find that it requires the academic background you get in the classroom as well as work in the field to allow you to put the concepts into practice."

All AFL-CIO training programs are joint appren-

ticeship training programs paid for by the student through an hourly assessment. There also is some state funding.

"Many of our programs are offered through Houston Community College, which is the administrator for the program," Shaw said.

"Some trades have stand-alone apprenticeship schools. They all are certified through the Bureau of Apprenticeship Training registered through the U.S. Department of Labor."

The programs are three to five years long.

Students' pay advances with their training level, Shaw said.

A beginning student may make 60 percent of the negotiated wage for journeyman. As they progress through program, they earn incremental raises. Graduates work for journeyman wages.

On the job, students work under the supervision of a journeyman. The journeyman has one apprentice at a time. "The beauty of the program is that the students get immediate feedback," Shaw said.

Like many career areas, the skilled trades are facing the affects of aging Baby Boomers.

"Many of our trades personnel are retiring and are not being replaced as rapidly as they should be."

"Our training programs often require five years of school because most trades involve concepts that require a lot of time to learn and thoroughly understand," Shaw said.

HVAC demand heats up

As Houston temperatures rise, the demand for heating-ventilation-air conditioning specialists

increases as well.

Dwaine Cooper, a North Harris College HVAC program instructor, said his students are in very high demand, particularly during the summer.

"We have two programs — a certificate program offering certifications in residential and commercial HVAC that require two semesters of training — and an associate in applied science degree that requires four semesters," Cooper said.

"We place more than 85 percent of our students, and the only reason a student isn't placed in a job is because they go into other aspects of the HVAC industry, such as sales, warehousing or manufacturing."

A residential HVAC certification trainee can expect to start at \$8 to \$10, Cooper said. After a year, they can make \$15 to \$18 an hour.

Students earning an associate degree in HVAC earn starting salaries in the \$40,000 range if they have gotten on-the-job experience while in school.

"We also have a fast-track program, where students can go to school in morning part of the week and then work for HVAC companies in the afternoon," Cooper said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

■ Find out about North Harris College technology department HVAC training programs by calling 281-618-5737.

■ To contact Staffing Solutions, call 713-329-9300.

■ To contact Skilled Craftsman of Texas, call 713-643-4991.

■ To find out more about AFL-CIO skilled trades training programs, call 713-923-9473.