

Shortage sparks demand

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The need for welders appears stronger in Trumbull County than in Mahoning County.

CHAMPION—Manufacturers are crying out for them. Companies are offering incentives to keep the ones they have. Agencies try to lure them away to their clients.

The object of all of this demand is the welder, an essential position in most industries. Yet, it's a need that is going unfilled in Trumbull County despite the above average unemployment rate.

“We've got companies calling us and asking for names of people completing our welding courses because they're ready to hire them once they've finished,” said Vicki Thompson, adult education director of Trumbull Career and Technical Center. Thompson said she knows of at least three companies actively recruiting welders.

Thompson said the demand for welders in the Mahoning Valley began increasing several years ago and has yet to peak. She noted that companies prefer experienced welders, but are willing to hire qualified individuals who complete the training.

Star Manufacturing of Vienna is one of them.

“We would not put [novices] on something that requires certification or a specific type of experience, but we can put them on easier parts that don't require as much skill,” said Dale Foerster, vice president, human resources logistics and training.

Star requires job applicants who complete the courses to pass a weld test and meet several other qualifications that Foerster considers equally important.

“What we're looking for are people who have undergone the training, are good and consistent welders, and above all dependable,” Foerster said. “We could easily use four more good welders.”

Other industrial firms sponsor courses at TCTC for welder training such as Control Transformer of Cortland, a designer and manufacturer of specialty transformers, which is paying \$15,000 for the school to train its welders for certification at the plant.

“We can start someone who has completed courses at places like the Trumbull center and train that person to become a more experienced welder,” said Bill Martin, company president. “Once they pass our welding tests and show either experience or completion of courses, we're interested.”

George Carney, TCTC industrial training coordinator, conducts welding classes containing a maximum of 12 welding students and the courses run the gamut of entry level to advanced fittings. Classes are held twice a week for four hours each night. Courses last one month and tuition is \$330.

Carney estimates that 30 percent of his welding students are unemployed and many have no welding experience. That doesn't eliminate them from job consideration once they complete 40 hours of courses.

"Novices are hired as maintenance mechanics and placed on apprenticeships," Carney said. "You're not going to become a welder in 40 hours, but you'll have all the basic knowledge you need."

Carney said beginning welders can expect to earn from \$10 to \$12 an hour while certified or more experienced welders earn \$17 to \$22 an hour.

"It's definitely an ongoing need because of a lack of people in skilled trades for us to place," said Melissa Delboccio, office manager of Cortemps Staffing Services, Niles.

One example is the position her firm is seeking to fill for a client — a structural fitter who is also capable of reading blueprints. That requires certification and experience well beyond the capabilities of a novice welder, but she said there are starting positions available for those who recently completed training courses. Delboccio said that not all welders have to be certified but all fitters do.

Carney explained that many companies require their welders to be certified due to contract requirements from their customers. Certification from the American Welding Society is awarded after the welder takes a test and the weld sample is favorably analyzed and reviewed by an independent testing lab.

TCTC's Thompson said industries have no hesitation about going after employed welders who have gotten time, experience and classroom training under their belts. Thompson and Carney said several companies attempted to get names of individuals taking specific welding courses at TCTC in the hopes of hiring them even though their current companies are paying their tuition.

"Under no circumstances will we give out those names," Thompson said.

Anyone interested in applying for welding classes at TCTC may contact George Carney, industrial training coordinator, at (330) 847-0503 Ext. 1610, or e-mail him at george.carney@neomin.org. The school is also considering offering welding classes this summer to keep up with demand.

In Mahoning County, welding training is available as an adult education course at the Mahoning County Career and Technical Center in Canfield.

Abbey Thomas, industrial training coordinator at MCCTC, said the school began offering welding as an adult education class a couple of years ago. Before that, the school had last offered welding in the 1980s, when the local steel mills still needed such workers in large numbers, he said.

It does not offer a high school welding class, but there has been discussion of starting one again, Thomas said, because of increasing demand.

MCCTC currently has about 15 adult students taking welding at three levels: The basic “MIG” welding that uses wire, “stick” welding and a class that leads to welding certification, Thomas said.

Many companies have told Thomas of their need for qualified welders, Thomas said. That type of worker can make \$15 to \$20 per hour. Some re-pipe welders earn \$28 an hour, he added.

Denise Vaclav-Danko, adult education administrator at Choffin Career and Technical Center in Youngstown, said the school plans to begin offering welding next school year for both adults and high school students. Choffin has secured a \$300,000 grant to launch the program this fall.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor says there will be a shortage of 250,000 welders by 2010 nationally because the average age of the American welder is 54, she said.