

Vocational And Technical Degrees Defy Recession

By Lucy Lazarony • Bankrate.com

The economy may be slumping, but some growing and often-overlooked fields are clamoring for workers.

And you won't need a bachelor's degree to apply.

What you will need is some specific career and technical training.

Jobs for workers with vocational technical degrees and certificates grew by 6 percent from January 2002 to January 2004, according to the Employment Policy Foundation.

Help wanted

More than 419,000 Americans with vocational technical degrees landed new jobs during the year -- no mean feat during a recession.

"The continued strong growth of employment opportunities for people with vocational degrees and certification, even in the face of a recessionary economy, is truly remarkable," says Ron Bird, chief economist at the Employment Policy Foundation.

Despite layoffs in so many other fields, the demand for building construction, electrical and technical workers, skilled craftspeople, welders, machinists and auto technicians remains strong.

Just look at the auto service industry. The days of the grease monkey are long over. Today's cars come with more than a dozen computer systems, and an auto technician must be able to assess and analyze every one of them. Many auto technicians wear lab coats.

"Most of the work done today is done with electronics and diagnostics," says Don Gray, president of Automotive Youth Educational Systems, a group that matches dealers with high school students eager for training.

Simply put, there are more skilled technical positions than workers to fill them. To top it off, many of the more experienced technical workers are reaching retirement age.

The average age of a skilled tradesperson is 48. The average age of a supervisor is 51.

Out with the old, in with the new

"A lot of jobs are simply due to people retiring," says Kurt Morauer, director for training program development at the National Center for Construction Education and Research in Gainesville, Fla.

Many master craftspeople update and broaden their skills over the course of their careers. Replacing them in the work force is going to be a challenge. A new electrician has a lot to learn.

"To replace a master electrician who's retiring today is going to require more formal education," Bird says. "You can't take 40 years to learn it anymore."

But you will be paid nicely for your efforts. A residential electrician makes \$25,000 to \$45,000 a year. A commercial electrician pulls down \$35,000 to \$75,000 a year. And an industrial electrician commands \$75,000 to \$125,000 a year.

Often, the more specific a technical skill or craft is, the higher the demand and the higher the pay. A tool-and-die maker can earn \$50,000 to \$100,000. These highly skilled craftspeople make the tools and construct the metal molds, gauges and fixtures used in manufacturing.

"That's an old, old trade, and I don't think most people understand what it is. It's the artist of manufacturing," says Butch Merritt, director of job placement and cooperative education at Tri-County Technical College in Pendleton, S.C. "That's a real skill. Accuracy is so important."

There's nothing second-rate about these jobs or the intensive training required. So you can toss any stereotypes about vocational careers out the window. In today's job market, technical skills are paramount.

The folks at the Association for Career and Technical Education don't even like to say the word "vocational."

"We are desperately trying to get people to stop using the word vocational," says Steve Ackley, director of communications at the Association for Career and Technical Education.

"Years ago, it was always looked upon that those classes were for second-rate students. They were the castaways."

But they are hardly castaways in today's job market. Employees with technical degrees and certification remain in demand while many employees with bachelor's degrees are being laid off. Job opportunities for people with bachelor's degrees have remained flat in the past six to 12 months.

Employment change by highest educational attainment January 2002 - January 2004

January 2004 total	12-month change
Less than high school diploma	15,908,416 -
510,695	

High school diploma only 1,360,000	40,450,000 -
Secondary and Post-secondary technical degree 419,122	6,507,836
Some college, no degree 890,000	25,990,000 -
Two-year academic degree 14,835	5,603,021 -
Bachelor's degree 90,000	25,080,000 -
Advanced degree 119,162	12,597,373

Degrees of need

These days there are more people with four-year degrees than commensurate employment. Check out these statistics from Kenneth C. Gray, a professor of work force education and development at Penn State University.

Only 23 percent of work in the 21st century requires a four-year academic degree or higher.

Forty-three percent of four-year college grads are underemployed, which means they have jobs that do not utilize their degrees. Just ask any English major working at Starbucks.

"A four-year degree is a ticket to get in line for an oversold airplane," Gray says.

In contrast, there's a shortage of people with technical skills, including those trained at the two-year level.

"There's more seats on the airplane than people holding tickets," Gray says.

Health care and information technology are two of the fastest-growing fields that require just two years of training and study after high school. There are job openings just about everywhere for everyone from physical therapist assistants to dental hygienists to respiratory therapists.

"The economy has not affected these people one bit," Merritt says. "They don't need our help at the placement office."

Registered nurses are in particularly high demand.

"Hospitals are in bidding wars to win people over," Merritt says. "They give \$3,000 to \$4,000 signing bonuses. RNs can set their own hours."

As for information technology, more than 490,000 new positions for computer support specialists are expected by 2010, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These jobs can pay as much as \$40,000 a year. Desktop publishing, which requires a vocational certificate, earn comparable salaries.

"There are many paths to success, and all of them entail some sort of education beyond high school. But a bachelor's degree is not the only one," Bird says. "There's room for everybody to find their own niche."

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