

## **Wanted: skilled workers**

### **Factories face shortage as baby boomers retire**

*By Dorie Turner and Dave Flessner - Chattanooga Times Free Press*

At age 20, Travis Shell already is in a career where he can make up to \$20 an hour in just a few years.

The machine tool technician graduated from Chattanooga State Technical Community College a year ago and immediately began working at East Tech Co. "Machinists have a really good job," said Mr. Shell, who lives near Dunlap, Tenn., on Lewis Chapel Mountain. "It pays well, and you don't have to get dirty."

But local employers say there are too few young skilled workers like Mr. Shell. As skilled baby boomers retire and modern plants require higher-skilled workers, the demand for many skilled crafts is outpacing worker supply.

"Up until now, we've been OK, but we have to hire a lot of welders and machinists to replace those who are about to retire, and the numbers and quality of people look pretty slim," said Rob Sentell, director of human resources at Alstom Power in Chattanooga.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 5.3 million skilled worker posts could be unfilled by 2010. The National Association of Manufacturers estimates that, even with staffing cutbacks at many plants, U.S. manufacturers will need 20 million new workers by 2020 to replace retiring employees at many factories.

While many of those jobs involve advanced math, science and engineering, vacancies also are expected for skilled blue-collar crafts such as welding, mechanics, construction trades and truck driving.

Experts point to the image of blue-collar jobs among high school and college students as the reason for the growing shortage. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, too few young people consider the possibility of manufacturing careers and are unaware of the skills they need to work in an advanced manufacturing environment.

"Too many people think of factories as dirty, noisy places with back-breaking jobs," said Ray Childers, president of the Chattanooga Manufacturers Association. "But today's factories are anything but."

Manufacturing jobs, on average, pay 18 percent higher wages than other jobs and usually offer better benefits, according to the association. The jobs on the modern factory floor require brains and brawn as skill demands rise, Mr. Childers said.

To help entice more students into manufacturing jobs, the National Association of Manufacturers and the Chattanooga Manufacturers Association each launched campaigns this fall promoting the advantages of factory jobs.

The local ad campaign, which uses Chattanooga Mayor Ron Littlefield and Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey, parallels the National Association of Manufacturers' "Dream It, Do It" campaign.

**SHIFT IN TRAINING** Some of the training once done through union apprentice programs was cut over the past two decades as the Tennessee Valley Authority and many factories trimmed their work rolls and more builders turned to nonunion workers for construction jobs.

Alstom, for instance, scrapped an apprentice program with the International Boilermakers union three years ago when the company still was cutting staff, Mr. Sentell said.

Vocational high schools and colleges now are trying to fill the void.

Dr. Dan Throgmorton, vice president of economic and community development at Chattanooga State, said the college's instructors are visiting schools to tell students about the specialized skills needed for manufacturing and construction jobs in today's economy. The college is working with the manufacturers association to improve the image of skilled labor, he said.

"We have to have people skilled in construction management and welding to respond effectively to our needs right here in Chattanooga," Dr. Throgmorton said.

Skilled workers are a key to attracting an automobile plant to the Enterprise South business park and in renovations to the Chickamauga Lock, he said.

Enrollment in the Tennessee Technology Center housed at Chattanooga State has grown about 25 percent in the last five years, with more than 1,600 students taking courses this year, administrators said. Administrators attribute much of that increase to the Wilder-Naifeh technical grants from the Tennessee Education Lottery, which pay for about two-thirds of the cost for any Tennessean to get a degree at the state's 28 technology centers.

**MEETING THE MARKET** At Northwestern Technical College in Rock Spring, Ga., enrollment has more than doubled in the last decade, hitting 2,300 students this fall. But much of that growth has been in health-related fields, and the skilled trades have remained fairly flat, administrators said.

President Ray Brooks said he is considering reviving the college's auto body program that was moth-balled in the early x90s because of a lack of enrollment.

"There's a bright future in those kind of jobs," he said.

Dalton State also shut down its auto body and diesel mechanic programs a decade ago because of a lack of enrollment, administrators said.

Joy Carrier, head of the technical division at Dalton State, said the college is working with the new Career Academy, a charter high school in Whitfield County designed to train students in vocational and technical fields.

"We're hoping through the Career Academy to build interest with high school kids," Mrs. Carrier said. "(We want to) make them aware that there are a lot of different jobs in the carpet industry that you have to have some training for."

Philip Martin is one of those who may help fill the vacancy. The senior at Sequoyah High School hopes to gain his American Welding Society certification and gain an entry-level welding job when he graduates from high school in May.

"I guess I've always been interested in welding, and I know it's a valuable skill right now," he said.

Sequoyah High, which once just focused on vocational training to supplement other high school programs, has been converted into a full-fledged high school. It has credit-sharing arrangements with Chattanooga State this year to help improve vocational training and student skills.

"We want all of our graduates to be able to either enter the workforce with a job skill, continue their vocational education at a trade school or be able to go to a four-year college," said Steve Holmes, principal at the 350-student school.



Photo by Jacqui Janetzko Travis Shell cuts steel into knife blades on a manual mill at East Tech Co. Wednesday. Mr. Shell, who graduated in May from Chattanooga State Technical Community College with a machinist degree, said he was inspired by his brother, Lebron, who has been a machinist for six years.