

# Skilled trades on the rise, in demand

## Mich. employers in search of more trades workers

By **TONY WITTKOWSKI**  
HP Staff Writer

Michael Voth has been in the welding business for more than two decades.

As the owner of Precision Welding and Repair LLC in Berrien Springs, Voth does some mechanical work and welding on farm equipment. In the last few years, he has begun to notice a growing problem, which many economic analysts have also noticed.

Both Michigan and the country are faced with a lack of skilled trades workers, like Voth. Should employers be unable to find qualified workers, the pace of economic growth that has been returning since the

2008 recession could come to a stall.

"I think there is going to be an extreme shortage, which is unfortunate,"

Voth said. "A lot of these jobs are good-paying and are left unfilled."

Manufacturing is no longer a dying industry and has been one of the most in-demand sectors this year in Michigan. According to a U.S. Department of Labor survey, nearly 5 percent of the jobs in Michigan are considered skilled trades, yet the number of job open-



MITCHELL

ings are expected to outpace the number of workers available to fill them.

The various explanations for the skilled trades shortage include stagnant wages and benefits, overly specific job requirements, fewer on-the-job training programs and apprenticeships, and an overall declining interest in skilled trades careers.

Jason Palmer, director of the Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives, conducted a study and said there are advantages of working in the skilled-trades sector.

While concentrated in manufacturing and construction, Palmer said

See **TRADES**, page A3



Don Campbell / HP staff

Paul Zelmer runs an EDNC sinker machine, used to burn or sink shapes into steel, Thursday at Hanson Mold in St. Joseph Township. Employers are reporting a shortage of skilled workers for such precision tasks.

**TRADES**

From page A1

skilled-trades workers are employed in many of the state's industries. These occupations can be divided into three categories—skilled industrial trades, skilled construction trades and skilled service trades.

According to Palmer's study, many skilled trades pay a solid wage with median hourly wages at about \$21 and ranging from \$13 to \$34. When compared to average occupational wages, with a median hourly wage of \$16 and a range from \$8 to \$39, the skilled trades see a pay advantage at the lower and middle range of the distribution, Palmer said.

"These workers are in high demand with more than 5,000 online advertised job vacancies" in Michigan, he said. "These vacancies and employment projections are measures of labor demand – not labor supply."

Without a supply of qualified workers to satisfy the growth in demand, Palmer said there will be shortages in the labor market.

A shortage will result in reduced production and slow economic growth, which Palmer said could lead to businesses locating elsewhere.

In the long run, demand for some skilled trades will eventually slow, due to a weak employment outlook in manufacturing. However, Palmer said the continued growth will remain strong for many skilled trades titles before slowing. Overall, skilled trades should still grow by 7.4 percent through 2020.

**Filling the skills gap**

The demand for these jobs comes at a bad time with a general lack of skilled trades workers in Michigan.

Adam Carr recognizes this problem while serving as a welding instructor for the Career Technical Education program run through Lakeshore High School. Carr said the school district put a significant amount of money into its CTE programs after successfully passing a large bond to improve the school's facilities.

Through CTE programs, Carr said the goal is to show the next generation manufacturing isn't what it used to be.

"People don't go into these shops and come out

looking dirty like coal miners," Carr said. "Manufacturing is a very clean, precise and safe work environment. My dad worked at a GM plant, but it isn't like that anymore. Now, when you go into these facilities, it is immaculate. They are bright and well-marked."

Carr said his passion is to teach young people to get into the skilled trades industry, stating those jobs are the backbone of America.

The Lakeshore teacher has also had to deal with the negative connotation that comes with students trying to become a plumber or an electrician.

"They are not crummy, last-resort jobs," he said. "There is so much more technology in this industry now. Students have to understand wiring, hydraulics and must be mechanically smart to run this equipment. We have students that come back that say they wished they paid more attention to math."

"Everything we come in contact with is manufactured. The table, the chair, light fixture, the pen they use to write is built by somebody."

CTE programs, like Lakeshore's, have attracted the eyes of local businesses in search of immediate help. Carr said they have a waiting list of Berrien County employers who want these skills in entry-level workers.

Among these companies is Hanson Mold, a mold and die making company in St. Joseph Township.

Dan Mitchell, president of Hanson Mold, said it implements a four-year apprenticeship program that most of its current workers went through.

Mitchell said they work closely with Brandywine, Bridgman, Buchanan, Coloma and Lakeshore high schools to find the right candidates.

"I think those communities should be very proud to have such good technical programs still in place, helping students and businesses," he said. "We had each of those schools tour Hanson Mold this past year, and students started the pre-apprentice academy on June 15 as a result of those tours."

Like other skilled trades, Mitchell said they have difficulty finding people with five or more years worth of experience in high-tech machining and technical areas.

As for finding younger

workers, Mitchell is not as worried.

"The opportunities for young people in this trade and at Hanson Mold are as good today as they were for me and my generation over 30 years ago," Mitchell said. "Our apprentices are a mix of students that are right out of high school to people who have worked at other jobs or went to college for a time."

Nathan Anders graduated from Brandywine High School last year and went on to begin his apprenticeship at Hanson Mold.

Part way through his four-year apprenticeship, Anders said he was thankful for the tutelage he received in high school.

"It was extremely easy for me to get quality training and education while in high school," Anders said. "I imagined myself doing something trade related, but not so soon. I thought I had to go to a four-year school, but it really wasn't necessary."

**Is college overrated?**

Benton Harbor High School CTE Director Pamela Dudley said they are trying to address the need for more skilled-trades workers in Southwest Michigan. Her job as director is providing students in her district with the necessary skills to join the work force after graduating high school.

"Not everybody is going out to a four-year college or to get their masters," Dudley said. "The bulk of our society is middle-level employees."

Dudley said it is not up to her to convince her students to either attend or not enroll in college, but to help them get to a career they enjoy.

"We hold very candid conversations with our students," she said. "We have to put our focus on the students and help them find



Don Campbell / HP staff

**Mold maker Mike Taylor works with a wire EDM machine, used to cut high precision shapes in steel, Thursday at Hanson Mold in St. Joseph Township. Employers are reporting a shortage of skilled workers for such precision tasks.**

that creative part of themselves."

Even celebrities have begun to take notice of the skilled-trades gap that falls in line with education.

Mike Rowe, who became known for his role on the television show, "Dirty Jobs," is among those who are trying to increase the number of skilled trades workers.

Rowe launched the mikeroweWORKS Foundation, which awards scholarships to students pursuing a career in the skilled trades.

Rowe said his reasoning for the foundation is simple: There are 4 million jobs out there for skilled workers like mechanics, plumbers and electricians, yet they are left unfilled.

To the former TV show host, a college diploma isn't worth what it used to be as 53 percent of college graduates under the age of 25 are either jobless or underemployed.

So the question is, why are students heading off to college instead of pursuing a career as a plumber or an

electrician with similar wages?

The problem, Rowe said, stems from an overall societal belief that skilled trades jobs are less admirable than other professions.

Rowe said he still remembers a poster on his guidance counselor's wall that portrayed a smiling college graduate with a diploma on one side and a tired, wrench-wielding trades worker on the other. Reading the caption, "Work Smart NOT Hard," was the first time Rowe said he saw work as something to try to avoid.

"We have got a trillion dollars in student loans today. A trillion," Rowe said through an email interview. "You have got really high unemployment among college graduates. You have got many graduates working in fields they didn't even study for."

While schools like Lakeshore have doubled the number of spaces available

in its welding program, other schools have cut their shop classes and programs all together.

Voth said he wouldn't be where he is today if it wasn't for the shop classes he took when he attended St. Joseph High School.

With a college degree in teaching and welding, Voth said he was often encouraged to go another direction when it came to his career choice.

But looking at his alma mater's curriculum today, Voth says he doesn't like that it did away with most of the industrial arts programs.

"That's a huge portion of the problem," he said. "That is where I spent the majority of my time in high school. Most of the skills I learned and use today were in those classes. It exposes students to what opportunities are out there."

Contact: [twittkowsk@thehp.com](mailto:twittkowsk@thehp.com), 932-0358, Twitter: @TonyWittkowski

**2015 RACE FOR YMCA**

**5K/10K | ST. JOSEPH**

PRESENTED BY  
**Chemical Bank**  
Member FDIC

**PARTICIPATE:** [ChemicalBankMI.com/Race](http://ChemicalBankMI.com/Race)  
**DONATE:** [www.bhsjymca.org](http://www.bhsjymca.org)  
**VOLUNTEER:** [allen.halquist@chemicalbankmi.com](mailto:allen.halquist@chemicalbankmi.com)

**FAMILY FRIENDLY EVENT!** We'll have a bounce house at finish, face painting, tattoos, and balloons for the kids!  
And, all youth receive a medal at the finish line!

**Doug Rowe**  
**Painting**

RESIDENTIAL / COMMERCIAL  
NEW CONSTRUCTION  
INTERIOR • EXTERIOR  
LARGE JOBS • SMALL JOBS  
QUALITY • SERVICE • EFFICIENCY

**429-3399 849-5409**

LICENSED INSURED