Workers needed for thousands of area jobs

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On a freezing January morning 19 months ago, David Weaver, a former machinist, joined 67 other people to climb a 45-foot wooden pole in hopes of becoming a power line worker.

Suchitra Ramani enrolled at Austin Community College to get hands-on lab experience because her master's degree in bioinformatics wasn't enough by itself to get a job in biotechnology.

And Steve Ratliff, a laid-off chip manufacturer, discovered that his electronics background helped him pursue a childhood dream of being an auto mechanic.

For their new careers, all three selected occupations from a newly updated list of 42 jobs in Central Texas that are in demand or emerging in the local economy, according to Workforce Solutions Capital Area, the regional arm of the Texas Workforce Commission.

The state creates the list to determine where to direct its federal training dollars, which can be up to $7,000 for a qualified individual who enrolls in Austin Community College or other approved training programs. It is a varied list of jobs that require from one year of training after high school to a college degree. It includes both high- and low-tech. The average wages range from $15 to $50 an hour. There are more than 8,000 openings now on the list in the 10 counties surrounding Austin, and that number is projected to increase to almost 66,000 over the next decade.

"We are moving people into jobs that we know will be there and will offer a sustainable wage," said Alan Miller, executive director of Workforce Solutions Capital Area. "These are jobs that will support our growth industries."

At 7.6 percent, the Austin area's unemployment rate is better than the national rate of 9.2 percent, and the city routinely ranks atop lists of the best places to find work.

"There's a lot of people looking for work, and there's a lot of jobs," Miller said of the local economy. "But a lot of those jobs pay on the low end and offer few career opportunities."

Not all occupations experiencing shortages make the list. Nationally, there's a shortage of truck drivers, particularly for long hauls. But Miller said there are plenty of people with the licenses necessary to drive trucks, and turnover is high: "The lure of the long haul wears off real quick."

The best opportunities in Central Texas require technical skills, though not always college degrees, but some job seekers don't have the right skills for the jobs.

"You are starting to see a mismatch between the job seekers and skilled jobs," Miller said. "We haven't reached a critical problem yet, but you have to keep your eye on it."

In today's economy, Miller said, new jobs are being created more quickly, and skills for old jobs are constantly changing.

"You might have been an engineer 10 years ago, but the skills needed today are different," he said. "People who have been out of work for a while have to upgrade and retrain."

That's what happened to Ratliff, 43, of Round Rock.

A graduate of ITT Technical Institute, Ratliff had spent his career in semiconductor manufacturing, first at Hitachi, then a decade at Samsung Electronics Co. A manufacturing supervisor, Ratliff said he was laid off in the fall of 2009 after his line of memory chips was discontinued.

Faced with a midlife career change, Ratliff recalled his grandfather's auto garage and his teen years spent working on cars.

"I never saw him unhappy," Ratliff said of his grandfather. "I've always heard if you're happy with your job that you'll never work a day in your life. I'm going to give that a try."

Once, students could go into auto mechanics with a little vocational training in high school. No more.

"The biggest hurdle is technology," said Robert Pelham, ACC automotive instructor. "Now we've got computers to talk to the computers in the car."

Ratliff said his electronics background has helped.

Pelham said he sees more older students enrolling.

Experienced mechanics are returning to class to learn how to work on hybrids and other technologies, while students such as Ratliff are changing careers.

Pelham said many students need a job sooner than the two years it takes to become an auto technician. He said they can specialize in brakes, engines, transmissions or air conditioning and get a certificate after six months. Then they can finish their education at night while working at a brake shop, for example.

"This helps them get their foot in the door," Pelham said. "But this career takes constant training."

Biotechnology is a small but emerging industry in Austin. Nationwide, Texas is No. 1 for clinical trials for new drugs, one of the cornerstones of the industry, but talent remains an issue in an industry that spans pharmaceutical, molecular diagnostics, manufacturing and cancer research companies.

"Asking a company to move from California, the question is, 'Where are we going to get the workforce?'\u2009" said Linnea Fletcher, chair of ACC's biotechnology department.

At its Round Rock campus, ACC has a $500,000, state-of-the-art lab.

"They have a better lab than some I've worked in," said Carroll Casey, a Myriad Genetics employee and a member of ACC's biotech advisory board.

Thirty-six students are expected to enroll this fall, three times as many as two years ago.

Fletcher said there are National Science Foundation grants to pay for tuition, books and child care, but, "We have a hard time finding someone to take one."

She blames misconceptions about the industry. "Parents and counselors, to some degree, think you have to have a four-year degree to get in this industry," she said. "They are wrong, but it's hard to change perceptions."

ACC has two paths to a biotechnology job focused on hands-on lab work: A two-year associate degree and, for college graduates, a one-year certificate program with an internship.

"I had great students with two-year degrees who were hired to supervise folks with college degrees," Fletcher said.

Ramani had no shortage of education when she moved from India to join her husband in Austin five years ago. She has a bachelor's degree in biochemistry and a master's in bioinformatics.

"I had a hard time getting a job," she said. "I had all the theory but no exposure to how the industry worked."

After three semesters and an internship, Ramani has a full-time job at Bio Scientific.

Casey said ACC biotechnology graduates are well-prepared for work. "They know what to do when they walk through the door."

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Another occupation — power line workers — is on the list because a generation is about to retire from the physically demanding jobs.

Some industry surveys predict that utilities will have to fill 40 percent of the nation's line worker jobs over the next few years.

The graying of the workforce and the greening of the industry are opening up new opportunities.

"You can't have a smart grid without a smart line worker," said Ray Cook, an Austin Energy trainer and an ACC climbing instructor.

Few people with the aptitude to work with electricity can also climb a utility pole with 40 or 50 pounds of equipment. Even fewer want to do it in extreme weather.

"It's a very select club," Cook said.

He said there are only about 110,000 line workers nationwide, and shortages in the industry are prompting signing bonuses as utilities compete for workers.

Weaver, 28, of Austin jumped at the chance to join the field. He was studying renewable energy at ACC when the college started its line worker program.

He thought it had everything he wanted in a job: Making good money while working outdoors with his hands.

As he waited his turn to scale his first pole on that freezing January morning, Weaver said he was thinking, "Man, get me up the pole. Let me climb this thing."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin