



BUSINESS

Medina manufacturers focus on closing skills gap with new program (photos)

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VALLEY CITY, Ohio -- Randy Bennett, like many manufacturers, had to contend with the skills gap.

He needed his workers at [Automation Tool & Die](#) in Valley City, where he is co-owner and vice president, to be proficient in the technology the company relied on to remain competitive. However, there wasn't any workforce development infrastructure in Medina County that he could tap into to train employees or rely on to provide a pipeline of skilled workers to fill openings.

Bennett could have done what many company owners do: Complain about the dearth of skilled workers. Reminisce about the good old days of American manufacturing. Feel defeated.

Instead, he sought solutions by spearheading the formation of the Medina County Manufacturers Partnership, which is comprised of about a dozen small and midsize companies. The new group will address closing the local skills gap and other issues aimed at enhancing competitiveness.

"We arrived at the conclusion that it should be industry led," said Bennett, after looking for existing programs to address the skills gap and not finding them.

The partnership's first effort is the Advanced Manufacturing Apprenticeship, in which 18 employees from local companies will both work and begin training in August at Cuyahoga Community College's Brunswick University Center. The program is a collaboration between the manufacturers, Tri-C and Lorain County Community College.



The nascent endeavors of Bennett and the other manufacturers offer a glimpse at a national problem - a shortage of middle-skill workers. These are workers who have training beyond a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree. Middle-skill jobs account for 55 percent of Ohio's labor market, but only 47 percent of workers in the state have such training, according to an analysis of government data by the National Skills Coalition in Washington, D.C. In the U.S., 53 percent of the jobs are middle skill, while 43 percent of the workers are.

Bryan Wilson, the coalition's state policy director, said many sectors, including health care and information technology, are also experiencing a shortage of middle-skill workers.

"In health care, we're talking about radiology technicians, licensed practical nurses and nursing assistants. In manufacturing, we're talking about CNC (Computer Numerically Controlled) operators and machinists and tool and die makers. In construction, we're talking about welders, boilermakers. In IT, there are many jobs that don't require a college degree, including coder."

Jessie Hogg Leslie, director of Business Leaders United, a joint project of the National Skills Coalition and National Fund for Workforce Solutions, said some may be surprised by the fields that need middle-skill workers.

"When people think of biotech they think of high-skill, four-year and beyond degree jobs," said Leslie, who helped Bennett with the Medina partnership. "But for every scientist we have, we need five lab techs underneath that scientist."

Medina manufacturers aren't the only ones interested in finding ways to close the skills gap. For example, the Cleveland Foundation released a study this year, done by Team Northeast Ohio, saying that by 2020 65 percent of in-demand jobs here will require a post-secondary credential. However, 46 percent of residents 25 and older have no post-secondary education and another 33 percent have a post-secondary credential, but not necessarily in an in-demand field.

See: [Good-paying jobs in NE Ohio remain unfilled because workers lack credentials](#)

Closing the skills gap in Northeast should primarily focus on training workers in the digital skills needed to achieve competency in using workplace technology, said William Gary, Tri-C's executive vice president of workforce, community and economic development. As with the Medina manufacturers, he said much of the workforce retraining Tri-C provides is initiated by employers.

Gary said these are employers who reassess their needs - often as technology advances - and realize they may have to put some "skin in the game" to upskill employees and increasingly to help create pipelines of qualified workers. He said this model, which takes addressing the skills gap into account, differs from what has been the norm.

"(T)his new model develops a holistic strategy, which includes this type of reassessment," Gary said. "We can no longer depend on the workforce of the past, expecting that workers will come ready."

The forgotten middle-skill jobs

Middle-skill jobs require education beyond high school but not a four-year degree. Key industries in Ohio are unable to find enough workers to fill these jobs.

KEY

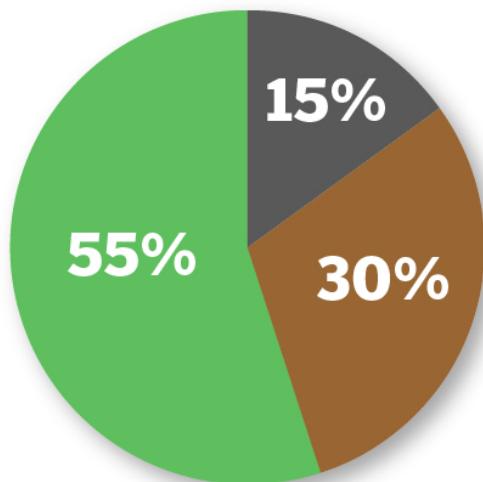
High-skilled

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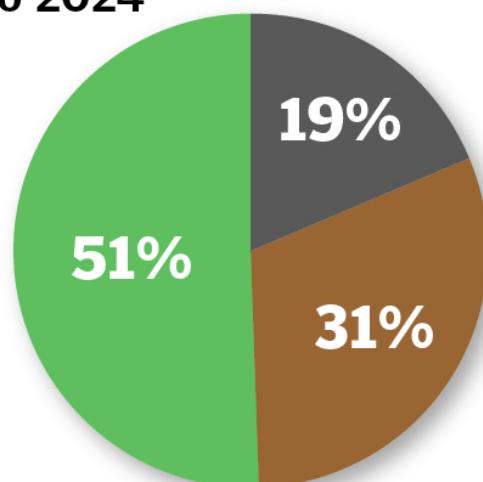
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Jobs by skill
level, 2015



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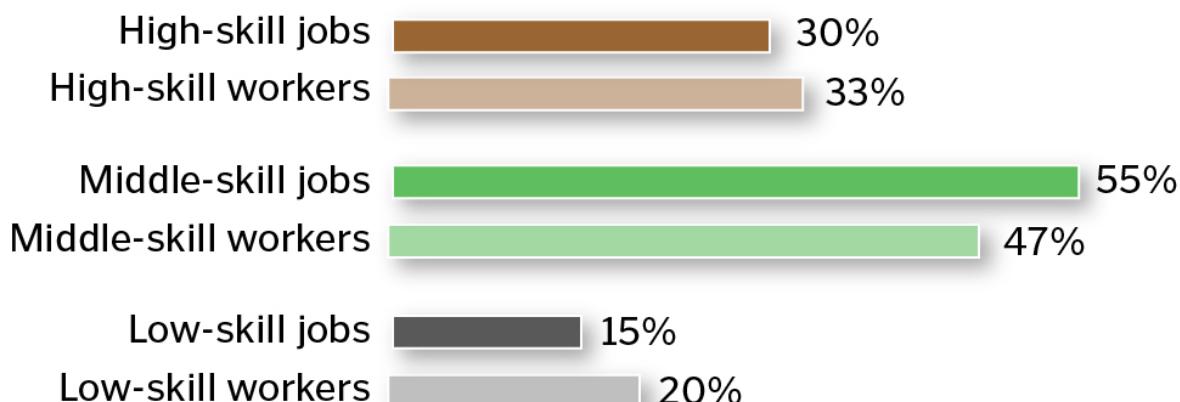
Job openings
by skill level, 2014
to 2024



Middle-skill gap in Ohio ...

Middle-skill jobs account for 55% of Ohio's labor market, but only 47% of the state's workers are trained to the middle-skill level.

Jobs and workers by skill level, 2015

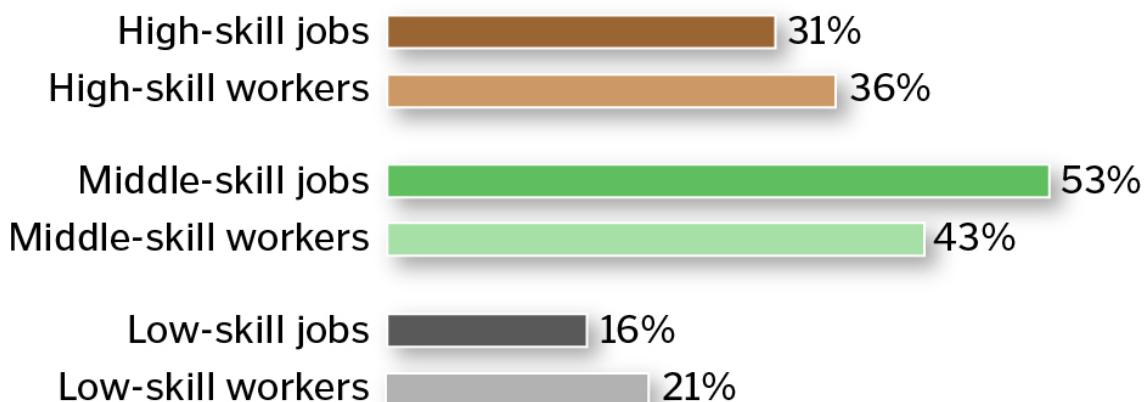


... and in the U.S.

Nearly the same numbers are seen at the national level. Middle-skill jobs account for 53% of the the

level. Middle-skill jobs account for 53% of the U.S. labor market, but only 43% are trained to that level.

Jobs and workers by skill level, 2015



SOURCE: National Skills Coalition
(Joel Downey, The Plain Dealer)

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Wilson said one of the reasons workers haven't come ready is because there hasn't been a priority in preparing people for middle-skill jobs.

"Our country's culture and education system have emphasized people obtaining a bachelor's degree," he said. "While schools are focusing on preparing kids to go to a four-year college or university, a lot of jobs at the middle-skill level go begging."

Bennett, a state certified tool and die maker, recalls when he was an apprentice from 1983-87.

"At that time, it was perfectly acceptable to get into the trades or to go to college," he said. "The infrastructure was there, where you would work during the day, go to class in the evening, get your on-the-job training, reconcile the theory versus practice and achieve your certification at the end of the apprenticeship."

Bennett said as manufacturing jobs continued to disappear, factory owners were disinclined to sponsor apprenticeships. Instead, they had fear about the future and took a "this is not the place to be" attitude. He said the Great Recession all but wiped out any training infrastructure in his area. Blue-collar jobs, including those in manufacturing and construction, were hard hit by the recession. Ohio is down nearly 88,000 of such jobs since the recession, according to an analysis of government data by Policy Matters Ohio.





About five years ago when Bennett was interested in apprenticeships and other training for his employees, he said he couldn't find any programs locally that could meet his needs. Other manufacturers in Medina were experiencing similar challenges. So, they would end up creating a sector partnership designed to address training and other needs they might have.

The demand for apprenticeships and other training remains high, despite employment declines in the manufacturing sector, said Jennifer Compton, human resource manager at Automation Tool & Die. She said workers need training to adapt to the new technology. For example, an operator, who used to perform tasks manually, may now be required to program a robot to do them. Additionally, many in the skilled trades are nearing retirement age; and younger workers must be trained to replace them.

Compton said the company, with about 80 employees, is similar in size to many in the partnership. This presents challenges in trying to go it alone in training.

"The reason why it is so important for small and medium size companies to band together is that a company might only have five people they want to send, and that won't warrant an instructor and a full classroom," Compton said. "When we pooled together, we could facilitate that happening."



Nick Ricciardi of Automation Tool & Die, is already taking courses at Tri-C in Cleveland as part of his apprenticeship, and will continue there. Still, he is excited about the new program in Brunswick because it will give people in Medina easier access to a program aimed at boosting their careers.

"That will be huge that they will have something right there near work," he said.

"The college track didn't appeal to me," Ricciardi said. "(With an apprenticeship,) you have an employer who is willing to pay for your schooling while you're working full-time and you're not going to graduate with all that college debt."

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