

## The Right Training for the Right Job



### ■ Trade and Transportation

*By Thomas O'Brien*

Last week's headlines brought more bad news. They included "Jobless Lose Lifeline," a reference to the debate in Washington over who qualifies for extended unemployment benefits and for how long. Will the benefits be extended nationwide? Will there be special consideration given to states with the highest unemployment rates?

It's hard to believe that just a few years ago the focus was on the lack of skilled personnel needed to fill the jobs driving economic growth. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the labor growth rate, which peaked at 2.6% in the 1980s, is expected to average only 1.2% between now and 2015. That figure declines to 0.2% between 2015 and 2025.

For those of us in Southern California, the questions surround the next generation of workers needed to fill the jobs in the trade and transportation sector, industries vital to the regional economy. Do we have trained engineers, logisticians, planners, IT specialists, etc. ready to take advantage of employment opportunities? This concern is shared by both private industry and the public sector. An often quoted figure is that approximately 50% of the State transportation agency workforce will be eligible to retire within the next 10 years.

These issues are still relevant, even during the great Recession. In fact, they are even more relevant. Job

(re)training is one component of economic recovery; but with scarce resources available, it's important to make sure that training programs prepare people for the opportunities that are likely to be available to them.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics projects that more than three quarters of the job openings between now and 2014 are in the technical areas of Engineering, Computer Sciences and Information Technology. In the U.S., we don't do a good enough job preparing people for those positions. 32% of our college graduates receive degrees in science and engineering. Contrast that with some of our competitors in the global trade arena. In Germany, the figure is 36%. In China, it's 59%; and it's even higher in Japan. On an annual basis, our nation produces 1/10<sup>th</sup> the number of engineers that China does.

But job preparation does not only occur in the college classroom. Students should be learning about opportunities in trade and transportation at an early age, in grades K-12, while their interests are taking shape. There should also be opportunities for lifelong learning for people already on the job and those looking to make career changes.

Whether or not you support the concept of a national education policy, there are benefits to having federal resources behind workforce development. Federal transportation legislation has allowed states to use a small percentage of surface transportation funds for employee training. The most recent transportation bill, SAFETEA-LU, expanded eligible activities beyond employee training and education to pipeline programs that help students prepare for transportation careers.

One place that is taking the notion of workforce preparation seriously is Carson, the focus of this issue of the Long Beach

Business Journal. Last year at this time, I spoke with Barry Waite, the city's Business Development Manager, who talked about the city's interest in preparing its population of 100,000 for technology-based, higher paying job opportunities in manufacturing and logistics. At that time, the City was actively involved in helping companies recruit and retain good employees. The City's drop-in center helps people find jobs and helps find people for open positions.

This year, Barry reports that Carson has stepped up those efforts. This past summer its youth program placed 180 young people in jobs with the city and with private firms. A new program using federal dollars targeted laid-off workers and helped develop skills in areas such as medical transcription and human resource management. Other training programs focus on youth job readiness and the special employment needs of probationary youth.

Certainly other cities have similar programs. What may set Carson apart is its willingness to invest the time and resources needed to better understand the problem at hand and the role it plays in preparing residents to fill in any gaps. The city is working on a project with local researchers to determine what (and where) future employment opportunities will be in the region, and then attempting to figure out the relationship between the growth sectors and the employment base in the city. This knowledge, and the input of local employers, will help Barry shape the development of future workforce development efforts.

It's not the City's job alone to prepare the next generation of workers. Neither is it Washington's; but a combination of better information and the effective use of training dollars could go a long way toward matching employer needs with employee skills. That, and getting the word out early to young people that trade and transportation offers the hope of not only a job but a fulfilling career.