

## OPINION

## Do more to prepare people for jobs

BY BOBBY LEE

“So, what do you want to be when you grow up?” Every child has heard that question, yet few of us as children could predict the jobs we hold today. It is daunting to forecast exactly how an ever-changing economy will affect our job, let alone alter employment opportunities for future generations.

We do know that a skilled, reliable work force always will be essential for sustaining our community and our economy. Good jobs lead to better schools, reduced crime, less poverty, more health care coverage and stronger families. A prepared work force is critical to a livable community.

Since March, columns on these pages have addressed work force development. The hope for the Building Lane County's Work Force series was to start a discussion. As the author of the last column in the series, I'm going to review some of the high points.

◆ *Who will replace the retiring baby boomers in Lane County?*

As the baby boom generation has aged, so has the work force. By 2000, people 45 to 64 years of age accounted for 53 percent of the working age population. That number is expected to peak at 60 percent in 2010.

The result will be work force and skill shortages. Work force gaps already are appearing in all industries. Locally, health care, wood products, transportation and warehousing industries face major challenges.

As a result, employers will compete for workers and will be attracted to communities that have a ready work force. Employers also will have to be creative in how they recruit and train employees. For instance, PeaceHealth-Siuslaw Region in Florence developed a “grow your own” strategy — proactively encouraging high school students to pursue health care careers while strengthening its internal career pipeline through onsite wraparound training and support.

◆ *Are our youth ready?*

Numerous surveys by employers show that local public schools are doing incredible work with limited dollars. Yet, it is clear that some young people are not ready to enter the labor market. Low math, reading and technology literacy are barriers to employment, and many youth lack “soft” skills, such as showing up for work on time, dressing appropriately or calling in if they are going to be late. In part, this reflects the fact that today's jobs require greater skill and education than in the past.

Many young people are looking for more from their jobs than did previous generations. According to a recent poll by Harris Interactive, workplace expectations of my cohorts in Generation Y are unlike those of previous generations: 92 percent desire more flexibility, creativity and personal satisfaction in their work. So how do local employers make sure their jobs are attractive to the workers they want to hire?

Employers already report skill shortages in their applicant pools and express concern about a lack of capacity in the current training system, without a high school degree, seems to be: You are on your own.

This is occurring at a time when many countries are beginning to close the education and skill gap. Today, X-rays of Oregon patients are being read in India, Web sites and software are being developed throughout Asia, feature articles for American newspapers are being researched and written by people in other countries — the list goes on. The computer, the Internet and improved telecommunications have made the world a much smaller place, and made it easier for employers to gain access to workers around the globe.

Our community is fortunate to have people who are committed to ensuring that both our young people and our current work force have the skills, so they are prepared to work in jobs that are rapidly changing. But we can do better.

Our purpose in this series was to interest the larger community in the importance of work force development. If you have any thoughts, please forward your ideas to the Lane Workforce Partnership ([www.laneworkforce.org](http://www.laneworkforce.org)). Help us advocate for programs and innovations to ensure that youth and adults in Lane County have every opportunity for success in their careers.

including apprenticeships. This year, 69 percent of Lane County manufacturers reported difficulties finding skilled production workers. To address this concern, the RV Consortium was created recently by the local recreational vehicle industry to collaborate with each other and Lane Community College for training, an internship program and curriculum development.

◆ *Are we investing in tomorrow?*

More than ever before, education, training and retraining are the keys to future employment and earnings. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, workers with a high school diploma make \$725 per week on average and have a 4.1 percent unemployment rate. But workers with a bachelor's degree or higher earn an average of \$1,408 per week and have an unemployment rate of just 2 percent.

From this perspective, the decision by Gov. Ted Kulongoski and the Oregon Legislature to increase funding for education at all levels was a major step forward for work force development, especially as the cost of new technologies and equipment escalates.

However, for more than a decade Oregon's investment in work force training has dwindled. Unfortunately, the 2007 Legislature did not approve Kulongoski's \$10 million “skill-up” funding proposal, the first of its kind. And to exacerbate the funding gap, federal money under the Workforce Investment Act decreased in recent years (\$400,000 just this year). The message to thousands of financially strapped Oregonians, including 260,000 adults

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