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Apprenticeships help bring employers, workers together

Applicants ranked by experience, test scores, education

Brad Avakian

Businesses in Oregon are having a tough time finding skilled workers. People on the job hunt often say they are having a tough time finding work. It's an apparent contradiction that has a great deal of truth to it.

Oregon is not bridging the divide between the needs of its various industry sectors and the available work force. The result is that it is more difficult for businesses to succeed and more difficult for Oregon families to make ends meet.

The Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries Apprenticeship and Training Division is a critical link in bringing the needs of employers and workers together. Apprenticeship is a combination of supervised on-the-job training and classroom instruction. It allows workers to earn money while getting the practical experience and education they need to build a career for themselves and their families.

There are about 8,000 registered apprentices in Oregon. Next to Oregon State University, University of Oregon and Portland State University, apprenticeship has the highest enrollment of any post-secondary program.

But not everyone who applies is accepted. The programs are rigorous and demand certain qualifications to enter, as well as hard work and determination to continue.

In general, applicants are ranked by test scores, work experience, education and an interview with an apprenticeship committee. Apprenticeship committees, made up of employee and employer representatives from the specific industries, operate programs and approve admission of new apprentices.

Once in, the benefits can be good: Apprentices usually earn about half of what a journey worker makes in their profession, with gradual increases as their apprenticeship continues and benefits.

Working under the direction of skilled journey workers, an apprenticeship can last one to six years, depending on the skills and technical knowledge required for the profession. More than 60 professions offer apprenticeship opportunities in Oregon, all approved by the Oregon State Apprenticeship and Training Council.

Such professions include electricians, plumbers, carpenters, cooks, police officers, machinists and many more. After earning journey worker status, the worker is in a terrific position to earn a good living for themselves and their family, have health insurance and save for retirement.

One difficulty in recent years has been the advancing age of apprentices. In the past 20 years, the average age of apprentices has risen from 19 to 28.

This trend has added to the problem of our aging work force, leading to fewer younger workers to replace retirees. This has been in part due to the elimination of career and technical education from our middle and high schools. Fewer and fewer students have had the chance to obtain pre-apprenticeship training in their public schools and begin the pathway toward a good career.

Many of the business and labor groups supporting apprenticeship have joined with BOLI in an effort

to restore these lost public school programs and strengthen the work force-development system in Oregon. If successful, the professions themselves will benefit with a steady, stable and skilled flow of workers; and workers will benefit from increased employment opportunities.

Apprenticeship is an effective way to develop a work force that brings together business, labor and education in a manner that benefits all three: Students will be more likely to do well in school and stay in Oregon when they graduate, more families will earn stable incomes, and business will thrive with a steady source of skilled workers.

As labor commissioner, I am committed to strengthening our work force-development system and apprenticeship opportunities in Oregon.

Brad Avakian is the commissioner of the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries.
