

PUBLICATIONS

Closing the Skills Gap: Advice for Parents Educators and Business

Australia has enjoyed a relatively robust economy for more than a decade. Our success, however, has created a problem: a shortage of middle-skilled workers like pipefitters, welders, heating/air conditioning technicians, electricians, carpenters, veterinarian assistants, horticulturalists, chefs, auto mechanics, medical techs, and many others. The result is job security and wage inflation for the people who have those skills, but diminished growth prospects for our economy.

Quality training and education is critical for engaging these idle hands and minds toward meaningful work. While many vacant positions require a university degree, most do not and can be filled through apprenticeship and traineeship programs. Those programs can open the door to rewarding careers and solid, middle class incomes.

Our nation will need 5.2 million new workers by 2025. Yet, given the number of young people in the pipeline who are achieving those levels, many jobs will not be filled, hamstringing business growth.

Our tight skills labour market will get worse in the years ahead as today's skilled workers march off into retirement. And owing to a decline in vocational education and inadequate career advice, the number of young people committed to skilled careers will be too few to fill their empty shoes.

One Young Person's Story

Like too many young people I meet, Jason graduated from secondary school with no practical workplace skills, experience or goals. He was rudderless during the next few years, drifting from one low-paying job to another, failing to gain traction with the world of work. He drifted along as many of his peers do, relying on a welfare cheque, and become less and less likely to land a good job or a real career.



As a beginner, Jason learned to perform a variety of mechanical chores, from simple ones, such as changing spark plugs and engine oil progressing to more skilled work with technological controls. Recently commencing his apprenticeship, Jason remains enthusiastic. Being paid to learn has brought him substantial satisfaction. "I enjoy the fact that I'm around machines all day" - Jason, apprentice

Jason's choice will not open the door to every opportunity. But if he completes his apprenticeship (a 4-year proposition) and advances over the years, his responsibilities will expand and his pay will rise. And, who knows, Jason may one day advance to the point of managing or owning an engineering service or with the benefit of greater maturity and experience, he may return to the university as an engineering student.

Successful cases such as Jason's create benefits for all: for the employee, the employer, and the community. They also put a dent in the skills gap.

Working together, we can do a lot. Government has a role to play in closing Australia's skills gap and reducing youth unemployment. For starters it should better target its incentives and payments: unemployment cheques should be smaller than those earned by first-year apprentices. The ultimate solution to close the skills gap is in the hands of parents, educators, and business owners.

Parents should get over the idea that a University pathway is the only route to a successful career—that anything involving the trades or hands-on work is a somehow a consolation prize.

Educators should provide more career counselling and look for ways to combine classroom learning with solid workplace experiences with a focus on the school to work transition. The German model for the school-to-work transition is the gold standard.

Business owners should identify their current and future skill needs, then invest in effective recruiting, training, and retention programs. In today's competitive world, human talent is the great differentiator. Apprentice and on-the-job training can give them the workforce they need to compete and prosper in an increasingly competitive global economy.

As parents and business owners we have an obligation to solve this problem. The vitality in our economy and our communities depend on a large population of vocationally skilled people who know which is the business end of a wrench and understand how to use it. Where will we be without them?

SOURCE: Wyman, N. (2013). Closing the Skills Gap: Advice for Parents, Educators and Business. Chief Executive. <http://www.coca-colajourney.com.au/careers/closing-the-skills-gap-advice-for-parents-educators-and-business>



About the Author

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