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Short-Term Solutions to the Skilled-Trades Shortage

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Worldwide, skilled trades are the hardest positions to fill, according to Manpower's "Talent Shortage Survey." This category covers a broad range of job titles that require specialized skills, traditionally learned over a period of time as an apprentice. Examples of skilled trade jobs include butchers, electricians, carpenters, cabinet makers, masons/bricklayers, plumbers, welders, etc.

The shortage of skilled trades workers stems from a number of problems, including the retirement of older blue-collar workers without adequate replacements, technical training that isn't meeting business needs, and the higher status accorded knowledge work over more manual forms of labor among those beginning their careers. It is clear that the next generation does not see itself working as operators, plumbers or electricians. Fewer than one in three 15-year-olds in Russia or Poland see themselves in a highly skilled blue-collar job by the age of 30. In other countries, interest in the skilled trades is even lower. Fewer than 12 percent of Italian teenagers, 10 percent of Americans and 8 percent of Japanese see themselves taking this career path, according to a survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The younger generations' lack of enthusiasm for the skilled trades suggests that the shortages will worsen. That means employers, governments and trade groups will need to become creative in order to develop a pipeline of skilled trades workers to keep operations humming.

Skilled blue-collar work resists one of the trends of modern global economies: sending work offshore. By and large, it is place-based work. Still, if the solution does not lie in the mobility of the actual work, it does lie — at least in part — in the mobility of workers. Some business and government leaders are already using mobility — the concept of strategic migration — to get the right skills in the right place at the right time. The easiest application of strategic migration, of course, is to find skilled workers within one's own country who are willing

to relocate for a job. When the right skills cannot be found within a country's borders, strategic migration can involve recruiting from elsewhere. For instance, some U.S. shipbuilding companies — located in towns and cities where the base of skilled labor is thinning out — have brought in experienced shipyard workers from countries like Mexico and Croatia.

Strategic migration is a practical answer to talent mismatches today. Without it, there would simply be no near-term solutions to alleviate shortages of skilled blue-collar workers. But other approaches may also be valuable, especially in the long term: increasing the supply of workers with the right skills or enhancing their mobility. Here are three areas where employers and governments should look to innovate.

Promote positive attitudes toward skilled-trades work

One of the imperatives for the stakeholders who rely on skilled labor is to find ways to emphasize the appeal of the work. At a basic level, this means promoting the career and compensation potential.

Governments, businesses and trade group leaders must take steps to reach out to students early in their education.

Align technical training with business needs

Even students who come through technical schools sometimes aren't well-prepared for the work environment. Business and trade associations must work much closer with technical educators to ensure that the classroom regimen is aligned with real-world needs so that individuals develop the relevant skills and can immediately contribute to the work force. Similarly, governments must have a clearer and more global view of where current demand is and where it will be in the future. Only then can they advise educators about what skills will be needed to meet those global business demands so that the students can prepare their career paths in anticipation of business's work force needs.

In addition, students should develop both specific technical skills and transferable "soft" skills, such as teamwork, communication and problem solving. Equally important are the attitudes that people bring to their work. For example, outgoing and empathetic people are a natural fit for customer-facing roles. Likewise, intellectual curiosity is essential to the problem-solving skills that employers really value. Individuals must also embrace life-long learning and be encouraged and supported by their employers, skilled trades associations and governments to continuously develop and upgrade their skills. This will not only improve their long-term employability, but it will also help them transfer their skills to new, emerging industries, such as renewable energy, where no such supply of workers exists.

Finally, to truly align training with market needs, businesses and governments need an accurate forecasting system that takes into account the relevant domestic, regional and global variables in order to match supply to future skill demands. Employers, skilled trades associations, governments and educators should partner in this effort, making sure to acknowledge the velocity of change and the impact of technology on particular job categories.

Develop international certifications to accelerate mobility

International certifications should be used to ensure quality standards and safety among the various skilled trades areas. If a hiring manager in the United Arab Emirates is considering an Egyptian or a Filipino pipe fitter, he naturally wants to know that he can count on that candidate to do work at a certain level of quality and to follow widely established safety procedures. Despite the fact that the requirements for labor are global, international certifications haven't really taken hold. Nations have been more focused on keeping their own bases of labor and have been concerned about who might have an upper hand in negotiations with industry groups in other countries. These sensitivities must be addressed if international certifications have any chance of becoming a global reality.

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