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Welding tools and masks are shown in a classroom at MATC's West Campus in West Allis on Monday. A shortage of welders has become a crisis that could slow large construction projects and manufacturing.

MILW JOURNAL-SENTINEL 11/16/05

Welders worry trade's spark is dying out

Shortage of newcomers threatens manufacturing

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Chicago — A shortage of welders has become a crisis that could put the brakes on large construction projects and manufacturing, industry sources said at the nation's largest trade show for welding and metal fabrication.

Employers are starting to panic because "things are really going to hit the skids" in 2008, said Dennis Klingman, technical training manager for Lincoln Electric, a welding equipment company based in Cleveland.

That's when thousands of welders are expected to retire. The shortage could worsen as a steady stream of older workers leave the

welding profession and there aren't enough young people in the pipeline to take their place, according to Klingman.

"It takes four years to produce a journeyman," he said. "In many cases, we don't have four years."

The trade show continues through today at the McCormick Place convention center. With more than 900 exhibits and 20,000 attendees, it is sponsored by the American Welding Society, the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, and the Fabricators and Manufacturers Association.

Milwaukee-area companies have lamented about a lack of welders, especially for work that requires a high level of skill and knowledge. In some cases, the shortage has created production bottlenecks at manufacturing plants.

Please see **WELDING, 2D**

Looming retirements a concern for industry

WELDING, From 1D

Construction projects including power plants, refineries, oil and natural gas pipelines are just some that rely heavily on welders, according to Klingman. Building contractors are recruiting welders from metal shops, which does not help address the overall shortage.

"Everyone is pulling from the same pool of talent," Klingman said.

Negative attitude

Society's negative attitude toward blue-collar work is largely to blame for the shortage, said Ed Norman, a welding instructor from Missouri and a member of the American Welding Society.

School guidance counselors and parents have not encouraged students to pursue careers such as welding, Norman said, because they mistakenly believe it's a dead-end job.

"But these aren't jobs that pay only \$10 an hour," Norman said. "I have young people coming right out of my program earning several thousand dollars a week" on construction projects such as power plants and pipelines.

Welding can be physically demanding, and there are no guarantees of big pay. The hours are sometimes long and sporadic. Some jobs require frequent travel.

Many welders eventually

morph into management, teaching or sales of equipment and supplies, according to Norman.

"Once you learn the skills, you can start your own company," he said. "I have been in welding for 27 years and have taught for 21 of those years."

The median pay for weld-

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ers and workers in soldering and brazing was \$14.02 an hour in 2002, according to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics data. The top 10% of the field earned more than \$21.79 an hour. The median hourly wage in motor vehicle parts manufacturing, where the most welding machine operators worked, was \$16.02.

In the Milwaukee area, it's not unusual for experienced welders to earn between \$18 and \$22 per hour, said Dorothy Walker, associate dean of manufacturing programs at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

The college offers both a one-year diploma and a two-year degree in welding. The one-year program includes about 24 hours a week of

hands-on training.

"You need a lot of time under the hood for welding," Walker said.

Lower wages, benefits

To address the shortage, the college has trained welders for companies such as Super Steel Products Corp.

"The demand for welders is really high now across the board," Walker said.

Not everyone is enthused about the profession's direction, said Mike Gerbing, a Milwaukee-area welder for more than 30 years.

"We have seen our wages and benefits decreased in the past 20 years," he said.

"When there was a shortage of engineers, they raised the starting salaries so that now there are more of them. They aren't doing that with welders."

Management often doesn't respect or value welders, according to Gerbing. "Why would we want our children or anyone else" to become welders, he asked.

Some companies have started welding classes in their factories. Others have recruited welders from overseas.

People often have to leave their hometowns to get skills that will advance their careers, Klingman said.

"But if you have a high school education and are drug free, you can get the training," he said. "People don't have to accept \$10-an-hour jobs if they are willing to work and learn something else."

At the trade show, welders from across the country competed for \$4,000 in prize money in a skills contest.

"Unfortunately, I cracked under pressure," said James Dlobik, a 19-year-old welder who works at Engineered Metal Products in Jackson.

Dlobik shrugged it off, as he had done the same weld successfully many times before. His plan is to continue as a welder and someday own his own business.

"You can see the improvements in your work," he said. "I like going from nothing on a flat piece of metal to a finished product."



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Dan Alt stick welds at Milwaukee Area Technical College's West Campus in West Allis on Monday. The power engineering student is training in welding and is hoping to get a job with Wisconsin Energy Corp.