

## PORTABLE SKILLS CERTIFICATES EMPOWER WORKERS FOR MANUFACTURING JOBS



In spite of every politician worth his salt, extolling the needs for creation of new jobs and surveys of all sizes and quality, showing that the unemployment rate continues to hover around 8 percent, it does come as a surprise to find that there are sectors where jobs are available, but not being filled. Reports say that every month there are thousands of manufacturing jobs, waiting on a platter for those with the right skills and competence, but the country lacks them. "Five percent of manufacturing jobs go unfilled every day because we can't find the skilled workforce," lamented Jay Timmons, president of the National Association of Manufacturers. At any given time, jobs that require a certain amount of skills, number 600,000. Given the rate of unemployment, constantly hovering around 8 percent, and the number of jobless looking for work, it is an ironically high number. The vacancies are in skilled production positions, where positions for machinists, production operators and technicians are open. Employers say that there just aren't enough workers who have the requisite skills to attend to machinery and do simple mathematics. To make matters worse, there is a very high rate of absenteeism. In an effort to narrow down this gap of unfilled posts, a couple of years ago, manufacturers started a nationally recognized portable skills certificate. An individual with such a certificate was eligible to land a job anywhere in America, be it California, Missouri, Illinois or Carolinas. The Trade association, along with the Manufacturing Institute had targeted issuing 500,000 such certificates by 2016. Martha Webb-Jones, senior manager-employment at Spirit AeroSystems in Wichita, Kan., said, "Our (employee) retention has improved. We're trying to build what we call a stable workforce in what is a cyclical industry," said Webb-Jones. Sandra Westlund-Deenihan, president of Quality Float Works Inc., in Schaumburg, Ill. said, "This issue really became important to me ... several years ago when I noticed how the skills levels for students (had) dropped," she said, lamenting that so few job applicants can pass a sixth-grade math exam and fewer are trained in calibration. "I've seen the workforce change dramatically. There are fewer workers available with the skills required." In 2011, the Manufacturing Institute's Manufacturing Skills Certification System yielded almost 85,000 of the portable certificates that the group hopes to have recognized nationwide. That's almost one-fifth of the goal. The system, by which the student earns the certificate, is called "stackable" secondary education. The "stackable" skills certificates cover everything from welding and applied math to comprehensible understanding of metalworking, packaging, construction, electronics and die casting. The timing of the program could not have been better. Manufacturing is returning to US shores, from China and other Asian countries. In the US there are thirty-six states that are participating at one level or another in the portable skills certificate. Thirty-six states now have some level of participation in the portable skills certificate effort. In Missouri, the state's sole technical college – Linn State Technical College – is a big believer in the training effort. "We've seen an influx of employers," said Victoria Schwinke, dean of academic affairs. Not only are the colleges supporting the program, even the high schools are involved in encouraging and sustaining the portable skills certification. "It takes a lot more training for that entry-level employee," said Michael Rogg, director of career and technical education for Special School District. Most kids coming to South Tech go on to post-secondary studies. Many also go straight into decent-paying manufacturing jobs, he said.