

CT energy industry facing workforce shortages

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PHOTO | STEVE LASCHEVER

Tunxis' new energy management program is trying to help fill a workforce shortage in the state. Shown (from left) are instructor Dave Bebrin, a senior engineer at Eversource, and students Brad Charron, Peter Kenefick and Kyle Kalisz.

Connecticut's aging workforce is causing another industry headaches: Energy.

The state's graying workforce and a lack of technical skills are the biggest barriers to meeting increased demand for energy workers in the state, according to a new survey published Friday by the Connecticut Business and Industry Association.

With rising national attention on energy efficiency and renewable energy, businesses in Connecticut are seeing increased demand for qualified workers in the energy sector, the survey said. Currently, there are 63,000 jobs in the energy industry at 5,600 businesses in Connecticut.

Of the 62 businesses surveyed, 56 percent plan to hire in the next 12 months, 82 percent in the next three years, and 61 percent within five years.

But more than half of respondents (57 percent) said they have difficulties acquiring entry-level workers for jobs related to energy and energy efficiency activities — in particular, HVAC and plumbing.

"The state has responded robustly to the needs of the manufacturing sector," said Andrea Comer, vice president of workforce strategies of the CBIA Education & Workforce Partnership. "While the need in terms of numbers in the energy sector may not be as high, the aging of the workforce is just as real. We must be committed to ensuring that all businesses in the state have the talent pipeline needed to thrive and contribute to our economy's health."

The 2017 Survey of Connecticut Energy & Energy Efficiency Workforce Needs was commissioned by the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and developed in collaboration with the CBIA Education & Workforce Partnership.

The largest share of energy employees work in high-efficiency HVAC and renewable heating and cooling firms, followed by traditional HVAC.

The biggest barriers related to hiring these employees include lack of required technical skills/certifications (73 percent) and basic career competencies such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving (45 percent).

To overcome Connecticut's entry-level energy and energy efficiency hiring challenges, CBIA and DEEP recommend the following:

- State regional workforce development boards should provide entry-level training in the energy sector for unemployed and underemployed individuals.
- Work-based learning programs that partner with the Connecticut technical high school system should provide training for in-demand energy efficiency positions.
- Support the establishment of a Connecticut Department of Labor apprenticeship program for the energy sector, similar to those funded for manufacturing, health care, and business services.
- Invest in community college-based stackable certificate and associate degree programs to fill gaps in training for entry-level and career changing employees in the practical skills needed by energy auditors, analysts, and building automation technicians.
- Replicate education programs that enhance 21st century soft skills.