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Apprenticeship programs give employers competitive advantage

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Something old is new again. Apprenticeships, an ideal means to train future workers, have been around for centuries throughout the world. A formal statewide apprenticeship system was created in California back in 1939. Yet today, apprenticeships do not readily come to mind as people plan for careers or employers look for skilled workers. That mindset is beginning to change and not a moment too soon.

The labor force, especially in the construction and electrical trades, is facing a worker shortage. Baby boomers are retiring. Trade technology classes are not being offered in many high schools. At the same time, our city, state and national infrastructure is crumbling. Where are we going to find the skilled workers to fill the jobs that are needed? That's where apprenticeships come in and where businesses can help.

Offering apprenticeships is a smart business move. Working directly with employers, apprentices become highly skilled in their field. They are productive and motivated. In fact, the Department of Labor cites studies indicating that, for every dollar spent on an apprenticeship, an employer receives an average of \$1.47 back in increased worker productivity.

Apprenticeships now are growing beyond the traditional labor trades. In June, Gov. Jerry Brown earmarked \$15 million for new apprenticeship programs in health care, advanced manufacturing, information technology and renewable energy. Nearly \$37 million of the state's 2015 budget went to apprenticeships. Nationally, businesses like CVS, Time Warner Cable and Zurich Insurance North America are using this model, noting its flexibility to address employer needs and develop a pipeline of trained employees. To qualify for state and federal assistance to help fund an apprenticeship program, businesses must register with the California Department of Apprenticeship Standards.

The federal government is also lending a hand to cover training costs, offering \$175 million in American apprenticeship grants to help businesses in all types of industries invest in apprenticeship programs. California can expect to get a big chunk of those funds because the state has more than 62,000 registered apprentices, training more workers through apprenticeships than any other state in the country.

Most apprenticeships last three to five years, depending on the trade. Apprentices work during the day under the guidance of a mentor and go to school at night or on weekends. The goal is to recruit, train and retain skilled workers. Once a program is completed, many apprentices receive certifications or licenses. Employers now have highly skilled, knowledgeable workers who enable their company to stay competitive.

Under state law, all contracted public works projects (those that are bided out to maintain roads, schools and other public property) must employ 20 percent of its workforce from a California state-approved apprenticeship program. California SB 54 calls for all workers who are employed on refineries and related facilities to be paid hourly prevailing wages and that a percentage of the journeymen performing the work be graduates of a California state-approved apprenticeship program or a federal government approved out-of-state program. About one-third of Ventura County's Laborers' International Union Local 585 members are apprenticeship trained.

Most apprenticeships require only that the applicant have a driver's license, have a high school diploma (or GED), be 18 or older, and be drug free. Some require high school or college level math, particularly algebra. Applicants can be eligible right out of high school — or even people who want a fresh start in a new career. Apprenticeship programs through local unions have fast tracks for veterans and programs for early release offenders and disadvantaged youth. All applicants must go through a rigorous interview and testing process.

Men and women who are selected as apprentices make good starting salaries. Electrician apprentices, for example, start at almost \$17 an hour plus benefits, including health care for family members as well as a pension after a five-year vesting period. Once trained, the hourly rate can reach more than \$40 an hour, with increases along the way. That's a living wage. Many recent college graduates don't make that much. Through firsthand experience, we have found that apprentices are committed to their jobs — they are on time, work hard and work together to get a job done well.

Apprenticeships are gaining momentum. Men and women are skilled and ready to work. The funding is there. All we need now is more employers to offer the opportunity.

For information about creating an apprenticeship program at your business and the grant application process, contact the workforce development board of your county or go to the California Department of Apprenticeship Standards website, www.dir.ca.gov/das/.

• *Anthony Mireles is president/business representative of Laborers' International Union of North America Local 585. Tony Skinner is executive secretary-treasurer for the Tri-Counties Business & Construction Trades Council. Both are members of the Workforce Development Board of Ventura County.*

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