



A Shift-Shaping Job Market — Can We Fill All the Jobs?

The challenge of aligning the skills of Westchester's workforce with the needs of today's emerging jobs and careers



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Examiner+ NEWS + ISSUES

Good morning! Today is Monday, March 14, and you are reading today's section of Examiner+, a digital newsmagazine serving Westchester, Putnam, and the surrounding Hudson Valley.



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Help Wanted

- Health Care Assistant, Pharmacy Technician, Dental Assistant, Home Health Aide | **Skills:** Patient Education, Data Entry, Physician Relation
- Web Developer, Full Stack Engineer | **Skills:** Computer literacy, Excellent problem-solving skills
- Machine Learning Engineer, Artificial Intelligence Specialist
Skills: Database management and information retrieval

The labor market in this country has been a fast-changing landscape from high unemployment during the pandemic, then swerving to an overflowing job market with some

10.6 million job openings in this country. Today, the national unemployment rate is hovering around 4.0% and seems to be dropping; in Westchester, it's about 3.7%.

But what about all the folks quitting their jobs in unprecedented numbers? Last November, the number of people who voluntarily left their jobs spiked to a record 4.5 million — and that was in just one month according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. What's that about? Reasons for those walking out are unreasonably low wages, poor working conditions, no career path, and no benefits. The message from workers: we want better jobs with decent pay and jobs that have a future.

The Ballooning Skills Gap

Adjusting to the evolving, post-pandemic workforce are groups who have come together to create new employment opportunities and training programs. The challenge: to reimagine what today's workforce development really looks like — what are the skill gaps and what areas of expertise are needed. Here in the Hudson Valley several organizations and educational institutions have been at the drawing board for the last year designing accessible and affordable training programs geared towards landing people in good-paying jobs with career advancement.

The Westchester County Office of Economic Development has partnered with Westchester Community College to offer an Advanced Manufacturing Career Training Program which helps individuals with little or no prior manufacturing experience on the path to a highly skilled, well-paying, and in-demand career. Enrollment started at the end of Jan. 2022.

Enrollment in short-term workforce programs at Westchester Community College is ongoing in courses leading to credentials in IT, Healthcare, Advanced Manufacturing, and other in-demand areas. Most programs are six months or less in length. Many students may be eligible for tuition and fee scholarships thanks to public and private funding.

Many of the WCC courses are virtual, attracting those who want to learn a new skill and keep working; virtual classes also help students progress at their own pace and a loaner laptop program is available for participants who may need them.

Ivan Woodard was enrolled in the WCC Workforce Development Program last spring. A Dobbs Ferry resident, Woodard received a Pepsico scholarship available as part of the Advanced Manufacturing Career Training Program, funds that paid for all his courses. Woodard took the three-part series of courses teaching Python programming, a scripting

language that allows you to manage web servers. “The biggest thing WCC has going for it is that the professors are actual professionals working in the field and they are very accessible,” Woodard explains. “Having someone there to hold your hand is a huge deal when learning new technical skills because you have to get it right.”

The program offers a variety of skills from creating products using computers, robotics, 3D printing, and mastering the basics of safety, quality, manufacturing processes, and green production. The program also offers opportunities to see first-hand how things work inside some of Westchester’s advanced manufacturing firms. Upon completion, participants will hold a Manufacturing Skill Standards Council (MSSC) CPT 4.0 Certification.

“This program is a great opportunity for individuals who are interested in technology, open to learning new skills and looking for good jobs that pay well to become candidates for in-demand careers,” says Bridget Gibbons, Westchester County Director of Economic Development. “Manufacturing processes have changed so much over the years – from the integration of robotics to artificial intelligence (AI) – and the career training provides an introduction to these exciting technologies as well as industry basics.”

In Westchester, advanced manufacturing is diverse, extensive and includes PTI (Packaging Technologies & Inspection) which is a leading equipment manufacturer of package inspection equipment; Micromold Products, which manufactures plastic fluid handling products; Metalized Carbon Corp., which focuses on self-lubricating machinery components; Bantam Tools, which manufactures desktop milling machines used to make printed circuit boards and aluminum parts; and Magnetic Analysis Corp., which has been advancing the science and technology behind nondestructive testing for over 90 years.



(Getty Images)

New Skills Training Programs

Across the river, Rockland Community College has expanded its Career Skills Academy. Jean M. Leandre, the Academy's Dean of Career and Professional Development says they started offering courses and programs as part of their 'stackable' career paths. "We can offer a course to become an EMT paramedic with a seamless transfer of credits to advance into a nursing program. Other programs offer short-term credentials that could lead to employment and a career where the starting salary is about \$40K and up — the living wage in the mid-Hudson Valley."

One big skills gap realized by RCC's Career Skills Academy is the national shortage of commercial truck drivers. Last month RCC partnered with Ancora Corporate Training, based in Arlington, Texas, to manage a portfolio of new courses that includes training for a commercial driver's license (CDL) Class A. According to Indeed.com, there are more than 5,000 job openings for full-time, entry-level drivers in Rockland County alone with an average starting salary of \$70,000. Other Ancora skilled training programs offered at the academy include web development, app development, mechatronics, and wireless technician training.

The cost to enroll in the one-month CDL program is \$5,500, but students who qualify for assistance can take the course for free. “I’m very optimistic about the 14 new training programs at the academy,” says Leandre. “By May we will have a group graduating from these new programs.”

In addition to adding new training programs, RCC has partnered with Lumen Learning, a Portland, Oregon-based company that specializes in a variety of virtual interactive learning tools and affordable digital content — the substitute for expensive print textbooks. Described as an equity-centered design process, the focus is to understand the impasses and roadblocks students face, especially among Black and Latina students. The RCC/ Lumen Learning program includes actual students who point out learning problems, leading to better-designed learning tools and programs.

“If you want to go into nursing, you have to have writing and math and most students have a hard time passing those courses,” says Stephen Burke, RCC’s Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities who is overseeing the Lumen Learning project. “We can identify ways to learn from the students themselves and then design the material to lessen that learning gap so it’s more equitable and students can get the right background training they need when seeking jobs.”

Helping Women of Color

Women of color in the workforce were the hardest hit during the pandemic, losing their jobs at a much higher rate than White men and women. At the beginning of 2021, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Black women’s unemployment rate was 8.5 percent, Latinas’ was 8.8 percent, while the rate was 5.1 percent for White women.

Many women of color worked for industries that were forced to shut down during the pandemic including the hospitality, restaurants, retail, and education industries. Many unemployed Black and Latina women living in the Hudson Valley started to reevaluate their working status and seriously considered becoming entrepreneurs. The Women’s Enterprise Development Center (WEDC), in White Plains and Poughkeepsie became the go-to non-profit organization for women from BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

For those women interested in starting a new business, WEDC helped them develop new business plans. “Woman who had hobbies and skills that could be turned into a viable business came to us for guidance in exploring the prospect of being a small business owner,”

says WEDC's CEO Nikki Hahn. "We helped them think through different business models and be realistic about possible outcomes."

WEDC offers free online courses to help build women's skills in how to negotiate, marketing, presentation, social media, and technology. Core to their program is a 60-Hour comprehensive business training program that includes three-hour weekly training sessions that teaches financing and how to create a marketing and business plan. The program is taught in English and Spanish. Pre-pandemic, the program cost \$250 and was held in computer labs at libraries. During the pandemic, the course was made available online and cost \$60. "This is not an easy class but we want clients to have skin in the game," Hahn says. "Most clients are afraid to talk about money and they don't know how to price themselves. But personal and financial literacy is what's needed most."

Among the many businesses WEDC helps are those owning traditional storefronts that rely on personal interactions. Especially helpful was when WEDC received a grant for Chromebooks and distributed them to their clients, paving the way for their businesses to have an online presence and to sell their goods on platforms such as Etsy, Square, and Shopify. It helped to keep their businesses going. Having access to the internet also was key to getting trained. "We gave out a significant number of Chromebooks," Hahn recalls. "They were a great help for technical training and helped those in health and fitness teach classes by Zoom so they could stay in business."

During the pandemic, Hahn realized that there were some businesses that were doing very well. "We helped start a Hudson Valley cleaning company and they began to do incredibly well. They expanded their business — they were striking while the iron was hot. Some businesses leverage what they can and have been successful."



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Vital Connections for Underutilized Workers

“There is a large group of underutilized workers that include veterans, immigrants, those with disabilities, minorities, ex-offenders, recovering addicts, youth and subgroups,” says Jason Chapin, Director of Workforce Development at the Westchester County Association (WCA), a 70-year old organization that connects numerous Westchester businesses and advocacy groups who help people find work. The jewel in WCA’s toolbox is their resource center with a vast list of training and learning programs to help job seekers as well as support service members who work in childcare, transportation, housing, and healthcare.

“With WCA’s tremendous resource career center, we try to bring those groups already working with the underutilized population together with our 300 workforce members who can provide training and placement,” Chapin says. He specifically names WCA members who have been exemplary — the Westchester Jewish Community Services and the Guidance Center of Westchester. “These and other members of WCA have been integral in recruiting, training, and have helped place people in jobs. It’s been a great part of the solution.”

WCA has an impressive track record. In 2014 Westchester County was awarded a Ready to Work grant worth almost \$10 million by the U.S. Dept. of Labor and WCA was tapped to oversee the Jobs Training Program, a four-year program that ultimately trained and placed 345 long-term unemployed job seekers and 75 healthcare workers to ‘upskill,’ and keep them in the industry. “From 2015 to 2019 we provided job training to over 500 job seekers and almost 400 of them were placed in jobs,” Chapin says. “Nearly 130 healthcare workers received upskill training.”

Partnering with Chapin on the Jobs Training Program and several other employment projects was Thom Kleiner, now Director of the Westchester-Putnam Workforce Development Board (WPWDB), an organization made up of local businesses, state and county government agencies, non-profits, and public education who focus on finding jobs and training for the unemployed. WPWDB oversees One-Stop Career Centers in White Plains, Yonkers, Mount Vernon, Peekskill, and Carmel.

“The Mount Vernon and Yonkers centers are involved with re-entry programs for people involved with a crime by helping with job placement,” says Kleiner. “Governor Hochul’s state gun violence prevention initiative is ongoing and has targeted certain localities to try to get people employed.”

The state initiative is designed to serve unemployed, under-employed and out-of-school youth between the ages of 18 and 24 living in areas impacted by high rates of gun violence.

Health Care Jobs

The vast shortage of healthcare workers since the start of the pandemic has been debilitating for Hudson Valley hospitals, clinics, and rehabilitation centers. If there are workers that are highly skilled, it is a challenge to keep them employed. A solution surfaced in the Earn While You Learn Program put into practice in 2016 by WCA and one of their partners, White Plains Hospital.

A staff survey showed what positions were lacking at the hospital and training for those positions was offered to workers currently employed at WPH. “We allow those in the program to keep working and get paid even while they are attending school,” says Diane Woolley, SVP, Chief Human Resource Officer at White Plains Hospital. “The jobs could be for a scrub or respiratory technician and depending on the program, if there are eight hours of classes a week, they work for 32 hours but get paid for the same weekly rate for 40 hours.”

On average the Earn While You Learn Program runs about 2 ½ years. Off-campus schools involved in upskill training include Pace University, the clinical lab at Mercy College, WCC, and a school in New York City. WPH pays the schools directly and they do offer tuition reimbursement and tuition assistance if needed. Hands-on training happens at the hospital. Woolley explains that hospital employees in the program have to commit to continuing to work in the hospital. “If they go to school for two years then it’s twice that they commit to working for us, or four years. We recruit from within and grow our talent.”

At WPH the Earn While You Learn program has seen five employees graduate and eight employees are currently in the program.

Now that the worst of the pandemic is over, outreach to train and hire people are ramping up with more in-person job fairs and broad marketing campaigns. Many target 18-24 year-olds by offering them alternatives to college such as paid job training or access to programs teaching a myriad of new, 21st-century skill sets.

“One of the big differences in outreach today is social media,” says WCA’s Jason Chapin.

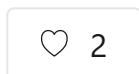
“There are more sophisticated ways of communicating and teaching with online videos and pictures and different ways to market opportunities and learning programs. Everyone is using it.”

It’s still too early to tell what the overall impact of these new, rolled-out programs and initiatives will be. Hopefully, there will be a declining turnover rate and an increasing number of new hires. The future depends on these programs’ degree of success and if the current grand-scale efforts to educate and offer essential training will reap benefits for both workers and Hudson Valley industries. The best scenario for job seekers: a guarantee for better-paying jobs and a position with a promising career path that will help the growing diverse community of workers have security in the future.

Abby Luby is a writer and journalist living in the Hudson Valley. She currently writes for The Examiner and has written for The New York Daily News, SolveClimateNews, The Villager, The Real Deal, and the Record Review (www.abbyluby.com). Her feature writing on food and on the arts has been published in Hook Magazine, Valley Table Magazine, Edible Hudson Valley, Roll Magazine, Living@HomeCT, the Poughkeepsie Journal, The Stamford Advocate/Greenwich

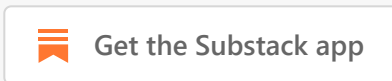
Time. *Luby* began writing creative non-fiction and poetry eight years ago. Her published short stories appear in the literary journals [Parhelion](#) and [Persimmon Tree](#).

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