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Michigan must ready itself for jobs

Lines of people - whether waiting for bread or for an opportunity for a scarce job - are iconic images of the Great Depression. So, in modern times, economic shocks invariably prompt media outlets to present the technicolor versions of these images of pain and uncertainty.

The opening of a Wild Wing Cafe site in Okemos recently brought the prospect of up to 120 jobs - and, on cue, a long line of people ready to vie for them.

But these images are actually misleading at this time in mid-Michigan. For every long line of discouraged applicants, there is a tale of good jobs going unfilled.

Call them the victims of Michigan's insufficient investment in human capital.

Doug Stites, who runs Capital Area Michigan Works, has been a local Cassandra on job skills for quite a long time. He argues that the local economy produces jobs, but they are all too often jobs that require high levels of skill or education.

Contacted last month, Stites and his staff offered up TechSmith and Franklin Energy as just two area employers that have received many applications, but not enough from those equipped to do the work.

While the contrast is not as distinct as before the general economic decline, Stites says IT (information tech), health care and engineering remain large fields where the local need is not being met by the local supply of skilled people.

Data from michigan.gov validate the analysis. Unemployment rates for those with just a high school diploma were more than double that for those holding a bachelor's degree or better - and that was back in the salad days of 2003.

The Granholm administration began its run in 2003 saying and doing all the right things. It formed a high-level panel to study the education issue. It made a priority of increasing the percentage of college degree-holders in Michigan, a state traditionally below the national average on that score.

But the collapse of Michigan manufacturing and the resulting effects on the state economy and the state budget have disrupted the focus. A state short of college grads is now looking to reduce scholarships as a loophole to cut higher education funding.

That "policy" leads nowhere.

Either Michigan will find ways to rapidly educate more of its workers, thereby filling current openings and drawing in more employers seeking such workers, or it will become a smaller state, with the long lines headed out the exits.

A Michigan of 10 million people built on an economy that was comfortable with lots of people with a high school diploma is no more. It's vital to accept that fact - and build state policies to meet it.
