



KURT HEGRE / THE FRESNO BEE

Industrial Technology instructor Wendy Smith teaches basic grammar and math skills for a class at Goodwill Industries in Fresno. The class is part of a training program at Goodwill that teaches the skills people need to work in the warehouse and distribution industry, which is expanding in the Valley.

Jobless dilemma: "What can I do?"

More Valley workers are seeking the answer with the help of job-training and placement services as a tough economy forces companies to downsize.

By Sanford Nax / The Fresno Bee

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More people are seeking out training programs in the central San Joaquin Valley as the tough economy forces companies to downsize.

The number of people receiving job-training and placement services through Goodwill Industries increased 52% through July compared with the same period last year, said Sally Wooden, director of public relations and development.

More of them are older than traditional students, leading organizers to conclude that they were laid off from their last job. The jobless rate in Fresno County last month was 9.7%, up more than two percentage points from a year earlier.

"We're seeing an increase in the average age" of clients, said Linda Hightower, Goodwill's marketing and resource coordinator.

Other organizations are reporting similar trends. Valley community colleges reported jumps in fall semester enrollments, the Career Advancement Academy at Fresno City College tripled participation over six months and the state Labor and Workforce Development Agency, responding to demand, is targeting laid-off workers from hard-hit industries such as construction, mortgage lending and real-estate financing.

Gov. Schwarzenegger has committed \$10.5 million to help displaced construction and finance workers "talent transfer" to other careers, said Paul Feist, a spokesman for the Workforce Development Agency.

"What can I do?" is a common question for people unexpectedly thrust into the job market. The Employment Development Department offers possible answers. It has on its Web site lists of careers that require similar skills.

Real-estate appraisers, for example, have similar skills to buyers for wholesalers and retailers. Or they can become claims examiners, cost estimators, customer service representatives or licensing examiners and inspectors.

Getting new skills

In Fresno, the Career Advancement Academy at Fresno City College offers 18-week and 27-week training for entry-level jobs in automotive, welding and computer-aided manufacturing. The academy also incorporates a strong dose of English and math tailored to the specific program.

From there, students can get a job and move up through the ranks, or advance to more detailed programs at the college. The objective: provide jobs in industries with a shortage of workers, said Vicki Pontius, academy director.

"Skilled technicians are retiring, and high schools are dropping vocational programs," she said. "We've worked with business and industry to determine what kind of skills are necessary."

Welders, executive secretaries, truck drivers and industrial machinery mechanics are some of the workers needed in the Valley, according to the state Employment Development Department.

Matching skills to the available work force is key. The issue is not a shortage of jobs, said Blake Konczal, director of the Fresno County Workforce Investment Board, but rather finding employees who have the necessary skills.

"It's work to find employees," said Michael Kelton, chief executive officer of Inland Star, a Fresno warehouse and shipping center. "It's almost a constant deal."

Goodwill programs expand

Students in Goodwill's new Industrial Technology program have visited Inland Star and other businesses as part of their coursework. The agency started the Industrial Technology training to complement its office technology, retail sales and janitorial programs in May.

The course equips people to work in the warehouse and distribution industry, which is expanding in the Valley. Students learn how to load pallets, pick orders (by pretending to assemble parts for an airplane), and navigate an assembly line.

That industry is growing because businesses that ship by private-parcel service can reach much of California within a day's drive from the Fresno and Visalia region. The training was requested by experts who work with Goodwill.

"We wanted to add a class that would offer the most opportunities," Hightower said.

Paul Whitley, 39, and Landale Hill, 25, enrolled in the Industrial Technology program because the work appeals to them. "It looked interesting," said Whitley, who will be one of seven graduates of the first class. He said he is picking up some additional social skills along the way.

Hill said he doesn't want a desk job, so the activity of a warehouse interests him.

"It keeps me on my feet and keeps me moving," he said. "There is a lot more to being in a warehouse than I thought. It is a living and breathing entity."

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Paul Whitley pulls a stack of boxes from a warehouse at Goodwill Industries in Fresno. Whitley is part of the Industrial Technology program at Goodwill.



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Inspirational words line the walls of a classroom at Goodwill Industries in Fresno during a training class. The agency is expanding such programs.


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WHERE TO GO

* Goodwill Industries of the San Joaquin Valley Inc.	6437 N. Blackstone Ave	Fresno; 559-224-0162; www.goodwill-sjv.org	
* Career Advancement Academy	Applied Technology Center	Fresno City College; 499-6024; Orientations: 11 a.m. Wednesdays	Room T100.
* Employment Development Department	http://www.edd.cahwnet.gov/		