

# Oregon lacks workers, especially for high demand positions

By BRITTANY NORTON  
East Oregonian

The good news is Oregon's unemployment numbers are the lowest they've been in recent history. The bad news is now the state lacks enough workers to fill job openings.

According to a report released by the Oregon Employment Department, there were a large number of difficult-to-fill job vacancies in Oregon in 2017. The report says there were 60,700 job vacancies at any given time in 2017, and over half of these were classified as "difficult to fill" — mainly due to lack of applicants. Other reasons employers listed vacancies as difficult to fill included unfavorable working conditions, a lack of soft skills like showing up on time, and lack of experience.

"Right now there are a lot of job opportunities, and I'm not sure everyone feels that way because they're not looking at the data," said state employment economist Nick Beleiciks.

The Eastern Oregon region, including Umatilla, Morrow, Union, Wallowa, Grant, Baker, Malheur and Harney counties, had 1,424 difficult-to-fill vacancies, which accounts for about 62 percent of all job vacancies in the region. Truck drivers, carpenters, personal care aides, construction laborers, farmworkers and restaurant cooks topped the list of occupations.

The report noted that Oregon "has enjoyed solid job growth and record low unemployment over the past few years," so it is to be expected that some jobs go unoccupied.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Oregon's unemployment rate is 4.1 percent, which



File photo by E.J. Harris

Crews contracted by the Wenaha Group work on the Hawthorne School in 2014 in Pendleton. Carpenters are among the difficult-to-fill jobs that make up the majority of vacancies in Eastern Oregon.

is at its lowest point on records dating back to 1976. The report estimates that Oregon's total employment will grow by 12 percent by 2027. The private health care industry will lead the way in job growth with the health care sector creating about one out of every five new jobs in Oregon by 2027. Construction is projected to be the second-fastest growing industry at 17 percent, due to population and economic growth and low vacancy rates across most of the state.

According to Beleiciks, lack of job seekers could hinder the growth of some businesses.

"We hear from construction workers that they'd like to take on more jobs, but they just can't find enough workers in order to commit

to those new jobs," he said. "I think construction is a pretty easy example where you can see them not building that next house because the staff that they have is already busy."

Beleiciks says the trend of young adults choosing to pursue bachelor's degrees, and thus forgo trade professions, is a common sentiment he hears, but there is more to the story.

"Another aspect of it is, are there enough training programs to meet the needs of the industry or the young people who do want to get into the trades? Are there enough opportunities for them to learn this skill?" He said there are programs being introduced to provide Oregon residents with skills training that are necessary qualifications for these jobs.

In early 2018, Governor Kate Brown launched the Future Ready Oregon initiative that aims to prepare the workforce in two ways. The first is preparing the future workforce, such as kids in school or adults changing careers or just entering the workforce. The second is preparing the current workforce, which encompasses those who are looking for a path to a better job.

According to Shalee Hodges, initiative manager for Future Ready Oregon, the program hopes to expand opportunities for apprenticeships beyond construction trades and into information technology, health care and manufacturing. It also plans on holding industry roundtables with employers from food processing, construction and

manufacturing industries to hear what their hiring challenges are.

Hodges said there are many reasons employers have a hard time hiring people, including lack of workforce skills.

"Part of what I think we need to do is focus on people who haven't really worked or haven't been successful in work," she said. "And supporting them in removing the barriers that they have in their lives and really becoming successful and becoming self-sufficient."

Closer to home, Blue Mountain Community College collaborates with community partners to evaluate workforce gaps. The college has advisory committees that are composed of about 50 percent community partners — such as business leaders — that represent what employers are looking for in workers. There also are apprenticeship and cooperative internship programs that allow students to gain real world experience and learn what skills are important for entering the workforce.

Mary Jeanne Kuhar, vice president of instruction at BMCC, says the college is always looking for new opportunities to provide to students. An example is the data center technician program, which was implemented because there were job openings in Boardman. Related opportunities continued to grow, and local employers said they needed more students, so the college expanded the program.

As for Oregonians who are currently searching for jobs: Beleiciks has some advice.

"One thing that really stood out [in the report] is employers are looking for previous work experience," he said. "I like to point this out when people are searching for a job: to highlight the related work experience — whatever they have."

## SpaceX launches AI robot, strong coffee for station crew

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A SpaceX rocket that flew just two months ago with a NASA satellite roared back into action Friday, launching the first orbiting robot with artificial intelligence and other station supplies.

The used Falcon rocket blasted off before dawn, hauling nearly 6,000 pounds of cargo including the spherical AI bot named Cimon, genetically identical mice and super-caffeinated coffee for the crew of the International Space Station.

The shipment — packed into a Dragon capsule that's also recycled — should reach the station Monday.

It was an especially gorgeous launch, delighting spectators as the rocket plume expanded in the clear night sky like a giant halo



Red Huber/Orlando Sentinel via AP

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket launches just before dawn Friday at Launch Complex 40 at Cape Canaveral, Fla.

beneath a nearly full moon and a gleaming Mars.

SpaceX's Jessica Jensen described the high-altitude plume, illuminated against the dark sky, as "the space jellyfish that's coming down

after us." "I was going to say breathtaking, but maybe awakening might be a better word," said NASA's space station program manager, Kirk Shireman.

## Rogers Toyota receives recognition

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