

# Turn of the Screw

In Tepid Job Scene, Certain Workers Are in Hot Demand

'Swiss-Style' Machinists Doing Ultra-Precise Tasks Typify Shortage of Skills

Mr. Schrader Gets Courted

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HOLYOKE, Mass. -- Two years ago, Robert Schrader got a call from a recruiter trying to lure him from his job in New Hampshire to opportunities as far away as Florida. He eventually took a new position in Massachusetts, after he had negotiated a raise, an expense-paid move and better health coverage. Since then, his old boss in New Hampshire has tried to woo him back.

Mr. Schrader isn't a hotshot young executive with a Harvard MBA. He's a machinist.

That group in recent times has been associated more with unemployment lines than with the corporate recruiting circuit. But Mr. Schrader isn't your average blue-collar worker. He is a "Swiss style" machinist, a specialty developed more than a century ago to make tiny, very precise gears and shafts for the European watch industry. More recently, Swiss-style machining has been married with advanced computer technology to become essential in the precision manufacture of a wide range of products, from bone screws to roller balls for Bic pens. Mr. Schrader's employer in Holyoke, Marox Corp., makes medical implants and instruments.

The steady flow of skilled immigrants who once filled many top craftsman jobs has dried up. The result is that at a time when many U.S. industrial jobs have been lost to low-cost countries such as China, American factories have a shortage of certain highly skilled workers. Other hot factory skills include some types of specialty welding and workers adept at programming the latest computerized production machinery. Mr. Schrader and others like him are part of a new working-class elite in such demand that some employers are even offering signing bonuses of a few thousand dollars. The shortage comes at a bad time for U.S. manufacturers, who are finally seeing an upswing in business. If they can't find the skilled workers they need, many companies could ultimately find it tougher to remain players in globally competitive markets.

Since the latest machinery is increasingly available in many other parts of the world as well, "the only way to keep a competitive edge is by having the skilled people who know how to get the most out of those machines," says Stephen Mandes, executive director of the National Institute of Metalworking Skills, a group that sets worker skill standards.

Some companies are already turning away business for lack of expert workers. Accu-Swiss Inc., which makes specialized metal parts for medical and defense industries, has turned down between 10% and 20% of potential business this year for lack of Swiss-style machinists to staff its factory, says Sohel Sareshwala, president of the Oakdale, Calif., company.