

Workforce Institute helps displaced workers

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When you lose your job or are tired of working for someone else, when the bills pile up and the old skills become obsolete, what do you do? You look for ways to reinvent yourself. You acquire new skills, invest your time and effort in mastering a new trade. You summon up the courage to start your own business, something you wanted to do all along.

The Great Recession has forced many displaced workers to review their career goals. One institution helping them acquire new skills in California's Silicon Valley is the [Workforce Institute](#) (WI) of San Jose. In alliance with the San Jose/Evergreen Community College District since 1988, WI offers vocational courses that lead to high probability of employment.

Recently, for instance, WI offered a Project Management Professional (PMP) exam preparation course for some workers at NUMMI, the automobile plant in Fremont that closed its doors on 31st March, resulting in the loss of close to 4,000 jobs. Many local employers include it in their list of minimum requirements for project management positions. Those participating in the WI course, launched on March 8th for 7½ weeks at 20 hours per week, are getting a head-start in PMP certification, thanks to the quality of the WI program and the speed with which it was organized. As of the 4th week of the program, there has not been a single dropout from the initial group of 32 students.

In collaboration with the largest water utilities in Santa Clara County, including San Jose Water Company, Santa Clara Valley Water District and the City of San Jose's Environmental Services, Workforce Institute has also developed an industry-validated Water Distribution/Treatment Plant Operator Certificate Program. Local water utilities have indicated that they anticipate job opportunities over the next 5 years as their aging workforce retires. Employees at San Jose Water Company, for instance, are encouraged to pursue their career growth with an annual tuition reimbursement of \$3,000. WI's program has been developed to prepare students to achieve Distribution (D2) Certification and Treatment (T-1) certification. Local industries have confirmed that student's applying for entry level positions with these certifications will have a distinct edge over other applicants.

But perhaps nowhere is the Workforce Institute's effort more visible than in the Solar Installation Certification Program it has recently developed. Prospects for clean energy workers and experts have never looked brighter. In this particular program that began on April 12, students learn the foundational skills of solar installation. These include solar photovoltaic (PV) power systems and their installations, with labs that offer hands-on experience with a variety of systems used by the industry. The course prepares students for the North American Board of Certified Energy Professionals (NABCEP) exam. This certification is an industry-recognized demonstration of basic knowledge, comprehension and application of key terms and concepts of PV system operations. Certified students will find their employment in energy careers considerably enhanced.

A discussion with the solar installation students reveals that they are interested in launching their own solar businesses. What one student said was representative of the class. "I am never going back to working for another company," said this student. "I have worked for solar companies. I know how the PV systems work. I am just brushing up on my basic knowledge for certification and credibility. I plan to open my own consulting company. Clean energy is the way to go. That's where the action is and will be, particularly in California. I already have clients who want to install solar panels. If I need professional help, I can get it from my fellow entrepreneurs right here in this class. We can help each other grow our businesses."

Bill Dahl, Corporate Account Manager for Workforce Institute, is very pleased with the entrepreneurial drive of the students. "It is great that they have this attitude. Any business starts out slow but the time is just right to start a solar business now."

