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Employer and Training Needs: Report 1 Ophthalmic Technology

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Report Number One

OPHTHALMIC TECHNOLOGY

EMPLOYER AND TRAINING NEEDS

PREPARED FOR METROPOLITAN TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Center for Applied Urban Research

university of
nebraska 
at omaha

OPHTHALMIC TECHNOLOGY

by

Joan V. Holley

OPHTHALMIC TECHNOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the employer and training needs in metropolitan Omaha in an occupational area designated as ophthalmic technology.

Ophthalmic Technology Programs

Three courses of study in ophthalmic technology are offered in the 1977-79 catalog of the Metropolitan Technical Community College: the three-month certificate program in Ophthalmic Laboratory Techniques, the nine-month certificate Ophthalmic Prescription Technician program, and the two-year associate degree program in Ophthalmic Technology. A Metro Tech brochure on ophthalmic technology describes each of these programs:

Associate Degree in Ophthalmic Technology (Dispensing)

This is a two-year sequential program of study, requiring the student to complete all Ophthalmic Technology core and support courses. The program offers the graduate a broad career choice, with adaptability, in opticianry.

Certificate as Ophthalmic Laboratory Technician

A nine-month achievement level of the Ophthalmic Technology program, this section provides the student with fundamental information and skills. Thus, the student may seek basic employment in the field, if desired, learning practical application and development of skills. This experience provides a meaningful stimulant for study.

Associate Certificate in Ophthalmic Techniques

This first three-month achievement level features the basic concepts of lenses and fabrication techniques, and also provides the student with an overview of ophthalmic optics and careers in opticianry. With the help of program counseling, the student should develop a clear understanding of his or her career preferences and abilities.

Study Design and Execution

To determine the target population, an exploratory study of the field of ophthalmic technology was done. The CAUR researcher interviewed individuals practicing in the various facets of the field. From this initial investigation, the listings under three headings in the telephone directory were determined to be the sampling frame. These headings were Optical Goods--Whol and Mfrs, Opticians, and Optometrists. The listings under each of these headings then were grouped according to relevant stratification variables, and a cluster sampling format was used.

The two survey instruments constructed for use in the previous study of employer and training needs (the apparel arts) were used. Both personal and telephone interviews were conducted. The findings of this study are summarized here, with conclusions about the employer and training needs related to the three programs in ophthalmic technology offered by Metro Tech.

Research Findings

Employers of Ophthalmic Technologists in the Omaha Area

Wholesale Optical Laboratories. From the list of 12 wholesale laboratories in the Omaha telephone directory, nine were found to employ individuals with training in ophthalmic technology. Two of the other three were involved in the production of contact lenses which does not require ophthalmic technicians. One recently closed.

A wide range was found in the characteristics of these optical laboratories. These variables included the size of the laboratory and number of employees, the training and skill level desired in applicants for job openings, the geographic distribution and types of clients, and the price and quality of the lenses fabricated.

The Omaha laboratory of Bausch & Lomb Inc. employed eight technicians and served primarily the Omaha area. The Modern Optical Laboratory had 12 technicians with 75% of the work being done for their own Modern Eye Wear optical centers in Omaha. Rite Style employed 80 opticians in their facility and had 130 technologists who worked in other communities throughout Nebraska. The clients of Barnett and Ramel of Nebraska were primarily optometrists from small communities in a five-state area. This optical laboratory employed 40 ophthalmic technologists.

The owner of Commercial Optical Company stated that his Omaha firm is the second or third largest optical laboratory in the United States, employing about 265 persons. With a nationally oriented wholesale market, Commercial Optical advertises through direct mail to optometrists throughout the United States and Puerto Rico.

With no experience or training, beginning employees at Commercial received a minimum wage. Bausch & Lomb and Rite Style started such employees at \$3.30. Wage increases were given for workers with additional training, skills, and experience. Rite Style paid the journeymen optical technicians \$8.00 an hour and had 11 supervisors in its laboratory who received salaries between \$14,000 and \$20,000 a year.

Commenting on the higher wage scales and use of technicians with more training and experience in his optical facility, one wholesale optical laboratory owner stated that his work was done primarily for opticians who

were located in medical buildings and received their prescriptions from ophthalmologists. These opticians demand higher quality workmanship since the customers will contact their physicians if any problem occurs with the lenses, he said. He stated that his work thus eventually reflected on the ophthalmologists who have high professional standards. A laboratory owner with a lower pay scale who preferred on the job training said, "We're producing Chevrolets because more people can afford Chevrolets, while some of the local laboratories are making Rolls Royces."

Opticians. There are 55 listings under the Optician heading in the telephone directory, representing 38 different retail optical centers. However, some of these firms have more than one location, such as Modern Eye Wear which has seven vision centers. Physicians Optical Service has four locations in Omaha.

One of the owner/managers of an optical business described the majority of opticians listed as being "independent opticians." They are located in or near medical or professional buildings and receive most of their clients from the recommendations of ophthalmologists whose offices are located in these professional or medical centers. Modern Eye Wear employs 29 dispensers in its seven centers , and Physicians Optical Service has 11 dispensers working in its four retail stores. The Owens Optical Service located in the Doctors Building employs six opticians: two surfacers, two bench workers, and two dispensers. Wiley Optical Company and Professional Optical employ just one or two assistants. Without training or experience the retail store dispensers begin working for about \$150 a week, receiving about \$200 to \$215 with a year or two of experience. Experienced dispensers usually receive from \$200 to \$350 a week, with retail store managers being paid from \$300 to \$400 a week.

Also listed under the Optician heading in the telephone book are a few optometrists who employ an assistant or two, as well as the vision centers that were described by several opticians as "the large conglomerates." One of these is an optical firm which includes the Malashock, Malbar, and Orchard Plaza vision centers. One of the managers of this optical business said the firm employed more than 50 opticians. Another large optical company is the Pearle Vision Center which has three retail stores in Omaha and employs 62 opticians. Pearle Vision Center has 800 offices, and is adding approximately 150 a year. The manager of the local Pearle Vision Centers said that the individual number of dispensers, laboratory technicians, and optometrists employed by the company in Omaha and their approximate salaries is confidential information. He said that Pearle Laboratories does 98% of its own work.

Optometrists. Thirty optometrists are listed in the telephone directory. Many of these optometrists are located in department stores (e.g., the three Brandeis Vision Centers, Montgomery Ward), shopping centers (e.g., the Crossroads Vision Center, the Omaha Vision Clinic in the Westroads), or are affiliated with the larger vision centers (e.g., Malbar, Orchard Plaza). The unaffiliated optometrists often employ one or two assistants in their offices. Dr. B.C. Fishbain at Greenberg Optical Company has five assistants, including an individual who can adjust frames and three receptionist/sales clerks.

Local Employment Opportunities

Retail Optical Centers. All the managers or owners of the independent retail optical centers indicated that they have more job openings than qualified applicants. The question on the survey instrument related to the

need for qualified applicants for job openings evoked many personal comments from the optical center owners and managers.

One manager of a large optical center related that at every meeting of the Nebraska Society of Dispensing Opticians in the past four years, one of the members had asked whether anyone knew of available dispensing opticians. This manager also commented, "A certified, experienced optician has never walked through this door seeking employment." An owner of a vision center said, "I believe that there are actually way too few trained people." He had ten individuals reply to the last ad he ran in the newspaper. Eight of the applicants had no training or experience but thought the job could be interesting, and the other two had some ophthalmic theory but no experience.

Another owner of a vision center said, "There is a constant need for qualified opticians." He needed experienced job applicants because he could not have other employees devote the time to train a dispenser at his retail store. One manager of a vision center said, "It's a good field. An experienced optician can go anywhere in the United States and find employment."

An owner of a retail optical center said he had placed an ad on the Metro Tech bulletin board but did not receive any responses, and another owner said that he had sent notices of openings to Metro Tech but never received replies. Several said that they had received the bulletins about graduates from Metro Tech, but these graduates were already placed when the opticians contacted Metro Tech.

Wholesale Optical Laboratories. The answers to the question of the demand for qualified applicants for job openings differed among optical

laboratory owners and managers according to the company policies about hiring trained or untrained applicants. Those managers who did not require ophthalmic training or experience usually said that the number of qualified applicants about equaled the number of jobs available. One manager stated that there were too many qualified applicants for job openings.

However, the wholesale optical laboratory owners and managers that have experience and training requirements for employment stated that there were too few qualified applicants for job openings. The manager of the Bausch & Lomb laboratory said that his company, with 80 laboratories in the United States, always was needing trained and experienced people. He added, "There are basically no experienced people at all available in the Omaha area." This local laboratory manager also said that the Cedar Rapids laboratory of Bausch & Lomb has placed ads for ophthalmic technicians in the Omaha newspaper and in papers in other cities throughout the Midwest and still has had difficulty finding qualified applicants.

Optometrists. Most of the optometrists in Omaha did not express a need for qualified persons for job openings. One optometrist did say, "It is difficult to find applicants with the right combination of traits for available jobs." Another optometrist said, "There must be a demand for opticians since the trade magazines always are full of want ads for trained and experienced people." A manager of one of the large "conglomerates" stated, "There appear to be enough applicants for the laboratory jobs, but our greatest need is for good, qualified technical sales people."

Suggestions for the Metro Tech Programs in Ophthalmic Technology

Most of the employers interviewed did not have Metro Tech graduates

working for them at the present time. One optician had hired eight students several years ago and had one still working for his firm. Two other firms had hired four graduates each, and several others have had one or two working in their laboratories or optical centers. One wholesale optical laboratory owner had sent an employee to take the ophthalmic technology program, and one manager now is sending an employee through the program. Employers who had hired graduates of the two-year associate degree program said that these ophthalmic technologists were adequately or well prepared, particularly in ophthalmic theory. Some of their specific suggestions for the Metro Tech program are included in this section of the study. Included also are some recommendations by employers after they reviewed the three Metro Tech programs. Other suggestions are based on the employers' perceptions of the qualifications most frequently lacking in applicants for job openings in their firms.

The Need for Practical Experience. Almost all of the employers interviewed emphasized the need for practical experience as part of the requirement for a degree in ophthalmic technology. Many of these employers recommended establishing a Metro Tech clinic. Each student then could perform all of the tasks related to the practice of ophthalmic technology such as bookkeeping, frame adjustment, assisting a customer with frame selection, and the fabrication of lenses. One employer said that this would give the students an over-all view of the business that is now lacking. One of the opticians called this a "mock lab that would supply real jobs working with real people." Another suggested, "Metro students could offer this service to institutions or welfare patients." A laboratory manager understood that at Metro a student takes one pair of glasses through all the

various processes. He suggested that at a school clinic each student should do one job as this is the method now used in most optical laboratories. A vision center manager said that a system could be established that would involve local opticians in supervising the clinic and giving the students critiques of their work.

An optometrist was critical of Metro Tech's requirement that students bring a specific quota of friends or relatives to the school so that the students could work on their glasses. The optometrist said that the students he knew had difficulty securing these volunteers and thus were placed under considerable pressure by this requirement.

The Need for Interpersonal Skills. Most of the opticians and optometrists indicated that more emphasis should be placed on developing the ability to work with people. One optician said, "The graduates are just not prepared to work with the public." A vision center manager stated, "This is a people-oriented business, and the schools are producing technical-type people." Another manager stated, "Applicants for jobs do not seem to have been exposed to elementary public relations principles." Others expressed this as the inability to communicate, to meet the public, or to be a company PR person. An optometrist said, "The patient's concern is our concern, and there seems to be a situation of office routine versus technology."

Other Suggestions. A vision center manager said that a need no longer exists for an optician to be skillful at all the various parts of ophthalmic technology. While an optician needs to have a knowledge of fabrication, he would not need to devote time to perfecting those skills that now are used only in the wholesale optical laboratories.

A laboratory manager said that the students are learning theory and skills that are not now necessary. He had heard that the students were performing long hand optical formulas when charts are now available. He thought they were doing things in class "that just aren't practical any more." Also, he understood that the students were learning on outdated equipment.

Another manager commented on the support courses in the laboratory technician program. He said that the Office Management course would give the ophthalmic technician unrealistic expectations. The manager perceived that the optical laboratory technician is a different type of person than the dispenser who is working with people.

Certification and Licensure. Several of the opticians began the interviews by expressing hopes that Metro Tech would become involved in the optician certification process. One stated, "I'd like to see Metro grads take the test and pass it." Another said that the American Board of Opticians now is working toward the national licensure of opticians and that this licensure could occur in about two years. One owner of a wholesale optical laboratory expressed a negative attitude toward licensure, since he perceived that companies that did not do quality work could use this achievement of licensure in their advertisements to add prestige to their businesses.

Previous Suggestions. When requested to review the ophthalmic technology programs, several of the opticians said that they already had offered suggestions to improve the courses of study or to increase the student enrollment in the programs but that the ophthalmic technology department at Metro Tech had not been open to these suggestions. Consequently, some of these opticians had resigned from the advisory board or from teaching ophthalmic technology courses.

Summary and Conclusions

Possible local employers of graduates of the Metro Tech Ophthalmic Technology programs included nine wholesale ophthalmic laboratories, 38 retail optical firms at 55 locations, and 30 optometrists. The laboratories in Omaha varied from small facilities serving primarily local independent opticians to one of the largest ophthalmic production laboratories in the country. This laboratory employs 265 workers and has a nationally-oriented wholesale market. Several large optical firms in Omaha combine the services of optometrists and ophthalmic technologists. Some of the opticians referred to these businesses as "conglomerates."

Opticians were optimistic about the career opportunities for ophthalmic technologists. They indicated a particular need for qualified dispensing opticians. Several had contacted Metro Tech to secure graduates from the Ophthalmic Technology program but were unable to obtain applicants for openings from the college.

Several dichotomies appear to exist in the field of ophthalmic technology. One is in the area of educational preparation required for employment. Some firms prefer to hire untrained and inexperienced persons and then supply on-the-job training; other optic businesses require an ophthalmic educational background and would prefer applicants with some previous experience. Increasing specialization in the field also has created a dichotomy between the types of jobs available in ophthalmic technology. The small optical shop where a single individual performs all of the ophthalmic services no longer exists in Omaha. Now needed are two different types of persons: the scientific technician who works in the ophthalmic laboratory and the dispensing optician who has exceptional

interpersonal skills. The managers of the "conglomerates" also expressed a need in the business for "qualified technical sales people."

Employers had positive comments about the preparation provided by the two-year certificate program, particularly in the area of ophthalmic theory. The important characteristic most often lacking in Metro Tech graduates and other job applicants is the ability to work effectively with people. Many opticians emphasized the need for additional practical experiences as a part of the requirement for graduation. Several suggested establishing a clinic at Metro Tech to provide this experience as well as to give the student a better understanding of the profession.

Some of the opticians recommended that Metro Tech become involved in the certification process so that their graduates could be certified by the American Board of Opticians.