

Chemical Plant Operator	Victoria (VIC)
ASCO Code: 4987-11	September 2006
Labour market rating	No Shortage

Occupational demand

Demand for chemical plant operators is determined by the general level economic activity, regulatory restrictions on access to overseas markets, foreign trade agreements, the strength of the Australian dollar and international commodity prices. The price of basic raw materials can vary significantly. The price of selenium has risen, restricting access for local chemical manufacturers who rely on the material as a raw ingredient. The industry is split into three broad sectors – production of chemicals from natural raw materials, production of pharmaceuticals using primary chemicals as the input, and production of vaccines and biological agents, which can involve highly toxic processes and by-products.

Occupational supply

The main trade level qualification operators undertake is the Certificate III in Process Plant Operations which is part of the Chemical, Hydrocarbons and Oil Refining Training Package. Companies commonly contract Registered Training Organisations to come to their workplace to deliver training on-site. Some employers seek operators with a trade background, commonly electrician, electronic instrument maker, fitter or diesel mechanic.

Employer and industry comments/current labour market

The skill level required by employers varies considerably depending upon the complexity of the chemical process being controlled. At the high end of the spectrum, operators at containment facilities producing hazardous biological agents and vaccines typically require a science degree. Conversely, operators in some pharmaceutical plants are semi-skilled as they supervise processes that only involve mixing and pelletising dry ingredients. There has been some down-skilling in the area as chemical plants increasingly utilise Programmed Logic Control and Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition to control and monitor the manufacturing process. These plants typically have computer based fault diagnosis software, and operators call in trade qualified maintenance staff when a fault is identified.

Employers seeking trade level skills generally accept that they will be lucky to find the exact skill set they require for a vacancy, and aim to recruit trade qualified applicants with experience in production environments. They then provide on-the-job training and contract Registered Training Organisations to deliver onsite training from the Chemicals, Hydrocarbons and Oil Refining Training Package.

Labour market outlook

The demand determinants and supply characteristics of the occupation are fairly stable and most employers should be able to fill vacancies in the short term.