Training for Real Jobs

by Gerald Ghazi, Vermont HITEC Inc.

When Motivation Means Opportunity

Photographs courtesy of Vermont HITEC Inc.

In recent years, employers in Vermont and New Hampshire have struggled to find workers with the highly specialized skill sets their companies need. At the same time, many workers have lacked career opportunities, adequate training, and access to well-paying jobs. Although placement agencies have helped workers who have skills, individuals without skills or education have often been on their own.

Today, however, new workforce-development efforts are benefiting both workers and companies. Consider Vermont HITEC (Healthcare and Information Technology Education Center), a nonprofit workforce-development organization. Vermont HITEC has used a program called Information Technology Apprenticeship Readiness (ITAR) to match unemployed and underemployed individuals with current open positions. It taps employers, government, and other resources to provide free education and training to participants who are screened for motivation, work ethic, and company fit. Workers chosen for ITAR are guaranteed a position with a sponsoring employer in health care or information technology. (See "Training for a New Life.")

The New Face of Recruitment

ITAR's candidate selection process is unusual. Skill sets and technical competencies are irrelevant, and prior experience is weighed only to ascertain the individual's integrity. Those who participate in program orientation, assessment testing, and interviews are evaluated for attitude, enthusiasm for a new career, fit with the employer's culture, and ability to take direction and communicate effectively. Each step is intense and allows both the job-seeker and evaluators to assess level of commitment.

Reverse-Engineering the Curriculum

In order to fully comprehend the ideal performance indicators for a position and ensure the program's success, the curriculum is designed through a reverse-engineering process. An instructor is placed directly into the job opening at the participating employer to experience the full scope of the work. The instructor then designs the training to blend job-specific skills with general industry skills. In some cases, multiple organizations within a highly specialized industry sponsor positions through a single class that trains students in universal competencies.

Above: Students at Vermont HITEC (healthcare and technology education center) studying to become CNC (computer numerically controlled) machinists.

An ITAR (information technology apprenticeship readiness) instructor helps students prepare for existing jobs as specialized machinists.

Fast-Track Training

The education and training portion of the model is relatively brief but very intense. A boot-camp approach tests the commitment and ability of participants. With successful completion of the program, candidates are well-prepared to face challenges in their new careers. Students work full-time in a virtual 24/7 environment on developing the new skill sets and can therefore be employed sooner—a benefit to both workers and employers. Ongoing mentoring shows students how to use proven strategies in both the learning process and their new careers.

Apprenticeship Readiness

Once students successfully complete the education portion, they become employees of the sponsoring company as well as state-registered apprentices. Apprenticeship lasts one to two years. All education requirements of the apprenticeship are taught during the ITAR before students have to practice them in the workplace. At the employer, they work with a senior mentor to further develop competencies. Cooperation between employers and mentors allows students to receive the guidance that guarantees success.

ITAR Model Comes to Life

The ITAR model is practiced by VT HITEC in cooperation with Vermont's Department of Labor and the Vermont Department of Economic Development. HITEC receives government grants for recruitment efforts, training equipment, materials, and on-site mentoring.

Within the past seven years, Vermont HITEC has completed programs for both Vermont and New Hampshire employers, and as of May 2007, it had found employment for 307 students. It has filled positions such as software analyst, installation consultant, support programmer, web developer, software developer, IT account manager, medical practice support specialist, medical registration representative, medical transcriptionist, and CNC (computer numerically controlled) machinist. Its clients include GE Healthcare (formerly IDX Systems Corporation), Spheris Corporation, Fletcher Allen Health Care, Dealer.com, Websystems, Hypertherm Inc., and Husky Injection Molding Systems.

As Jim Miller, director of operations for Hypertherm's torch and consumables division, says, "How well we meet the challenge [of growing demand for our products] will be determined by how well we can expand out trained workforce. Vermont HITEC's desire and commitment to recruit and educate CNC machinists meets a critical need."

Meanwhile, employees and companies alike are benefiting from the longevity of employment that results from the program.

In one example, an ITAR program was developed for Dealer.com, a national Internet marketing-solutions provider for automotive dealerships, based in Burlington, Vermont. The company wanted to expand its workforce but could not find qualified applicants. An ITAR program was developed to create 14 IT account manager positions. The eight-week, tuition-free program was followed by a one-year apprenticeship. All 14 students selected for the program graduated and got jobs at Dealer.com. One year later, 13 of the 14 were still working there.

That success led to a program to train Java programmers for Dealer.com. The seven students who graduated and completed their one-year apprenticeship are now

Training for a New Life

An ITAR Student's Story

I had been working with my company for five years when I was unexpectedly laid off. I was worried because I had neither a college education nor trade-specific skills. As I endorsed my unemployment check, I noticed an advertisement on the back for a program offering free training for employment. I kept the thought in the back of my mind a few days as I went through the classifieds. Then I received a postcard about this ITAR program. Evidently I could be a machinist for a local manufacturing company.

Would Someone Want Me?

It sounded interesting, but I doubted this was for someone like me. Then I heard a radio ad that said the same thing as the postcard—I could become a machinist with no prior experience. It sounded too good to be true, so I asked the Vermont Department of Labor about it. They encouraged me to apply and said that I had the requirements: a desire to become a machinist and a positive, willing attitude. I went online at their office and filled out an application.

The web site explained that I would go through a screening process, and if I was chosen, I'd attend a full-time nine-week class. Upon graduation, I would have a guaranteed job with benefits. I attended the orientation with about 75 others. We got details about the training program and about seven companies that were willing to hire a total of 16 people with no current skills. The companies would offer full benefits, including a 401(k). I decided to follow through.

The next day I took four hours of grueling tests. The folks running the program told us it was all about our attitude taking the test. The following week, I was called for an interview. I thought, Now they will see that I just don't have the background. They asked me about my work ethic, willingness to put in extra time, desire for a new career, and my feelings about intense training—nothing about machining or even math.

It had been 20 years since I was in school, but they said not to worry. A few days later, I got another callback and met with each of the employers and the training instructor. The job I could work toward sounded amazing. It was hard to believe I was sitting in front of such intelligent people, offering me this opportunity. They were looking for fit, and my lack of competencies in machining didn't seem to matter. One week later, I learned that I had made it.

Exhausting and Exhilarating

The following nine weeks were challenging and exhausting. I had class five days a week, eight hours a day, and then four hours of homework each night and on weekends. The instructor was knowledgeable and helped us through the most challenging parts. A mentor met with each student regularly to guide us through difficulties—personal or academic. My mentor helped me retain my unemployment benefits through the training. I needed her encouraging voice when things got stressful.

Now I have finished the first week at my new job. My mentor stopped in this morning. We discussed how everything was going, and I received some good advice on how to approach my manager for feedback on a project I'm working on. I'll meet with my mentor regularly throughout my one-year apprenticeship. I still cannot believe this is happening. My two children have everything they need now, and I am happier than ever before. I consider this my second chance at life.

senior software developers. Altogether, there have been six ITAR programs for Dealer.com. Forty percent of the company's current workforce has been developed this way.

The ITAR model is adaptable to a variety of industries, company sizes, and types of jobs. Policymakers concerned with workforce development in New England would do well to consider such programs, which succeed through partnerships and through careful screening of candidates for motivation.

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