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COLORADO'S UNDEREMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED

Resources for Jobs By Andre Takacs & Steve Kessler

W

alk into an office today and you will see an array of machines from computers to copiers (that do far more than copy), and phones (that do far more than call). And that does not count what is in workers' pockets. People today walk around with more computing power in their pocket than it took to put a man on the moon. However, the question is: Do the people using these types of technology know how to use them in the ways they need to be used as productive tools?

There are varying, and oftentimes heated debates on what the government and employers need to do to fuel the job market. Employers cannot be expected to provide fundamental skills training — they expect that the education systems have provided potential employees with the appropriate basic fundamental tools to get the job done. It is expected that when someone applies for a job they have the skills needed to be in that position. When typewriters were the technology of the day, students were expected to pass typing tests in the public school system. Nowadays however, our public schools are not imparting the necessary skills needed for the use of computers in the workforce.

The rapid evolution of technology does not help the situation. Someone who used to be a computer expert two years ago may no longer be an expert unless they have kept up with their learning. This poses a significant challenge to employers to decide the skills they require potential employees to use and for employment support groups to ascertain appropriate training. The speed of technological change is not going to wane; in fact, it will only get faster. Thus, foundational skills are vital.

The knowledge gap is widening between those who know technology and those who do not. Programs like KidsTek (www.kidstek.org) work to bridge this digital divide and make sure that all students have access to technology and the social skills to move beyond being labeled the stereotypical geek.



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Andrew Bissland, Program Director of KidsTek says, "Students need to be equipped with not only the computer skills for today, but the critical thinking skills to apply knowledge to technologies that have yet to be created." Factor in the population who come from difficult economic backgrounds and the gap grows even wider. "Technology skills need to be taught in all schools regardless of socioeconomic level," comments Bissland.

Computer skills are not the only skills people are lacking. Often people lack fundamental abilities, like general life and language skills, which play a significant role in individual employment. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, ex-offenders and

the associated costs to taxpayers have steadily increased, creating the largest burden on local government. Ex-offenders have a much more difficult time re-entering the workplace due to their criminal record and need specialized training programs and job search advice such as those offered through local and regional workforce centers.

At the federal level, there are programs like the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) that, in conjunction with state and local communities, provide potential workers with information, job search assistance, and directed training that provides employers with skilled workers.

Colorado's unemployed and underemployed citizens have been receiving

much needed skills training through Colorado's 52 workforce centers. These centers assist in job search support in order to help and ex-offender make a successful transition to new employment. And some of these trainings even provide the necessary computer skills for constituents to be more competitive.

Arapahoe/Douglas Employment by Design Workforce Center is one of these training centers that was specifically established to move individuals from dislocation and claimant status to employed status as quickly as possible. Employment by Design was created to meet the needs of the unemployed in having greater workplace skills by receiving training and ultimately re-entering the workforce in a timely fashion. Employment by Design was funded through a stimulus grant comprised of federal and state funding.

Program services at workforce centers include access to a fully equipped resource center which supports intensive job search activities including: resume creation and critiquing, mock interviewing, employer targeted hiring events, labor market research information, general job search assistance, and computer training workshops.

Denver DataMan, a Denver based computer training company, was contracted in November 2009 by Arapahoe/Douglas Works! (ADW!) Employment By Design to develop tailored computer training for ADW! clients. These classes have focused primarily on Microsoft Office applications, but has also included basic computer skills, navigating the Internet, and computer skills needed for composing and writing resumes and cover letters. Computer classes like these support local job-seekers in a classroom setting while being supplemented by custom training materials.

Results from the partnership between Denver DataMan and ADW! Employment by Design has aided 610 individuals over the past two years and helped 150 people in obtaining jobs they otherwise would not qualify for due to their previous lack of computer skills. By writing its own curriculum, Denver DataMan can cater the material to the specific needs of clients. For example, when Microsoft Office releases a new version with a different navigation interface, the training material and classes are catered to meet those changes quickly by updating the content and adding relevant changes.

Jobs across all sectors of the economy, even in industries that are not expected to require computer skills, now often do. These computer skills could include checking in and out at work or submitting a part request. The Denver Regional Transportation District, for



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- Andrew Bissland



example, uses Excel for maintenance orders on buses. New employees may never have had the opportunity or necessary skill-set to learn or keep up-to-date on this software, making it difficult to perform the job.

With the recent economic turbulence it is more important than ever to make sure that the national, regional, and local workforces, possess the skills they need to enter or re-enter the job market. Society cannot rest on its laurels and be satisfied with the workforce using the technologies of today; we must invest time and capital to ensure that we have a workforce ready to adopt and invent the technologies of tomorrow. From new computer systems to green energy, the American workforce is not only competing against others throughout the nation, but also those in developing countries making significant investments in education.

The role of the workforce centers is to provide workforce relevant skills in a more affordable and effective manner than through traditional education avenues. Having places where people can learn skills they are lacking and even refresh skills to be more marketable is a great asset to the business community and the community at-large. But what is also an

important aspect is that participants choose to be part of these programs, rather than being overlooked by other social entities.

Offices of today are only a window into the offices of tomorrow. Technology that is used today may be laughable in the future, like that of Apollo computer systems of the 1960s, but it is with the current technology that the foundation for future success is laid. Success will only come with an educated and motivated workforce — by making sure people are trained to use modern technology. With that, society can have a productive workforce that will provide for the training of the technologies that will eclipse current tools and bring about a more technologically advanced workforce. And with collaborations like that of the Colorado Workforce Centers and private training firms like Denver DataMan, public-private partnerships are closing the employment knowledge gap and are putting people back to work.

Andre Takacs is Lead Trainer & Consultant at Denver DataMan. Steve Kessler is Owner & Lead Consultant at Denver DataMan.

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Success Stories

“During unemployment, I was extremely hard on myself — questioning my skills. I was fortunate enough to have been contacted by my local workforce center to participate in specialized workshops set up and designed for dislocated workers.

At first I started attending the workshops on an as-needed basis, but within a short time, I started cultivating relationships with Employment by Design staff, workshop facilitators, and networking groups.

I became extremely excited about the services and workshops being provided. All along I was gaining new, invaluable computer skills, labor market information, and amazing job search connections. Armed with this new knowledge, I began looking at companies that interested me, and applied for positions that matched what I wanted to do. I am happy to announce I accepted a fulltime position with MCPN Clinics.”

- Beth C.

“I was employed in the education industry for nearly 15 years. However, when my employer told me that my position was being eliminated, I found myself without a job for the first time.

One evening, after a long day of job searching, I received a voice message recording from Employment by Design stating that they were offering a week-long intensive job search and computer workshop to assist unemployed professionals. So I went to check it out.

After attending a number of free weekly intensive job search workshops, assessments, networking, and the fabulous computer training, I was so encouraged and motivated that this type of services was being offered in my community. I was exposed to and learning all of the high quality computer software applications that I never used while I was employed.

Andre from Denver DataMan, as well as all my facilitators, was awesome! The emotional and practical benefits and services offered through Employment by Design have been endless – you can’t put a price tag on these things. I can’t thank you enough.”

- Karen F. ▲