

TAPPING INTO TALENT

Apprenticeships Connect Youth With Career Options

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

Ryder Craig is a high school junior with a knack for information technology. Through a U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)-registered apprenticeship, he hones his skills at RTC Communications upgrading computers, installing firewalls, troubleshooting and more.

RTC is a rural communications cooperative in Montgomery (a community of approximately 800 in southern Indiana) that serves Daviess, Lawrence and Martin counties. Products include world-class internet, voice and business service solutions.

“Ryder works under our network engineering group,” explains Patrick Todd, RTC’s vice president of HR and public relations. “Right now, we’re testing some products and actually rebuilding an experimental lab in one of our areas. He also works with our mapping systems and helps us look at different patterns of homes where we may be looking to expand services in southern Indiana. If our network engineers have a problem or are fixing something outside of our building, he’ll go with them to do observations or to be an extra set of hands. So, his role can vary.

“It’s really important to be able to assist rural community growth in building a future workforce,” Todd stresses. “We need these kids that are competent and capable of being up to speed quicker when they come in. Ryder’s very technology oriented, and most of the young people are nowadays. A lot of it is intuitive, so the high schoolers aren’t afraid to pick up a piece of equipment or get into a piece of software and start rolling with it.”

The DOL-registered youth apprenticeship program is sponsored by Regional Opportunity Initiatives (ROI) through a partnership with the Indiana Office of Work-Based Learning and Apprenticeship (OWBLA), located within the Department of Workforce Development. It unites employer partners in the high-demand sector of information technology to provide career opportunities to rural youth and meet job growth in southern Indiana.

Help desk scenarios are at the heart of the DOL-registered

apprenticeships, launched last year. There are seven apprentices at seven employers (also including K-12 schools and Ivy Tech Community College) throughout five school districts. In addition to RTC, area businesses Smithville Fiber (Ellettsville) and Mainstream Fiber Networks (Nashville) are taking part.

Growing their own

The DOL apprenticeship effort grew out of ROI’s UpSkill Work and Learn modern youth apprenticeship program. ROI serves as the apprenticeship sponsor, connecting employers, education providers and students to create high-demand career pathways as well as homegrown workforce solutions.

“The opportunity to earn a paycheck while you’re getting an education and learning relevant, timely skills in the tech industry is essential,” comments Jason Graves, senior director with OWBLA. “And it helps the employer fill a hard-to-fill position. They’re getting that talent and getting it early.”

He also points to another benefit. “Through the apprenticeship, these students can receive CompTIA training (a national training standard offering various certifications) at no cost to them. Those certifications carry value to potential employers.”

ROI Career Connections Specialist Jen Staab describes how the apprenticeship program kicked off with RTC, Mainstream Fiber and Smithville. “It was interesting that all three employers had similar occupation needs,” she reflects. “That’s part of what we do when we’re talking to employers is asking, ‘What is your need for talent and how can we help you by aligning students who are getting training in high school?’

“Each of them wanted to start with the students at the help desk because that was a great way to start interacting with customers, and (acquiring experience with) problem solving and figuring things out. Those employers have enough similarities that we could create a nice pathway and competencies, but also enough uniqueness that the students are getting a little different flavor at each site. We were able to expand beyond that to (the school settings) that needed help desk technicians.”



Ryder Craig, a junior at Barr-Reeve High School in Montgomery, is a valued apprentice at RTC Communications. The organization has approximately 43 employees and has operated in Daviess County since 1949.

Origins, growth

ROI's UpSkill encompasses a variety of occupations, with roughly 50 students and 21 employer partners throughout ROI's 11-county region (Brown, Crawford, Daviess, Dubois, Greene, Lawrence, Martin, Monroe, Orange, Owen and Washington).

"It's varied in terms of what those occupations are and where they align with student pathways," says Michi McClaine, vice president of talent development with ROI. "Now that we're in year two of the modern youth apprenticeship structure, we're more comfortable bringing on that DOL-registered apprenticeship piece alongside."

"Not all of those positions are registered apprenticeships yet – the help desk technician is our first. We work really hard with DOL in terms of what does it look like for us to grow this (to other professions)? The (ultimate) goal is that any student who's an UpSkill modern youth apprentice will have a DOL-registered apprenticeship eventually. The occupations will be varied; they won't just be IT. But it takes time."

Students have the option of beginning the apprenticeship, which includes high school – and in some cases postsecondary – credit and compensation the summer prior to their junior year. The interviews are employer driven, and students are provided CompTIA training at no cost.

At Bedford North Lawrence High School, an apprentice divides his day between attending school and working at its IT hub – all while earning credit at Ivy Tech Community College.

"No commuting at all!" Staab declares. "What's great about (the arrangement is) that he comes in first thing in the morning and does some hours, goes off to class and can float back later in the day because it just works for his schedule. It's pretty fluid."

On-the-job training

College freshman Ethan Scott is in his second year of an apprenticeship at Five Star Technology Solutions, a Jeffersonville-based organization that helps school districts reduce costs and boost productivity.

Scott, a Bedford North Lawrence High

School graduate, earned a direct admittance into Indiana University's Ludy School of Informatics, which he attributes in part to his apprenticeship background. He works two days a week at various high schools and attends the university three days a week, majoring in computer science.

"Most students – once they get out of college – don't have the experience they need to get a job. Whereas if I stick with (current employer) Five Star (Communications throughout my postsecondary career), I'll already have five years of experience I could put on a resumé," Scott proudly asserts. "It kind of gives me peace of mind because the ROI program will always be something I can use as a reference. I already have a jumpstart (on my career)."

Graves contends: "One thing that's relevant for the employers is – as a student, you learn something in the classroom and walk on the job the next day. You're not waiting four years to learn all your knowledge and then walk on the job. You're learning it, and then you're immediately using it and you're getting paid."

RESOURCES: Jason Graves, Indiana Office of Work-Based Learning and Apprenticeship, at www.in.gov/dwd/owbla | Michi McClaine and Jen Staab, Regional Opportunities Initiatives, at regionalopportunityinc.org | Patrick Todd, RTC Communications, at rtccom.com

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