

VALLEY NEWS

Learn the Job, Teach the Job: Workforce Training Firm Vermont HITEC Is DHMC's Apprenticeship Program Builder

(TUESDAY, December 29, 2015) -- Vermont HITEC calls its apprenticeship model "reverse engineering." Rather than teaching skills in an academic environment, it starts with the job and the competencies sought by the employer.

"We learn the job and we know what the employer needs," said Juliane Hegle, an instructor and consultant with the Williston, Vt.-based workforce training firm.

"We are like chameleons," said Hegle, who, like other instructors in Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center's Workforce Readiness Institute programs, had to become certified — in this case as a pharmacy technician — before she could become an instructor. "We become whatever we are teaching. We learn the job so we know what is needed."

That knowledge is, in turn, used to develop the curriculum, a collaborative effort between Vermont HITEC and the medical center.

"Vermont HITEC does a terrific job packaging the classroom and explaining to our operational people how invested they are," said Sarah Currier, director of workforce development at the medical center.

Vermont HITEC has developed and taught apprenticeship programs for Lebanon-based Hypertherm, which now has an in-house apprenticeship institute, and at Structural-Bridges in Claremont (now Canam-Bridges), where the firm taught a welding course in 2010 for the fabricator of steel bridge girders.

"The process is the same, regardless of the company," Hegle said about how the apprenticeship programs are structured.

Vermont HITEC, which was started in the late 1990s with a curriculum for medical transcription, is the main instructor in apprenticeship programs, but the employer it is working with will have members of its own staff in the classroom as well.

"We don't do 100 percent of the education," Hegle said. In the pharmacy technician course for DHMC, for example, a staff member taught the piece on medication safety. "Part of the curriculum is bringing the employer's people into the mix," Hegle said.

Since retention — in addition to training and hiring — is one of the primary objectives of the medical center's workforce readiness programs, the emphasis is on finding candidates with the greatest potential for success — and the right outlook.

"We have a really structured and rigorous interview process," said John Malanowski, DHMC's chief human resources officer. "People who come to us have to have the passion and commitment."

Hegle said intangibles are important, and they can be identified in the aptitude test.

"We are looking for people who have the interest and the dedication," she said. "We don't want people in jobs they won't be successful at."

Mike Gaffney, of Thetford, a licensed nursing assistant at DHMC for 12 years who was in the first medical assistant course and then taught and supervised subsequent courses, said a medical assistant has an important role to play beyond his or her technical knowledge.

"You are the first person the patient is going to see, so you have to have a really good attitude and be able to present yourself well and (the medical center) well," Gaffney said.

The course curriculum includes having students engage with the providers — the nurses and physicians — they will be working with, which smooths the transition from classroom to workplace.

"These apprentices walk in knowledgeable about the processes, policies and procedures," Malanowski said. "They have an understanding of the culture. The provider doesn't need to spend time training. It also increases the confidence the provider has in the apprentice."

Hegle said she sees Vermont HITEC's apprenticeship model growing because it goes beyond training one person for one skill and instead looks at career growth and education.

"We make sure what we do is academically rigorous," Hegle said. "It is accreditable. It is not just a training program. We are looking at the bigger picture: academics."

It also is a practical approach that can make sense for those worried about college debt.

"The No. 1 financial issue in our country right now is student loan debt, across the board," Hegle said.

Apprenticeships at DHMC begin with hourly wages of \$14.50 to \$14.75.

That can increase to between \$15 and \$16.50 an hour, depending on the job, with the hospital paying for the course.

Vermont HITEC mentors students during the apprenticeship. After one year, the apprentices graduate with a U.S. Department of Labor certificate of completion, industry certification and academic credit.

Gaffney, who is returning to school to obtain his physician's assistant license, said the apprenticeship program can open doors.

"I think it is a great way to get your feet wet and see what health care is about," he said. "And it is a good job for someone who comes in with no experience."