

Innovative IT Training Program Strikes Gold



CHALLENGES

The Golden Colorado region outside Denver has an appropriately expressive name. Ever since Pike's Peak Gold Rush, new residents have relocated here to enjoy the spectacular geography and an exceptional quality of life. Recently, rapid population growth has increased the competition for affordable housing. In 2018, the median home price in Jefferson County was \$439,778 and the average monthly rent was \$1,706 (smartasset.com/mortgage/the-cost-of-living-in-colorado). A key economic indicator, the 2019 cost of living index in Jefferson County was 110%, while the average was 100% for the entire U.S. (<http://c2er.org>).

With such a high cost of living, long-term underemployed or unemployed residents in Jefferson County face significant challenges finding work with sustainable wages. Individuals seek career guidance from the Jefferson County Business and Workforce Center (BWC) in order to stay in their homes. BWC promotes economic vitality by identifying, developing and matching a talented workforce to businesses. In addition, BWC's training programs prepare adults for financially attractive job openings

Being a well-established community, Jefferson County's demographics skew a bit older and include multi-generational families. Often middle-age job seekers find it difficult to secure job interviews in their field, despite years of relevant industry experience. Some individuals want to transition from multiple minimum-wage, part-time jobs without benefits to full-time permanent positions, with benefits.

Nationally known companies make significant contributions to the region's economy. With capital investments, these companies have automated their manufacturing processes and employ highly-skilled professionals. With a county unemployment rate of 2.3%, regional businesses in every sector are challenged to fill open IT positions with candidates possessing both technical and soft skills.

There were 518 job postings for entry-level IT Support Specialists, with an average salary of \$53,537 in Jefferson County during the 12 months between August 2018 and July 2019, according to Burning Glass Technologies. BWC is helping underemployed and unemployed people fill the IT pipeline through training, internships and apprenticeships.

"This program was developed to increase and accelerate access to the IT career pathway. Our mission is to provide all populations with an opportunity to enter the sustainable career pathways leading to self-sufficiency."

– **Michelle Scott Foley**
Jefferson County Business & Workforce Center
Program Manager



SOLUTION

It was important to Jefferson County BWC that an IT training program accommodate individuals with none or minimal IT work experience. The program was marketed to the general public, but special care was taken to reach out to Jefferson County residents who had been laid off or were receiving assistance through human services programs. The screening process was focused on making sure that candidates had the basic skills to be successful in the class. Candidates were not assessed on their prior IT knowledge. Following the skills assessments, candidates were interviewed to make sure that the IT training would align with their career paths and help them to achieve their goals.



STUDENT COMMITMENTS

Prior to starting the IT training, BWC asked participants to sign an “Expectations and Enrollment Agreement” which committed students to:

- Participate in the full length of the course and comply with a strict attendance policy.
- Sit for appropriate certification exams during the designated dates on the course schedule.
- Conduct themselves in a professional manner, wear business casual, and create a professional email address.
- Provide their own supplementary materials such as a book binder, CD, DVD and USB storage drives.
- Bring the IT training manuals issued to the class on a daily basis.
- Complete all CertMaster exercises and dedicate study and review time in addition to classroom hours.
- Participate in quarterly focus groups for one year after graduation, to ensure BWC’s IT training program provides graduates with post-training support and the program achieves its long-term objectives.



IT INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULUM

CompTIA provided instructor-led training. The instructors were certified in the courses they taught and shared their real-world expertise throughout their lectures. Classes were held onsite in the BWC Laramie building Monday through Friday from 9:00am to 4:00pm. Each student was provided a workstation, computer and internet to use during the class and lab assignments.

The curriculum started with the CompTIA A+ certification, the industry standard for establishing an IT career and the preferred qualifying credential for technical support and IT operational roles. A+ prepares students to troubleshoot, problem solve and understand a wide variety of issues, ranging from networking and operating systems to mobile devices and security. After 4 weeks of A+ classroom instruction, students spent the 5th week reviewing and preparing for the two A+ exams.

After testing for the A+ certification, students moved on to study for the CompTIA Network+ certification. Network+ helps develop a career in IT infrastructure by covering troubleshooting, configuring and managing networks. Network+ validates the hands-on skills needed to work with both wired and wireless networks and also includes emerging technologies such as unified communications, mobile, cloud and virtualization technologies. After 3 weeks of Network+ classroom instruction, students took the single Network+ exam.

Since this IT training program was open to students with no prior IT training, it was essential to prove to employers the IT program graduates had validated their technical skills by earning the globally-recognized CompTIA certifications. The two CompTIA A+ and one Network+ exams are each 90 minutes long, closed book, with multiple choice questions (single and multiple response), drag and drops and performance-based questions.

To prepare the students for the internship and job interviews, the IT program included soft skills training. The curriculum included writing resumes and cover letters, building a personal brand and role-playing interviews. Practicing communication and relationship-building skills are especially important for individuals re-entering the job market in a new career.

Another key component of the initial BWC IT training program included hands-on internships, providing benefits for both students and employers. Internships give students an opportunity to apply their classroom knowledge in real scenarios. Students make contributions to the employers by performing valuable tasks. Employers have an opportunity to vet potential candidates for job openings.

In some cases, the IT interns stepped right into full-time employment.



OUTCOMES

Several residents and businesses in Golden Colorado have struck gold once again with BWC's innovative IT training program.



CANDIDATE EVIDENCE

For example, with 30 years of marketing experience Lori Dille spent a few years applying for jobs in the region's saturated market for marketing professionals. Lori was excited to apply for the BWC IT training program. With virtually no IT technical experience, the BWC program provided Lori with resources at every stage including books, labs and study groups. "Being an older student, even if I don't have all the answers, I have gained the confidence that I am able find the correct answers and make a contribution as an IT professional."



EMPLOYER EVIDENCE

Barber-Nichols, the specialized turbomachinery manufacturer, has hired multiple BWC interns, including Lori Dille. During her internship, not only did Lori resolve basic computer and phone issues, such as cutting CAT cables, she also worked on a security planning project. Since Barber-Nichols has a relatively small IT department, Lori was provided with exposure to "dabbling" in a wide array of projects, which she found appealing.

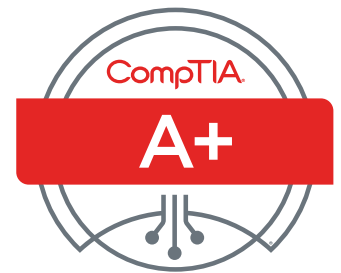
Lori's manager, Dave Kwiatkowski, Barber-Nichol's Systems Lead Engineer, focuses on leveraging technology to improve productivity. When hiring for IT positions, Dave looks for candidates with IT certifications because they "quantify a level of knowledge and demonstrate that a candidate has achieved a certain level of standardized skills to use on the job." He was pleased to know that Lori had earned three CompTIA IT certifications. With minimal coaching, Lori was able to understand a project's objective, and prioritize and work through tasks. "Lori immediately jumped in and understood enough about IT-related systems and hardware that she could participate and add technical value right out of the gate."

During the internship interview, Lori's soft skills shined. She was articulate, professional and presented her IT credentials with confidence. During the internship, Lori worked well with a broad range of personalities, as she helped colleagues resolve technical challenges. As a permanent employee, Lori's current responsibilities include IT support, security planning, supply chain sales and product development.

Rachel Jaakkola, Barber-Nichols Human Resources, has worked closely with Mike Aman, BWC's Work Based Learning Coordinator, to forge a mutually-beneficial partnership. "Barber-Nichols wanted to help the community and help our business. I was pleased with the screening and training of the applicants Mike presented to us for the IT internships. Mike understands which candidates will be a good professional fit for our company. I look forward to continuing to partner with BWC in future internships."

"While many individuals find the concept of transitioning into an IT career intimidating, the reality is a large portion of IT careers do not require a college degree. Most technology positions just require proof that you can do the job. Certifications meet the proof requirement."

- Mike Aman
BWC's Work Based Learning Coordinator

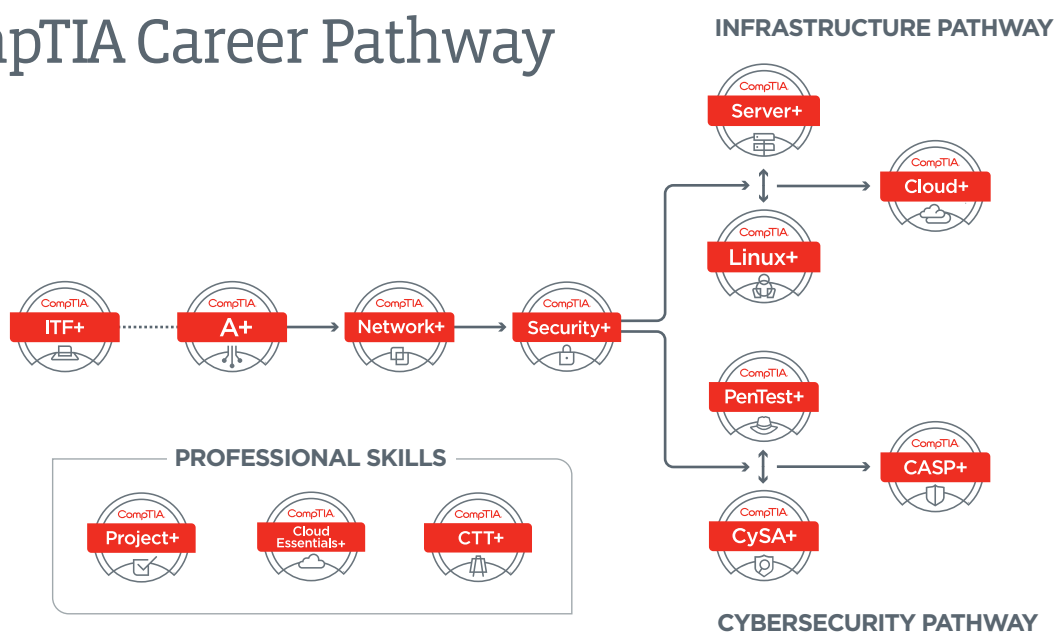


100% of program graduates earned their A+ Certification!

WHY IT FOR WORKFORCE

CompTIA delivers “turn-key”, accelerated training and certification programs for diverse workforce populations, that build the talent pipeline and transition people into high-wage IT and cybersecurity careers.

CompTIA Career Pathway



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