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GOVERNMENT

Expanding the IT pipeline by taking the show on the road

BY KIM PALMER

The Greater Cleveland Partnership's IT Careers Expo returned, after a two-year pandemic hiatus, as part of the organization's annual Tech Week, which ran Oct. 18-20.

The expo, designed to bring students and graduates together with local tech employers to expand the pipeline of talent, added an off-site mobile program aimed at helping adults in minority communities find a way into an IT career.

Its career-focused events at the I-X Center attracted more than 1,000 high school and college students from across the region to help drive them toward either an IT degree or career — and, as GCP's managing director of tech economy initiatives, Courtney DeOreo, pointed out, to encourage those workers to stay in Northeast Ohio.

The expo on Tuesday morning, Oct. 18, brought in high school students for "Passport to IT Careers," and then in the afternoon assembled college and university students and recent graduates for "Linking Talent to Opportunity."

"For high schoolers, we call it an exposure and exploration program. ... We are just trying to generate awareness of the industry," DeOreo said. "For the college and university students, we push an interest in IT jobs and internships. It's more of a traditional career fair."

The expo unveiled a Best of NEO map that allows attendees to visualize all IT opportunities available to them in region, which DeOreo said is another tool to help keep potential IT professionals here. It also branched out to address high school students who are not necessarily on a college path and might be better off going directly into entry-level IT jobs, which DeOreo noted still require formalized skills training or short-term credentials.

"We have realized that we were previously leaving these students out of the conversation, and we wanted to be more responsive to them," she said.

The objective is to drive interest in IT careers regardless of the path, with organizations such as GCP's IT workforce sector partnership looking to create a continuum of workers entering the field with different skills at different levels — but as soon as possible.

As the expo at the I-X Center focused on a traditional path from education to employment, Craig Platt, GCP's IT sector partnership managing director, was out in the community for two days with the Bridges to IT Roadshow. That program is aimed at adults in their 20s to mid-40s who live and work in communities underrepresented in the industry.

Minorities make up 23% of the population and 19% of the workforce in Northeast Ohio, according to Team NEO with data from 18 counties. However, Black workers hold only 12% of the jobs in the region, and only 8% in computer-related occupations.

The pilot program, created in January, was designed to develop and deliver a more diverse IT talent pipeline to employers, Platt said.

The Bridges to IT Roadshow included hands-on simulations. | GREATER CLEVELAND PARTNERSHIP

The goal is to bring to those communities a less formal, fundamental awareness of potential IT careers.

The two-day roadshow offered four, 25-minute sessions that began with a robot demonstration, moved to a presentation of basic information about cybersecurity and a hands-on simulation of drone flying, and concluded with an introduction to a free coding app that attendees could use to assess their skills.

"We show them an industrial production robot and some drones," Platt said. "After the demo with the robot, we then point out that those simple, repetitive movements are achieved using just 12 lines of computer code."

DeOreo

Introducing tech that comes from only 12 lines of code or showing a cute robot run by the AI from a smartphone helps reach people, Platt said, and avoids having them shut down as the tech concepts become more complex.

Platt

"For so long, we were starting in the middle with more advanced technical foundational training versus really exploring interests and assessing skills that fit each person," Platt said.

He said motivating the region's "untapped talent" toward IT careers and hoping for better outcomes for underrepresented communities required a step back to look for ways to make people comfortable learning basic IT skills.

"All too often, people expect candidates to jump into an IT career just because they point out that it is a great opportunity, but how can they if they really don't know what it is or how to start?" Platt asked.

The difficulty of taking that first step is the reason the roadshow started with what Platt calls "exposure and exploration." Only after participants know what IT can do are they presented with any type of skill testing or assessment.

With the free app, called SNAP, attendees for the last 25 minutes of the roadshow were introduced to a program that uses logic-based sequencing skills to build simple computer code. Platt said the app helps many people realize they have an aptitude for skills that are the underlying path for IT jobs.

Another integral part of the Bridges to IT program, Platt said, is the partnership among minority-owned service providers and tech experts from Urban City Codes, We Can Code and the Minority Technology Alliance who teach the tech, and community-based organizations — JumpStart, Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Towards Employment, El Barrio and the Cuyahoga County Public Library — that provide coaching, job placement and funding for more training.

Using private, public and philanthropic funding available for both tech training and underserved communities, the Bridges to IT program can help with credentials for entry-level IT positions in customer service and quality assurance, Platt said.

"When you offer funding and support from the community, people are more confident and comfortable, and these careers do not seem like such a pipe dream," Platt said.

Kim Palmer: kpalmer@crain.com, (216) 771-5384, @kimfouroffive