

Iowa Region #2 Workforce Development Partnership Basic Computer Skills Program

In the spring of 2008, the Region 2 Workforce Development Partnership began offering free basic and intermediate computer skills classes at the Mason City one-stop center. The classes were originally designed to bridge the technology gap between customers who were losing jobs in traditional career fields and had little to no training on computers, and an increasing number of employers that were posting openings online and requiring online applications and resumes. It was apparent that basic computer and internet skills were becoming an essential part of the job search process. While computer classes were offered through the local community college, many customers did not have the basic skills or the confidence level to enroll and succeed in a college-level course. With this customer base in mind, a plan was developed to offer classes that would not only help them get back in the workforce, but also transition to college-level courses to gain the skills needed for a changing job market.

Two classes were developed based on a curriculum from Labyrinth Publications. An instructor and two assistants provide sixteen hours of hands-on instruction one evening a week over an eight-week period. *Computers for Beginners* introduces individuals to the basics of a personal computer with a specific focus on employment. Objectives include learning how to operate a computer, use email to send and receive messages, develop a resume and cover letter, and use the internet to register with Iowa Jobs and conduct job searching activities. For customers that want to advance their computer skills further, *Introduction to Microsoft Office* focuses on Microsoft Word and covers the basics of Excel and PowerPoint. Through an agreement with the community college, Workforce customers that successfully complete one of these courses have the opportunity to continue their training at the college by enrolling in a free computer-related continuing education course.

To date, approximately 235 students have taken a course at the Center, with many going on to take the college computer courses and several of those becoming full-time college students. Feedback from the customers has been overwhelmingly positive and for many, these courses have not only awaked a desire to continue their education but also opened the door to new career options. A few students have used their newly acquired skills to start or manage a business. One student was so enthused she used her income tax refund to buy a personal computer.

A rather unexpected outcome from this initiative has been the opportunity to put a new face on Iowa Workforce Development in the region. The classes are bringing new people into the Center for the very first time and others who previously may have referred to the local one-stop as “the unemployment office” now see the one-stop as the place to learn new skills, get information on new career options, and get connected with other programs and services such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Disabled Veterans, New Iowans, Ticket to Work, and Work Incentive Planning. The “one-stop” is becoming the “first-stop” on the path to a new beginning.

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