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Canada's YYC Net Lab Prepares Immigrant and Indigenous Women for Jobs

A Fresh Approach to Tech Learning

Technology workers are in short supply in Calgary, Canada—an urgent problem affecting cities around the world. According to the World Economic Forum, 54% of all employees will require significant re- and upskilling by 2022.¹ To proactively tackle the problem, Mike Simoens, an entrepreneur active in Calgary's nonprofit community, decided that technology training needed a fresh approach. He teamed with Mark Leonard, a certified Cisco Networking Academy instructor, to create YYC Net Lab. Its mission: fostering personal development in computer networking by delivering low-cost access to training for all Alberta residents.

Cisco Networking Academy was a perfect match for YYC Net Lab. Networking Academy is part of Cisco Corporate Social Responsibility – an organization with a mission to positively impact the lives of people, society, and the planet. By offering CCNA (Cisco Certified Networking Associate) courses, YYC Net Lab prepares a diverse range of students for globally recognized industry certification exams.

"We need an educational model that can serve students with more diverse — and not necessarily technical — backgrounds," says Simoens. "Students need a flexible training schedule, because most have responsibilities that make classroom-based study impossible. But self-paced alone won't provide effective training. Mentorship and collaboration are incredibly important, especially when the training is an entirely new area for a student."

Networking Academy courses are built from the ground up to be highly effective, regardless of a student's skill level or learning style. By applying the science of learning together with global and local education standards, Networking Academy delivers a dynamic, digital, and hands-on learning experience. Designed with a practical approach, the labs and activities give students plenty of opportunities for hands-on practice, learning at their pace.

An Innovative Training Model

Early on, Simoens reached out to two other well-established nonprofits, Making Changes and Momentum, each created to help raise people out of poverty. Together, the three non-profits were awarded a high-profile \$100,000 grant from the newly created Alberta Status of Women agency, to prepare immigrants and Indigenous women for careers in technology. Making Changes finds the learning candidates, and YYC Net Lab delivers the training courses – such as CCNA (Cisco Certified Networking Associate) courses.

In the flexible, self-study Networking Academy program, students are free to do coursework any time of the day or night. Using Cisco Webex Teams collaboration technology, they can work together, on what Leonard likes to call "crowdsourced learning." The flexible format makes it easy for students to help each other on problems or post questions for instructors to answer.

Teamwork and problem-solving are the cornerstones of Networking Academy courses. Complemented by mentoring with local businesses, students develop critical thinking skills together with technology knowledge that employers value. After completing the program, many students were inspired to return as mentors for new students. Three students are taking their skills a step further by becoming certified as Networking Academy instructors, a wonderful way to give back to the program.

¹ World Economic Forum, "Reskilling for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and the Future of Jobs Report," 2018

Unlocking Student Opportunities

YYC and Making Changes work with the Alberta Status of Women agency to empower women with employment and life skills. For example, Peace Ilondior, who moved to Calgary from Nigeria with an advanced degree in Environmental Science, had been unable to find a good job in Calgary. "Immigrant women experience significant barriers as they transition to life in Canada," says Coutts. "Indigenous women are often mired in a generational poverty cycle. They struggle to move beyond 'survivor' jobs to well-paying careers."

Ilondior was part of the inaugural class of 16 women, all of whom finished with various levels of certification. All received internships, and five secured full-time employment. "It's amazing how fast these women progressed. It's beyond our expectations," says Simoens. In addition, companies that participated with internships are signing up again, a testament to the quality of candidates coming out of the program.

Before the inaugural class even graduated, word of its success spread. This helped the program secure multi-year funding from another source. YCC Net Lab is expanding the Networking Academy curriculum, adding IT Essentials. Now a new class of immigrant and indigenous women has begun, continuing the positive cycle of preparing diverse students for global opportunities.

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