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WORK-BASED LEARNING IN ACTION

PROVIDING WORK-BASED LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT BEST BUY

Work-Based Learning in Action is a series of case studies highlighting effective models of work-based learning. This case study is part of Walmart’s work with JFF, [Making Work-Based Learning Work for Retail](#), and covers companies that have implemented valuable work-based learning programs that provide lessons for employers creating or redesigning their own retail work-based learning program.

Will Woodworth began working at Best Buy at age 22. He needed a job but did not consider Best Buy a career. Today, 14 years later, Woodworth works at Best Buy training the next generation of company workers, thanks to the launch of the Geek Squad Academy and the Pathways to Success initiative, two of Best Buy’s

corporate social responsibility efforts that have been transformed into work-based learning programs for entry-level workers. These programs connect individuals from Teen Tech Centers and entry-level retail positions to Best Buy careers, not only creating economic opportunity for workers like Woodworth but also filling

key business needs for the company. As Woodworth himself notes, “A lot of [the training] is driven by the fact that our turnover, like any retail organization, is very high. If you have somebody that you think is good at what they do, you have to make an investment in them as a person and as a professional employee in order to make them stick around.”

Best Buy employs innovative work-based learning programs to support a business strategy that reimagines retail services in light of a changing economy. The state of retail has presented some challenges for most vendors—and Best Buy is no exception. In 2012, the store announced a staggering 97 percent decline in profits, largely due to the rise of online retail giants like Amazon.

“[Our employees] are far more likely to remain with the company because they’re...more engaged and maybe...more proud of the company they work for once they’ve seen the work that we do in the community.”

– Best Buy Program Director

Fast-forward to today, and not only has Best Buy become the leading consumer electronics retailer in the United States, but it was ranked as one of the “Happiest Retailers to Work For (2015)” by *Forbes Magazine*. Best Buy’s recovery is primarily due to prioritizing personalizing customer experiences and supports. Work-based learning provides an

excellent training strategy to ensure that Best Buy retail workers learn the real-world skills to provide exemplary customer service.

The stories of the Geek Squad Academy and Pathways to Success are different, but each leverages corporate social responsibility initiatives for business impact and highlights the value that work-based learning can provide to retailers. In addition, Best Buy has demonstrated several essential company designs critical to the success of these programs: leadership buy-in, training for staff overseeing the learning, and a culture of advancement. Importantly, Best Buy has learned how to identify youth-appropriate work responsibilities so meaningful work becomes part of the Teen Tech Center educational programming.

GEEK SQUAD ACADEMY HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Geek Squad Agents offer support in installation, device protection, 24-hour online assistance, and device repairs, among other things, for an array of technological tools ranging from car electronics to appliances to video game consoles.

In the early 2000s, with a growing customer base for Geek Squad support, Best Buy recognized that its customer-facing staff and in-person or in-home customer experiences require certain skills to keep customers happy. While the existing training for technical skills was sufficient, Best Buy needed a

more intentional strategy to offer the employability skills that make every customer's experience a pleasant one. Agents need to be proficient communicators and problem solvers—they must ease a client's concerns while diagnosing a problem under pressure. For Woodworth, this meant transitioning from being “the hero that just fixed everything” to someone who could confidently meet many new people each day, serving customers as a technology translator, teacher, and friend. “That was a really interesting transition of skills because the technical side is actually the minor part of what that role requires, and a lot of it is personality driven.” Woodworth's transition to become an agent, and mastering the skills required to

do his job well, were experiences common among other Best Buy employees new to their agent roles as well. Best Buy saw an opportunity to leverage its corporate social responsibility activities as a way to provide training for Geek Squad Agents.

In 2007, Best Buy launched the Geek Squad Academy to provide workshops and short-term camps to youth ages 10 to 18. As part of the effort, the company trains Geek Squad Agents to deliver the Academy programming and staff the initiative. While not housed in Best Buy stores, the Academy provides a work-based avenue for customer-facing Best Buy employees to build their customer service skills and position for career advancement.

Geek Squad Academy Supports Core Work-Based Learning Principles

JFF's report [*Making Work-Based Learning Work for Retail*](#) outlines seven core principles to guide the design of high-quality work-based learning that supports the success of low-income individuals seeking to enter and advance in their careers. This Way Ahead offers many of these design components:

- Supports entry into career track
- Provides meaningful job tasks that build career skills and knowledge
- Identifies target skills and validates gains
- Provides compensation
- Rewards skill development

How the Geek Squad Participation in the Academy Works

Geek Squad Academies engage youth in hands-on learning in STEM and are delivered in partnership with nonprofit partners such as libraries or community centers. Camp and workshop content includes both technical skills and team building, with Geek Squad Agents as part of the classroom delivery. Behind the scenes, more-experienced Best Buy employees serve as field lieutenants to coordinate and run Academy events. Employees, with support from their managers, can participate in one-off events or for weeks at a time. The headquarters, not the local stores, pays for all the time Best Buy employees spend participating in the Geek Squad Academy. Through conversations with one's supervisor, an employee can identify and

target skills he or she needs to work on and commit to developing those skills through involvement with the Academy. To prepare employees for the role of classroom facilitators—the first level of engagement in the Academies—Best Buy provides a six-to-eight-hour in-person training that guides them not just in the activities for the day but also through behavioral management and teaching strategies.

While the initial preparation for store staff new to the program is in the classroom, the time as a classroom facilitator in the Geek Squad Academy workshops and camps themselves serves as a work-based learning opportunity. In this setting, the Best Buy employee represents the company and teaches technology to students, employing the same customer service and communication skills required when working with customers. This also creates a controlled situation in which Geek Squad Agents can practice what they learn in training.

As Andrea Riehl, who manages the Geek Squad Academy initiative, describes, “I think it’s true of almost any job, where you can’t train for everything that’s going to happen . . . because who knows what crazy curveball is going to happen, a fire drill is going to happen What I can do is give you a lot of tools and . . . resources and then let you go. And work with you and be that supportive person.”

Staff develop leadership and decision-making skills while improving their customer service skills through leading tech workshops for various schools and community groups. Once they

have enough experience supporting instruction at the Geek Squad Academies, store employees can apply to the corporate Geek Squad Academy initiative to become field lieutenants, the Best Buy staff responsible for managing camps and programs. Field lieutenants are selected by Riehl and staff; once they are offered a position as a field lieutenant, they undergo a training boot camp to understand the complexities of running an event on the ground.

Trainees receive an additional six to eight hours of classroom training, shadow experienced Geek Squad Academy instructors, and are placed in real classroom settings as the program or classroom leads. These challenging but low-risk positions allow field lieutenants in training to make decisions independently, while they still can receive support from classroom facilitators and an experienced lead field lieutenant. The work-based learning also includes a review of the experience with Geek Squad Academy leadership.

Finally, field lieutenants are asked to test activities and materials and review communications protocols for each workshop or camp they lead. This approach to teaching and learning offers leads the opportunity to see how events develop and learn how to make informed decisions.

Business Impact

In an industry that struggles with high rates of turnover and often suffers from a lack of well-informed staff, it might seem unadvisable to encourage quality staff to be off site for extended periods of time.

Instead, the Geek Squad Academy has proven to be an effective work-based learning strategy in a safe, low-stakes setting. The program has created value beyond its goals as a positive community relations program for neighborhoods with Best Buy stores, as well as a way to build an engaged company culture. Employees participating in the program not only gain customer service skills that improve their productivity—they also stay at the company.

In fact, 85 percent of the respondents to a company survey of program participants envision staying at Best Buy for at least another year. Riehl notes: “We find that employees that participate with Geek Squad Academy are far more likely to remain with the company because they’re a little bit more engaged and maybe a little bit more proud of the company they work for once they’ve seen the work that we do in the community.”

In addition to higher retention, participation in the Geek Squad Academy also contributes to the career growth of many employees within the company. Employees return to their jobs motivated to apply what they learn back in a store environment and feeling good about serving their communities in a unique way.

Nearly 90 percent of staff participants surveyed from the program last year plan to pursue increased responsibilities at their stores due to program involvement. An overwhelming majority of program participants surveyed also indicate that their involvement has deepened their commitment to Best Buy in a variety of ways, including applying their newly developed leadership skills to their current roles. Many Best Buy employees who have participated in the Geek Squad Academy have gone on to careers in management and even at the corporate level.

Photography courtesy of Best Buy



Riehl not only directs the Academy but also serves as an example of its value in attracting and retaining high-quality talent. She started as a part-time, seasonal employee at Best Buy in 2010, while also having a full-time job as a career coach at a university. After moving from customer service to becoming a certified Geek Squad Agent, Riehl began her local involvement with the Geek Squad Academy. After two summers traveling with the program and running individual Academy events, she was excited by the opportunity to support the Geek Squad Academy nationally.

Riehl left her community college position to become a full-time employee at Best Buy, where she continues to implement this work-based learning approach.

PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS INITIATIVE

PROGRAM ORIGINS: FROM CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO PRE-EMPLOYMENT PREPARATION

Best Buy has used its corporate social responsibility initiatives not only to support and grow current staff but to build a strong talent pipeline into their stores. In 2013, Best Buy partnered with the international youth organization, The Clubhouse Network, to launch an out-of-school-time program, the Best Buy Teen Tech Centers.

The Centers support young people from underserved communities in alternative educational programming. The Centers

have their own designated youth programming staff (Teen Tech Center coordinators) to facilitate the drop-in program. Currently, there are 16 Teen Tech Centers providing young people with free access to the latest technology, coupled with mentoring support, to build creative confidence and ultimately help young people identify paths to success. In response to teens aging out of the Centers without clear plans in place after high school, Best Buy created the research-informed Pathways to Success program.

Andrea Wood, the community relations director at Best Buy, began to consider how the career needs of participating youth complement the talent demands of Best Buy stores: “We have found, sort of organically, that some teens from our Teen Tech Centers get hired by local Best Buy stores.” With 98 percent of Teen Tech Centers participants coming from diverse backgrounds, and often not immediately college bound, Wood explored how Best Buy could attract young people toward the career possibilities at their stores.

She asked, “Why aren’t we looking at this as a way to help from a business perspective and be able to get more diverse candidates in, get younger people in who are likely to be looking for their first job and also have some affinity for Best Buy, having been at the Best Buy Teen Tech Centers?” Now, Best Buy is doing just that. A partnership between Best Buy’s company side and the corporate social responsibility team jointly developed and launched a Pathways to Success pilot. Best Buy’s human resources department designed

job descriptions for youth-appropriate, entry-level positions. The community-relations team and The Clubhouse Network mapped these positions to appropriate skill-building curricula and lead the program delivery.

Pathways to Success provides a mix of classroom training and extensive work-based learning. To begin, 12 to 15 youth are recruited from within a Teen Tech Center to participate in a training cohort. The young people participate in the nine-month program at the Teen Tech Center.

During this time, a participant's time at the Center (some attend daily) is complimented with 2 to 3 hours per week of career-focused training and workshops. Curriculum includes general employability skills, such as money management, communications, and networking.

The Clubhouse Network is identifying additional partnerships to build on these trainings. For example, US Bank has expressed an interest in being involved with money management training, and LinkedIn plans to offer a LinkedIn and networking seminar for participants. Centers are also leveraging existing employer relationships to design additional job-shadowing opportunities for participants outside of Best Buy stores.

The classroom component of Pathways to Success also provides occupational training, introducing technology skills based on the job descriptions developed by Best Buy's human resources department.

One example of work-based skills developed through the program centers

on vehicle tech installations. "There's a lot of demand for getting your devices to play nicely with your car. And it's something that happens all over the country, [not] just certain markets," says Nina Nolan, program manager of the Clubhouse-to-College/Career initiatives within The Clubhouse Network.

Teen Tech Centers Support Core Work-Based Learning Principles

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- Identifies target skills and validates gains
- Provides compensation
- Rewards skill development
- Provides comprehensive participant supports

This translates into training on how to set up specific automotive accessories, such as a GPS and sound system, as well as how to sync and troubleshoot Bluetooth and Wi-Fi features. In addition, the youth learn to walk customers through how to use their new tech items.

Upon completing the classroom training, youth enter into a seven-week, full-time paid position at a Best Buy retail store. Youth are provided stipends from the Best Buy Foundation for participation throughout the year and earn hourly wages upon beginning full-time work at Best Buy, paid by the local store. Throughout the program, a Teen Tech Center coordinator and the local Best Buy provide mentoring support.

Business Impact

Currently, seven Teen Tech Centers are piloting the Pathways to Success initiative, with at least 10 participants per Center.

Nolan, along with the Best Buy staff, is excited and eager to see how these individuals transition into their store experiences, which will begin in summer 2018. With multiple partners on board in developing the curriculum

and identifying the skills required to be successful in the customer service industry, Best Buy believes these prospective new hires will soon become valuable workers and assets to the company moving forward.

LESSONS FOR SUCCESS

Best Buy has harnessed the value of work-based learning for multiple lines of impact—community outreach and educational initiatives, career advancement of participating individuals, and talent development for the company. Both the Geek Squad Academy and Pathways to Success are designed with their participants in mind—setting the stage for growth through real-world experience. They offer hands-on learning opportunities for their participants in low-risk settings, equipping participants with skills they can immediately bring into their current



roles and responsibilities as students and salespeople, supporting them in career advancement and helping to identify career tracks where they feel confident.

The success of these two programs has been made possible by a set of supports within Best Buy. The programs share the benefits of leadership buy-in and training participant staff. A culture of internal advancement has supported the Geek Squad Academy, while a focus on youth-appropriate work responsibilities has been critical to Pathways to Success.

Leadership Buy-In and Commitment

The corporate headquarters has provided strong support for both of these programs. While Pathways to Success is in its early phases, Best Buy leadership has signaled its commitment by tapping human resources to partner on job description and curriculum development.

Leadership support of the Geek Squad Academy is more established. Riehl attributes leadership's growing buy-in to store employees who have moved up the ranks and spoken from their own experiences with the program. She also credits the value of the program in helping managers identify the strengths of their workers.

Best Buy leadership reinforces support for the program by strongly encouraging stores to have employees from all roles and experience levels participate in the Academy.

Because they're participating in this different role in a different environment, it gives them the ability to see their employees in a different light and allows them to grow and be a little bit more engaged with the company, as well.

*- Andrea Riehl,
Manager, Signature Programs*

Training Participating Staff

Best Buy recognizes that appropriate upskilling and management training are vital to a participant's experience in a work-based learning initiative. Store management and Geek Squad Academy leadership are trained in the goals of the Academy and the general participant experience.

The lieutenants are offered scaffolding from Academy leadership at a corporate level. Working along with experienced peer mentors who have participated in the Academy before, these structures help ensure that they're learning what they need to do behind the scenes while also making sure that everything is running in front of the curtain for the students and other employee classroom facilitators. For the Pathways to Success initiative, The Clubhouse Network serves a role in managing the training of store staff that will engage with youth participants to ensure their success. Currently, The Clubhouse leads the professional

development and training offerings for the Teen Tech Center coordinators, the primary facilitators of the youth-focused efforts.

The vision is for coordinators to continue working with youth in becoming job ready but also lean on store staff for additional scaffolding support and create a feedback cycle relating to participant performance.

This approach allows practitioners to focus on their other responsibilities while ensuring they have the information they need to support participants during future check-ins.

Culture of Advancement

Employee participation in the Geek Squad Academy is one example of a larger commitment from Best Buy to provide employee development and career advancement at every level.

For example, every Best Buy employee is required to have an evaluation every three months, weekly coaching sessions, and monthly team check-ins. Riehl notes: “As a company, across the board, we have a pretty significant commitment to employee development. We’re always looking to develop our employees into leaders. We’re meeting them where they are and putting them on a path toward wherever they’re hoping to be.”

Employees believe that participating in the Geek Squad Academy can help advance their careers because they see long-term opportunities within Best Buy—a majority of store leaders are hired from within the company.

Identifying Youth-Appropriate Work Responsibilities

Best Buy confronted an unexpected hurdle in creating work-based learning opportunities for youth. Not all careers at Best Buy are appropriate for internship or job-shadowing programs. State law precludes non-employees from having access to personal information, which is required for some of the more in-demand job opportunities, such as home installations and repairs and mobile or computer support. As a result, Best Buy has created opportunities to for participants to at least understand these offerings in a way that allows them to be ready for a full work-based learning experience once they become employees.

MOVING FORWARD WITH WORK-BASED LEARNING

Work-based learning programs don’t just impact the community—they have an impact on Best Buy’s bottom line. These work-based learning strategies are now an embedded part of Best Buy’s entry-level talent pipeline as Best Buy seeks to bridge the gap between opportunity youth and employment.

Best Buy also hopes to use work-based learning to create a bridge that offers new employment opportunities for their store’s top performers by designing more opportunities for staff to join Best Buy at the corporate level.

While Best Buy currently offers a corporate internship program, a majority of participants do not have a previous work relationship with the company. To recruit more participants, Best Buy is currently experimenting with strategies to get more store employees entered into these corporate-level positions. A new marketing strategy targets individuals participating in the company tuition reimbursement program.

Best Buy also gives preferential consideration for these internships to those who are taking courses and eligible to apply. With these new efforts, work-based learning is sure to grow across the company.

These work-based learning programs also promise to have an impact beyond Best Buy. Since establishing a connection between their business side and their corporate responsibility team, both teams are beginning to see the possibility of having a positive impact on the industry.

Wood observes that “there is a really specific design to the jobs that are going to come open, not just for us, but for many of our vendor partners who are partnering with us on our Teen Tech Centers, like Sony and Bose and others All of us are looking for skilled workers of the future. And so this is a perfect opportunity to have a funnel—a pipeline—to these jobs.”

Best Buy’s corporate social responsibility footprint is clear. The Geek Squad Academy has brought educational programming to thousands of youth in over 100 cities. Teen Tech Centers are in the process of doubling in number, with 12 new sites planned for opening in 2018.

In parallel, Pathways to Success is now completing a pilot year with this jointly developed curriculum, and Best Buy expects to launch the program at scale in summer 2018. These programs will continue to respond to changing technology with expanded and evolving training offerings.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We asked our contacts at Best Buy for three pieces of advice that they would share with an employer considering starting a work-based learning program for young people. These were their thoughts:

> Engage partners in HR and business units early when creating a work-based learning program. Understanding the needs, skills, and potential roles for students mean that the experience will be valuable for everyone involved. Finding champions for the program within business units makes hiring and retaining interns much more likely.

> Work with potential nonprofit partners to understand capacity of staff and interest of students. This is vital; if partners involved can’t support the work or students aren’t interested in the opportunity, success will be hard to find.

> Make sure that program design meets the needs of students. An intense, 12-week training program that requires full-time attendance may not work for high school students but would work for unemployed young adults.