

Project Iowa: How a job can change a life

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Graduates from Project Iowa could talk about how the job training program propelled them to a new career, how they walked away with new technical skills or how they're now earning more than they ever have before.

But when they talk about the job training program, they tend to use words such as confidence, emotional intelligence and self-worth.

"It changed my life, honestly. Because I found me," said Heather Schmidt, who completed the program in October 2014. "I learned who I was."

She now works at Quality Resource Group in Urbandale operating a forklift, moving the company's marketing materials in and out of the warehouse.

Schmidt is only working part-time, supplementing her job there with part-time fast-food work, but she says she's better off than she was before Project Iowa.

QRG pays her \$14 an hour, while she previously lived paycheck to paycheck off the \$9 an hour she earned at Dollar General.

"I've never in my life made over \$10 an hour," she said. "It was a big change. And it was nice."

Funded by state money, grants and private donations, Project Iowa is aimed at helping the unemployed and underemployed find living-wage careers with benefits. In addition to helping those with a lack of experience or skills, the program targets those with criminal backgrounds who often struggle to find work after serving their time.

Three years in, Project Iowa has graduated 205 participants. The program has a 92 percent completion rate and a 67 percent retention rate with graduates.

In other words: For every 10 people who have joined Project Iowa, nine have completed it and seven have maintained employment for a year or more.



On average, graduates earn about \$14 an hour. More than half of Project Iowa's graduates have criminal backgrounds.

Executive Director Julie Fugenschuh credits the program's success not on its job-specific training, but on its focus on soft skills. Participants are trained to think about how their thoughts influence their actions.

Staffers emphasize each individual's value and values, Fugenschuh said, because a personally secure individual makes a much better employee than those who are unsure of themselves.

"Our presumption really is 'you are enough,' that everybody is created with everything that they need to be successful," she said. "And it's just finding — or really for a lot of our participants, it's about rediscovering — those gifts and talents, and believing in them, versus questioning yourself all the time."

That goes for ex-offenders, too. Though many companies automatically disqualify job candidates with criminal backgrounds, Project Iowa has found those willing to hire ex-offenders. It can act as a vetting source of sorts for hesitant employers.

Fugenschuh said gainful employment is key to an ex-offender's emotional healing and to preventing recidivism. But most employers aren't willing to give them a chance.

"What are they supposed to do?" she said. "If we really believe in the penal system and restitution, how much longer do we have to punish people?"

Kemin's Des Moines plant, which manufactures additives for animal feed, pet food and human food, has hired several graduates of Project Iowa. As a partner, the company guarantees a phone interview for graduates.

Amanda Bakeris, a human resources director at Kemin, said Project Iowa graduates are generally dependable, hard workers. While the company can't hire applicants with certain criminal backgrounds, Bakeris said it does consider some ex-offenders.

And Kemin works with Project Iowa staffers, who can help vet and refer candidates.

"I would say we have been more flexible with Project Iowa just because the graduates have gone through their program and have been specifically referred to us," she said.

Since he was hired on at Kemin in June, Anthony Daniels said his circumstances have changed dramatically. Earning \$18.32 an hour, he no longer has to work multiple low-paying jobs.

He's got more time and money to spend with his wife and kids. He took his family on vacation. He bought a house.

"I hate cutting my grass, but it's mine," he said. "So I'm happy."

He said he entered Project Iowa in 2014 angry and defensive. He had just been released from a halfway house after serving nearly seven years in federal prison for gun charges.

"I was basically a drug dealer," he said.

The staff made him believe in himself again. He realized he didn't have to be defined by his past.

"Really, they showed me who I was," he said.

Daniels lives in the same Des Moines neighborhood he lived in before prison. But he says he's a different person.

He constantly sees people from his past life. He ignores some people altogether, others get a polite nod.

Sometimes people approach him and ask if he's who they think he is.

Nope, he says, that's not me.

Learn more

Individuals interested in learning more about Project Iowa may attend one of the group's regular informational sessions. The meetings are held at 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. on the second and last Thursday of each month in the Maddie Levitt Conference Center of the United Way building, 1111 Ninth St.

Project Iowa

The average age of a Project Iowa participant is 37. About half of graduates are white, 40 percent are black and 10 percent identify as other races. Of its 205 graduates, 64 percent have a criminal background.

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