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The Rural Online Initiative: Remote Work and COVID-19

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Abstract

Rural Utahns experience high levels of unemployment. Under the Rural Online Initiative, USU Extension created the Master Remote Work Professional certificate course, a specialized training that equips rural residents with skills needed for remote employment. Although legislatively funded pre-pandemic, remote work employment opportunities further benefit rural communities impacted by COVID-19.

Introduction

The Rural Online Initiative (ROI) program began as an economic development strategy in 2018. It was a legislative response to increasing unemployment rates and rural-urban migration in rural Utah communities (Governor's Office of Economic Development [GOED], 2017a). Given the wide success of broadband infrastructure in rural counties (Feyerherm, 2017; GOED, 2017b), the Utah Legislature viewed remote work as a viable solution to address these challenges. As such, Utah State University (USU) Extension was tasked with developing capacity building courses in remote work best practices. The Master Remote Work Professional (MRWP) certificate course was designed to prepare Utah's rural workforce for online opportunities in remote employment. With the onset of COVID-19, the ROI program held a unique position to transition the affected workforce to remote work. USU Extension faculty have also participated in the MRWP course as many shifted to remote work.

Response

The ROI is an economic development and recovery strategy that capitalizes on the economic and environmental benefits of remote work. Benefits include job creation without rural-urban

migration, increased income, reduced overhead costs as businesses save on office space, and reduced carbon emissions which enables clean air (Greer & Payne, 2014; Kurland & Bailey, 1999). The program's objectives are to create and deliver an educational online course targeting remote work skills and assist participants with remote job placement through skills scholarships. Through remote work education, the month-long MRWP course can help rural and urban communities recover from economic hardships caused by COVID-19 through nine modules of interactive core content, assigned quizzes, group activities, and individual career-coaching sessions. Participants practice professional remote work etiquette through live weekly Zoom workshops and virtual teamwork exercises. Program coordinators also conduct additional seminars to assist participants in securing remote employment.

Participants

Given the unemployment and rural-urban migration challenges in rural areas, the target audience for the MRWP certificate course are rural Utah residents. This population includes adults, small businesses, and most recently, high school students. However, with the challenges of COVID-19, course participation expanded to include jobseekers and USU Extension faculty. Faculty participation included those who wanted to further learn about remote work skills and best practices, engage virtually with their clientele, improve their digital communication skills, and utilize online video conferencing tools.

Outcomes and Impact

Since October 2018, about 1,298 participants completed the MRWP certificate course. An evaluation of short- and medium-term outcomes captured changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations toward seeking remote employment. Results showed statistically significant increases in participants' knowledge after completing the course. Although 63% of participants did not have remote work experience, most (92%) indicated it was important or very important to acquire remote work skills. This included participants who experienced job losses because of COVID-19 and were eager to obtain remote work skills. On average, participants had high overall mean scores across all remote work skills; participants felt they had better abilities to balance their professional and personal lives, manage their professional and personal productivity, solve problems, communicate digitally, use online technology, engage in teamwork, and manage their careers.

Ninety-seven percent of participants felt their value as a remote worker improved and 96% were empowered to seek remote work after course completion. Follow-up surveys reported 167 out of 560 active jobseekers found remote work. In response to COVID-19, about 36% (123 participants) began working remotely. One participant said, "...due to restructuring, I was laid off from a previous position. After five long months of unemployment and COVID standstill, I have

been able to obtain a new position as a Payroll Controller. I am so excited about my employment, the new position, and the company in which I work! Besides making nearly a 40% pay increase, there are opportunities for new responsibilities, along with benefits and retirement!” With respect to environmental impacts, reduced commute times equated to savings of \$997 per month across all participants who found remote work due to lower fuel expenses. This further resulted in a total reduction of 3.34 metric tons of carbon emissions per month which helps promote clean air.

Public Value

The ROI program expanded significantly since its inception, now offering new and revised courses to meet changing community needs. With remote work opportunities, rural residents secure well-paying jobs without leaving their communities. This benefit of remote work is especially emphasized in a global pandemic. To support Utah residents struggling with remote work transitions or furloughs because of COVID-19, future activities include:

- *Supporting GOED’s Executive Orders 2021-03 and 2021-04.* The ROI program will provide training and strategic support for statewide efforts to increase remote work opportunities and move jobs to rural Utah. As noted in the Governor’s Executive Order, approximately 40% of Utah’s workforce worked remotely during the pandemic. For many, the change was mandated but did not include training in essential remote-work skills such as communication, collaboration, and time management.
- *Facilitating partnerships between businesses and remote workers.* Highlight remote work job opportunities to past ROI certificate holders by hosting job spotlight events with business leaders.
- *Piloting a revised Master Remote Work Professional certificate course for incarcerated populations.* This initial pilot is currently ongoing at the Garfield County Prison. Inmates preparing for release from prison are provided remote work training in sessions moderated by an ROI program coordinator.

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