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A Rural County Turns to the Internet for Jobs - No Incentives Required

By Louise Anderson

In the spring of 2009, Perry County, Tennessee - population 7,900 - had a staggering 27 percent unemployment rate, the second-highest in the nation.

Roughly 700 jobs, at two of its biggest private employers, had evaporated in quick succession. One manufacturer moved its operations to Mexico in late 2008, and a second plant went through major layoffs in early 2009.

There's nothing like an all-out disaster to spur a community to action. "We had to do something drastic, and quick," said local business leader Michael Dumont.

That action started with a focus on arts and tourism, moved on to a summer jobs program for youth, then evolved into job training and the creation of more than 100 Internet-based jobs.

From community development...

A group of local officials and business owners in the county, located about 90 minutes west of Nashville, got together to figure out what they could do. They decided that a tourism strategy - focusing on historic downtown Linden (the county seat, pop. 1,000) and strengthening the arts presence there - could infuse money into the community.

They planned a highly successful "Blooming Arts" Festival for the first day of spring, which attracted over 5,000 people. It started to feel like the community was taking control of its future.

Momentum behind them, the group learned about the availability of stimulus dollars for summer youth employment and quickly put a plan in place. They used the money to hire 65 youth who worked on projects such as community cleanup and gardening, painting facades, business research, website development for local retailers and public art projects.

The summer work program was such a success that Linden mayor Jim Azbill allocated money to keep the work going, and the community and economic development group VisionPerry was formed to carry it on. (VisionPerry operates under the town of Linden, pending approval of its application for 501c3 status).

...to economic development

The focus of VisionPerry and community leaders then turned to longer-term job creation. Business recruitment wasn't an option for a number of reasons, including the lack of a four-lane road and the remoteness of the region. The closest community college is 45 miles away.

"A lot of the opportunity in small towns is in convenience stores and restaurants, with no upward mobility," said Dumont, the program director of VisionPerry and owner of the historic Commodore Hotel in downtown Linden.

But Perry County had begun to get a lot of positive attention for the community development work it had done. Through this exposure, diligent research and meetings with a variety of people and groups, VisionPerry started to focus on work that could be done over the Internet. Ultimately, it chose to serve as a site for a rural economic development pilot project called the Digital Factory. The Digital Factory is a smart but simple concept: Train and place rural residents in jobs that can be done online by a remote workforce.

The program kicked off as a collaboration among the South Central Tennessee Workforce Alliance (the region's workforce investment board, or WIB), the town of Linden, the city of Lobelville and Perry County government. VisionPerry's headquarters in downtown Linden served as the training and co-working site.

How the Digital Factory works

Training. Thanks to WIB funding, the program trains anyone, free of charge, who has gone to the local career center and earned a [Career Readiness Certificate](#) at the silver level or higher. Participants are trained for customer service work or computer programming.

"We learned a lot of tricks for getting people into the workforce as quickly as possible," Dumont said. "We have training that takes anywhere from three weeks (for some customer service occupations) to six months. We can get them hired in three weeks, helping them through their initial calls and giving them the confidence that they can do the job."

Placement. The program goes well beyond training, actually placing people in jobs. VisionPerry places workers with about a half dozen national companies that it connected to in a variety of ways - introductions, companies that heard about what they were doing and wanted to participate, and just plain luck.

The companies certified the program's training and now offer participants full- and part-time positions, as well as contract work. Besides customer service and programming jobs, VisionPerry has had success placing people in other Internet-based work, such as website design and web-content writing.

Co-working site. One of the stumbling blocks to implementation was broadband Internet access, which is available to only about half of the households in Perry County. Mapping shows that service is available in some places where it's not, according to Dumont, who himself lives on a main road but doesn't have access.

So in addition to being a training site, the VisionPerry headquarters is a no-cost co-working center, equipped with phones, computers, printers and conference rooms. On any given day, the center is full of roughly a dozen people who can't access the Internet at home (or can't afford it) working for multiple companies on different shifts. Those who can work from home - over 100 people, to date - do.

Earnings. Wages for customer service representatives range from \$9 to \$13 per hour, but can be as high as \$25 for those who are good at making sales on the incoming calls. Those who get six months of training in multiple programming languages qualify for beginning programming work that pays \$15-\$25 an hour.

Impact. So far, the program hasn't developed an official way of measuring its impact other than the number of people who have been placed in jobs. Sales tax revenues are up and unemployment is down. But perhaps its biggest impact is also the hardest to measure: that on individuals and the community.

"We see people come in with no confidence, really struggling, [later] coming back as mentors, wearing better clothes, smiling. We see the individual impact," Dumont said. Both of the current trainers were trainees at one time. Participants range widely in age, but many are in their 50s and 60s or are single moms.

"This is a reach for a lot of people, if they are used to working in a factory or a fast-food restaurant, to now have to communicate over the phone or Internet," Dumont continued. "But when they know someone personally that has done it successfully, it gives them a lot of confidence."

Challenges and opportunities

Developing a sustainable funding model for the program is one of its current challenges, as the initiative has been funded entirely with public dollars so far (from local governments, the state, federal departments of Labor and Agriculture and the Delta Regional Authority). The slow expansion of rural broadband is another challenge.

In the short term, the program has developed new skilled workers in the region and helped them get living-wage jobs - but it's also built capacity to attract a call center or other business. "At the end of the day, companies are looking for good employees, people who will come to work every day and stay," said Dumont.

In the long term, he envisions a large, technology-savvy regional workforce that can work remotely for companies from centralized work centers. "We believe that the game that we're playing is long-term and sustainable," Dumont said. "There are 4,000 occupations that can be done over the Internet. There are some long-term implications there."

The Digital Factory concept expanded to Gibson County, 100 miles west, in late 2011; more than 50 people there have found work through the program. Now, Dumont is looking for opportunities to expand it to other communities.

The program's success is attributable to passion and hard work from people who were willing to do it for very little. "At the end of every day, we know we put people to work somewhere. That's really what drives us," said Dumont. "This is an organic way of helping ourselves."

For more information on VisionPerry, contact Michael Dumont, michael@visionperry.com, or view one of the group's YouTube videos ([here](#) or [here](#)).

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