

Insider Training

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Frank Tucker saw all the raw talent he'd need 'on the street corner' every morning. Now they're on his payroll

New area codes are cropping up faster than kudzu these days. And nobody is happier about that than Frank Tucker. Tucker is CEO of Oakland-based Tucker Technology (#4), which provides telecommunications installation and maintenance to large companies. The business, national in scope, is growing as fast as those new area codes, spurred by the proliferation of fax machines, cellular phones, and Internet hookups. "Just think about how that infrastructure has to expand to accommodate all those new numbers," says Tucker. "It's quite an opportunity."

Of course, with that opportunity comes the classic '90s challenge of finding enough of the right people to fill the spots in a fast-growing company. To ride the infrastructure wave. Tucker says, he needs "the bodies to make the money."

One secret to Tucker's ability to find the bodies is linking up with community-based organizations throughout the country. He estimates that 15% of his employees have come from such groups, which often provide skills training. He came upon the idea in 1995, when he was driving to work through some of the most economically challenged parts of Oakland. "I'd see all the human resources on the street corner," he says. "Clearly, they had no jobs to go to." And since much of the service his company provides is basic and entry-level—albeit labor-intensive—Tucker decided those "human resources" might be a terrific source of raw talent.

To draw a picture of the sort of work—and workers—involved in those entry-level jobs. Tucker describes a recent cable installation in Kansas City, Mo. For that job he hired "some real roughnecks, a few steps away from homelessness." The work was in an extremely harsh environment, pulling fiber-optic cables covered with grease through a building's walls. "You can teach almost anyone how to pull the cable and then teach the smart ones how to splice it," he says. "And then they have a marketable skill set." According to Tucker, who pays an average hourly rate of \$23, his installation jobs allow workers to build solid lives for themselves beyond merely subsisting. "These are craft people," he says. "Someone here can create a career, buy a home, take vacations. It's not just flipping burgers."

Tucker's foray into linking up with community-based organizations started in 1995, when he scored some cable installers from the Long Beach Training Center, outside Los Angeles. The group, funded by the Private Industry Council of Los Angeles, subsidized 50% of the workers' pay during a 90-day training period. That successful union was only the beginning for Tucker. Today he sits on several community boards, which gives him a chance to voice the needs of both his company and his industry. It also makes his name known when it comes time to place those newly trained workers in jobs.

One of the boards Tucker serves on is that of Capital Commitment, an organization in Washington, D.C., that trains the unemployed in telecommunications installation, and from

which he regularly hires workers for jobs in the D.C. area. Tucker also serves as a member of a focus group for the Communications Workers of America-which, among other things, is involved in converting the skills of downsized military personnel to focus on civilian technology. Closer to home Tucker has become involved with the Women's Economic Agenda Project, in Oakland, sitting on its technology advisory board.

To Tucker the advantages of his board sitting are manifold. To begin with, he gets workers who are trained before they start their jobs, and at someone else's expense. Plus, in serving on those boards, he can rub elbows with the leaders of other major corporations in his industry, many of whom just might have a need for his services. In addition Tucker reports that the people he hires through community programs tend to stay much longer than those he hires "off the street." (The three-month attrition rate for training-program graduates is less than 2%, compared with a 40% rate for other hires.) "If they can make it every day to go through that training, you know they've been socialized," he says.

Of course, even the workers who make it through the training process may bring with them a variety of personal issues, from substance abuse to criminal records. Tucker, a former social worker, says he intentionally steers clear of getting involved in employees' personal lives. "It's the only way I can manage the company," he says. "I know some people come with problems. But I'm not doing social work anymore. Otherwise I'd end up worrying about someone's child. I provide the jobs. If they can pass my drug-screening test and they have the skills and the work ethic, anything else is really none of my business."

Tucker says that employees who come to him through community-based training programs exhibit no more long-term allegiance to Tucker Technology than any other employee does. "I don't think they're any more loyal to me because I gave them a break," he says. "The ones that have developed themselves, once they realize they have marketable skills, will jump ship and go to my competitors as quickly as anyone else. In the same way, if I can steal people from competitors, I do."