

Payback Time in Oakland Entrepreneur Trains Local Youths for Telecom Jobs

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By Rebecca Smith

A year ago, Frank Tucker's telecommunications company was perched in an Oakland business incubator where Tucker took advantage of all the freebies he could get. Free accounting services. Pro bono legal advice. You name it.

Tucker, who spent 20 years in the marketing departments of AT&T, New York Telephone and Pacific Bell, was convinced that deregulation of the telecommunications industry was creating opportunities for startups like his to land lucrative contracts rewiring older buildings and equipping telephone company central offices to meet the needs of new competitors.

Today, Tucker Technology Inc. is out of the incubator and comfortably lodged in the classic Central Building in downtown Oakland. Tucker expects his company to have revenues of \$5 million this year generated by its 75 employees.

Tucker attributes the Firm's success to three things: deregulation's many opportunities, an appetite for hard work, and an ability to forge partnerships with community organizations that train the people he can put to work.

"Some people complain they can't get trained workers," Tucker said. "I see all the human resources this industry needs hanging out on street corners."

Laney College in Oakland, Women's Economic Agenda Project in Oakland and Capital Commitment in Washington, D.C. are three of Tuckers valued partners. All teach students, often from low-income neighborhoods, to become telecommunications technicians and move up from minimum-wage jobs to something more promising.

Tucker takes entry-level workers, starts them at double the minimum wage and tries to move them up to \$25-an-hour positions with the help of on-the-job training from retired Pacific Bell employees like Art Cravanas.

"When I was at Pacific Bell, you learned one job and did it for 20 to 30 years." said Cravanas, Tucker's Field manager. "Here, you see it all and do it all. It's made me excited about work again."

Nineteen-year-old Jonathan Harden started with Tucker after completing the three-month cable technician training at Laney College. He tried to get a job with Pacific Bell but it wasn't hiring. Tucker took him on as an intern in April, paying him \$10 an hour.

"I'm up to \$14 now," Harden said with evident pride. "I love the work because I'm doing different things every day, working with good people and using my mind."

Tucker also finds good employees through Capital Commitment, which supplements the technical training it offers with classes that teach the basics of the work world, such as what your boss expects, how to get along with difficult co-workers and how to handle your paychecks. In fact, he likes the organization so much that he sits on the nonprofit organization's board of directors.

Ernest Boykin, president of Capital Commitment, said his organization is involved in the welfare-to-work population and knows it isn't enough to just get people jobs.

"We need to help them figure out how to go from public assistance to a \$35,000-a-year job and make the most of it," he said. "It's not enough to make money. You need to manage it."

Tucker said his firm has leveraged off the successes of his partners. He's also worked closely with the biggest telecommunications union, the Communications Workers of America. All of his positions are union jobs.

"I'm proud when I take an entry-level person and put them in a job with a union card and a career," Tucker said.

Ethel Long-Scott, executive director of Women's Economic Agenda Project, said her nonprofit group's mission "is not to train people for dead-end jobs."

Most of her clients are single, working mothers living in West Oakland, where the median income is around \$12,000 a year.

"What Frank has done is exemplary," said Long-Scott. "It's what these big Silicon Valley companies should be doing."

Tucker, who grew up in the Bronx, said the best role model he ever had was his father. His father worked in the garment industry in lower Manhattan. Eventually, the senior Tucker saved enough money to open his own factory, partnering with a friend who ran the local luncheonette.

"I learned more watching my father go to work at 5 in the morning and return home at 8 o'clock at night than I ever learned in my MBA program." Tucker said.

From time to time, Tucker thinks about moving east, where his biggest clients - Lucent Technology, Nortel and AT&T - are located. Lucent even offered him free office space in Atlanta. But he's committed to staying in Oakland.

"I crawled into that incubator and I ran out," Tucker said. "It would be unfair of me to leave town now."