



HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY & CHANGING LIVES

<http://stridecenter.org>

The Model

The Stride Center is an innovative social venture business, using technology as a tool, a resource and a fundamental strategy for improving the communities it serves. There are two overarching elements to the Stride Center's programs:

1. The expanding IT job training program that helps adults of all ages with barriers to employment to begin well paying, upwardly mobile careers in information technology.
2. The social venture technology business, ReliaTech, where the Stride Center creates jobs for graduates, paid internships for current students, delivers affordable equipment and tech support to underserved communities.

The Stride Center

The Stride Center's career training program is breaking the cycle of poverty and offering real hope of economic self-sufficiency by preparing low income adults for careers in the information technology field. Graduates go on to enter the economic mainstream earning high entry-level pay and experiencing significant wage gains in the first 3 years.

In September 2010 the census bureau reported that more Americans are living in poverty (1 in 7) than at any time since the government began tracking this data. Growth in unemployment and resulting poverty exacerbates the already profound dilemma for adults caught in the cycle of poverty. Without comprehensive programs like The Stride Center, most of these men and women and their families will have little hope of gaining economic self-sufficiency.

The Stride Center's mission is to empower adults facing barriers to employment to gain economic self-sufficiency by providing a comprehensive career development approach designed to address the issues facing low income adults caught in the cycle of poverty. Since 1999, The Stride Center has been facing and addressing the primary roadblocks preventing low income adults from achieving success in building self-sufficient careers. These primary challenges to crossing the bridge from poverty to self-sufficiency include 1) lack of marketable job skills in promising careers, 2) lack of professional and interpersonal skills necessary in a professional work place, 3) lack of credential, 4) lack of job attainment skills and strategies 5) lack of relevant work experience and 6) lack of a robust professional network. The Stride Center's career development program has evolved for over 10 years to address these obstacles and more.

The Stride Center focuses on career skills development for the information technology field. The IT field offers every hallmark of a field promising relief from poverty including excellent entry level pay (\$16 - \$24 per hour), a proven and varied career ladder, technical certifications (credential), a robust job market and a cross sector job field. Importantly, program participants can complete the core course in 22 weeks and be ready to go to work.

Even with technical skill and a technical certification, job candidates are offered and ultimately keep jobs based on their ability to be dependable, behave professionally, interact well with co-workers, dress professionally, and more... in other words, professional skills. The Stride Center has developed a model of learning that not only teaches students what is expected of them in these aspects, but models all aspects of professionalism at all times. Students are required to behave as if they are on the job – expected to dress professionally, arrive every day on time and prepared for class, interact with staff and each other professionally and practice, practice, practice their best behavior.

Because the vast majority of Stride Center students do not have work experience in the IT field, credential in the form of a technical certification becomes absolutely essential. While most IT training programs do not even track certification success, The Stride Center has developed highly effective certification preparation tools, and Stride students have an outstanding record of success obtaining their technical certification. In the A+, Network + and MCDST certifications over 80% of students are successfully obtaining their certifications, providing them with a competitive edge over non-certified job candidates.

Ultimately, job candidates with strong technical skills and useful credentials must still compete against a pool of other qualified candidates. This means that they must have the ability to represent themselves well in all the mediums today's job candidate must utilize. Stride Center graduates will have excellent resumes, a professional on-line image (web, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc), practiced and proven interview skills, professional interview and work clothes, and more. As a result, Stride Center candidates are in demand and job placement rates, even in this competitive environment, while down from previous years are still strong.

For those students who successfully complete their training with the Stride Center, they become their professional network. The Stride Center has a strong and growing group of active employer partners who communicate with them when they have job openings. Given that over 80% of jobs seekers find jobs through internal contacts and internal referrals, this is an essential aspect of the Stride Center program. Indeed, well over 50% of graduate job placements occur through employer network referrals.

ReliaTech

The Stride Center is able to help some students gain technical work experience through paid internship positions at its social venture technology support business, ReliaTech. Stride's own studies reflect other field findings that students who are able to gain work experience through internship programs are significantly more likely to succeed in their chosen field. ReliaTech interns are nearly 100% likely to go on to work after their internship.

And, while ReliaTech work experience is invaluable to helping Stride Center start careers in IT the story only begins there. Using technology as a market force and with a dual focus on business and social mission, ReliaTech provides jobs for Stride graduates, paid internships for Stride students, low cost or free computer equipment, affordable technology support to its customers and even free tech support through regular technology fairs and volunteer events.

ReliaTech operates store locations in 3 cities in the East Bay (San Pablo, Oakland and Alameda) in communities where affordable tech support is either completely nonexistent, or difficult to access. ReliaTech serves thousands of customers from store locations or with technicians (Stride graduates) dispatched to their home or place of business. ReliaTech also provides technical support to small businesses, largely nonprofits.

Accomplishments

Since being founded in 1999, the Stride Center has completed 1635 enrollments, with a steep increase in enrollments and training locations beginning 2008 when CETF made a strategic investment in Stride's growth and expansion. Stride has maintained strong student completion (retention) of over 75% every year, and has exceeded aggressive technical certification targets of 70% since 2007. Most importantly, the Stride Center has exceeded job placement targets of 80% every year until 2009, when job placement dropped to an all time low of 64%. The Stride Center has grown from one small training location in 2007 to today's six training locations in San Pablo, Concord, Sacramento, Redwood City, East Oakland and Downtown Oakland.

ReliaTech, founded in 2004, has also witnessed significant growth since 2008. ReliaTech has refurbished over 1500 computers (2000 by the end of 2010), provided jobs or paid internships for nearly 100 individuals, given free tech support to hundreds of residents of low income communities, and in 2008, turned a profit for the first time since being founded.

The Stride Center has demonstrated that technology jobs offer a key to upward mobility for low income, adults as well as how a technology business can be both profitable and socially responsible. Today, The Stride Center is one of the longest standing IT training programs, and one of a handful of ongoing social venture business models in the technology industry.

The Stride Center and ReliaTech are well respected in the community as witnessed by an impressive list of long standing partnerships. In the nonprofit sector, the Stride Center has developed successful training partnerships that allow them to start up fully functioning technology training programs in underserved communities with low start up costs and rapid ramp up times. These partnerships include Goodwill Industries in Redwood City, the Urban League in Sacramento, the Michael Chavez Center in Concord and OCCUR in East Oakland. The Stride Center has also developed strong service and referral partnerships in the communities it serves, most notably in the Richmond area where they have successfully launched their Progress Richmond program. Progress Richmond is a collaborative program focusing on the Richmond area, building nonprofit partnerships to enhancing services for students, creating greater access to residents and building strong business and hiring partnerships in the local community. Finally, the Stride Center has developed strong business relationships with employers in communities they serve with active hiring relationships with numerous firms including Robert Half Technology, Hitachi Data Systems, Manpower, Chevron, the County of Alameda and more.

The Stride Center has been and will continue to be instrumental in enlisting, assisting and promoting digital inclusion to serve the public good. Most notably, the Stride Center has been at the center of developing and launching Empowernet California, a web based tool kit with resources to help nonprofits across California launch their own technology-based community service activities from job training and social venture businesses to community technology centers. With the latest ARRA funding, the Stride Center will be sponsoring EmpowernetCA and driving programs from their headquarters on Oakland.

All of the Stride Center's programs leverage the power of technology to bridge the digital divide, harness market forces and enable adults and families living in poverty to get out and stay out of poverty.