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Ring Power Corp. apprentice programs train area workforce

Training prepares workers for highly skilled positions

Premium content from Jacksonville Business Journal by Sarah Mueller, Reporter

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JACKSONVILLE — Ring Power Corp. calls the company's apprentice program "Learn while you earn."

Many local companies and industry associations have multiyear trade programs that teach a job or a skill while students continue to work full time. It's a good deal for the companies and employees, said one workforce specialist. Companies grow the pool of highly skilled workers and employees accelerate their career path.

Training coordinators said the No. 1 thing they look for in a candidate is attitude.

"The saying goes 'We can teach you the job, but we can't teach you how to do a great job,'" said [Candace Moody](#), vice president of communications for WorkSource Florida.

A wise investment

If Ring Power had decided not to invest in [Jose Claudio](#) as an apprentice in 2005, there's no telling where he would be now, Claudio said. The Jacksonville company offers a two-year apprentice program that teaches entry-level employees or new hires the skills to move into a shop technician job within the company. The program geared up again late last year after the company suspended it during the economic recession.

Claudio said he wasn't a school-oriented person, but he was good with his hands. He completed his apprenticeship in mid-2006 and moved up from a shop technician to his present position as a field service technician.

"Ring Power put a lot of time and money into helping me along," Claudio said.

The company, based in St. Augustine, is a Caterpillar heavy-equipment dealer in North and Central Florida. Other company divisions include power generation, energy generation systems and pipeline machinery. Caterpillar Inc. (NYSE: CAT) is a large heavy-equipment manufacturer.

Ring Power pays about \$5,000 per student for the training and students are guided by mentors. Apprentices make a base wage of \$12 an hour in and out of class, receive three hourly raises totaling \$2 and three tool credits of about \$334 based on performance and successful completion of program requirements.

Applicants must be an employee or hired as an apprentice, sponsored by a service manager, have a high school diploma or GED, be at least 18 years old and pass two aptitude tests and interviews.

It's a very challenging program, said [Chip Handley](#), vice president and director of training. "It's the best of the best."

Looking for a good fit

[Joe Sabo](#), corporate director of safety and head of the apprentice program for Ring Power, said he looks for candidate attributes that include initiative, attitude and enthusiasm. The company has nine apprentices and expects to have 15 by the end of the summer.

"It's the key to success for these young men," Sabo said. "We're trying to build a good work ethic and culture."

The [Northeast Florida Builders Association](#) has operated an apprentice program for 39 years and offers training in carpentry, electrical, heating and air conditioning and plumbing. Would-be apprentices must show documentation that includes a valid driver's license, high school diploma or GED, two letters of recommendation, Social Security number, proof of transportation and four years' trade experience. The program is four years and employers generally

pick up the costs, said [Robin Roundtree](#), apprentice program training director for NEFBA.

The association matches apprentices with employers and classes run at night from September to April each year. Students need 2,000 on-the-job training hours and 144 class hours each year and more than 1,600 apprentices have graduated.

It's a smart move for companies because they already know about the employee's quality of work, values and interest in the industry, Moody said. Instead of being one of many companies competing for those skills, businesses can gather together all the workers who shine and pick the ones they want.

Sarah covers logistics, transportation, trade, manufacturing, defense and technology

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