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Keeping hope alive for hired interns



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As PC Troubleshooters President Eric M. Shorr built his company over the last 18 years, he learned an important lesson about community involvement: It doesn't have to hurt.

Shorr said many small businesses view community involvement as a drain on revenue and staff time, and is best left to corporate giants with greater resources.

He rejects that notion and says his company's internship program – among other community-outreach initiatives – not only changes lives but is simply good business.

Shorr is happy to introduce you to Leonel "Leo" Padilla to prove his point.

A native of Honduras, the 24-year-old started as an intern at PC Troubleshooters as a sophomore at The Met School in Providence. He continued as an intern for more than two years, received his associate's degree from New England Institute of Technology and is now a network engineer at the company.

Padilla is just one example of the company's internship successes. In fact, five of its eight technicians started at PC Troubleshooters as interns. Overall, the company – expecting its best year with an anticipated \$2 million in 2010 revenue – has 13 employees who service and maintain computers and networks for the small business and educational markets.

PC Troubleshooters' interns typically come from The Met School, the New England Institute of Technology, MotoRing Technical Training Institute (MTTI) and Ocean Tides School in Narragansett.

Many of the interns are from inner-city neighborhoods that often seem like barriers to successful careers.

"At PC Troubleshooters Inc., our mission is to bring back and instill hope, to show the many possibilities available to each person," the company stated in its Business Excellence Award application.

Eric Shorr said the internship program "works both ways," as it gives his company extra sets of helping hands, as well as a chance to mold potential employees and see

them in action before offering permanent work. He estimates that more than 50 interns have worked at the company since the program began eight years ago.

The company's community involvement doesn't end there.

Eric and his wife, Lisa A. Shorr, the company's vice president of marketing, also support nonprofits by providing pro bono computer work and sitting on numerous boards. The company lends its expertise and equipment to Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education (RISE) and Clinica Esperanza – Hope Clinic, a free health clinic in the Olneyville section of Providence.

Eric Shorr is also a board trustee for RISE and the University of Rhode Island Hillel, part of an international group dedicated to enriching the lives of Jewish students. Lisa is a board trustee of Friends of the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, The Miriam Hospital and the Jewish Community Center of Rhode Island.

It's the internship program, though, that the Shorrs take the most pride in.

'It gives them the realization that a real career is possible for them.'

BRENDAN GERRITY

Ocean Tides School president



The company offers a variety of options to students based on their needs and the programs run by the schools they attend.

A student's involvement could range from a one-day job shadow to a typical eight- to 12-week internship. PC Troubleshooters employees work with three to four interns throughout the week, 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Because the internships are unpaid, it's just a matter of providing staff time to nurture the students' skills.

"It requires a lot of time, no question about it. And from time to time, it can be challenging," said Eric Shorr.

"There have been a few bumps along the way, [but] it doesn't detract from the wonderful kids we have had."

He said interns work side by side with technicians, who teach them the basics of computer service and repair. Once trained, the interns' jobs range from setting up new computers to identifying and removing computer viruses.

"They're certainly not 100 percent trained, but they have definable technology skills – enough to get a foot in the door," said



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GIVING THEM A SHOT: PC Troubleshooters Inc. founder and President Eric M. Shorr, right, with company employee Leonel Padilla, who started as an intern from The Met School.

Shorr.

He added that interns who get hooked on computers as a career have gone on to study computer science and computer repair.

Lisa Shorr believes computer knowledge is just one of the takeaways for the students. Many of the interns come to PC Troubleshooters with no work experience and don't know appropriate workplace behavior, so the company works on "building people skills."

Because some of the interns visit clients with staff technicians they need to understand good customer service.

"This is a very emotional business. When your computer isn't working it is very stressful and you want to feel supported," she said. "We teach [the interns] to interact respectfully. We teach them how to dress appropriately and the importance of smiling."

It's clear that the company's dedication to the program goes beyond work force development.

"Leo is like a son to me," said Gordon Tempest, the company's mentorship director, who took Padilla under his wing. He said that he had an immediate personal connection to Padilla and their friendship has grown over the last seven years.

And, Padilla says Tempest is more than just a boss. "Gordon has changed the path of my life," he said.

Brendan Gerrity, president of the Ocean Tides School, the Narragansett-based school for troubled boys, has worked with PC Troubleshooters for more than 12 years. Three years ago he started an internship program with the company.

"It has been an outstanding experience for our students. For many of our boys it

gives them the realization that a real career is possible for them and that they can really learn necessary skills to be successful," said Gerrity.

Lisa Shorr pointed out that the company's internships have not only benefited teens, but adults looking for a second career. Many of the interns from MTTI are people who lost their jobs and needed retraining. She said PC Troubleshooters has been lucky enough to help several unemployed re-enter the work force.

The Shorrs said the beauty of PC Troubleshooters' philosophy has been the influence it has had on employees and their outlook on giving back. "When hired by PC Troubleshooters, it is engrained from Day One that community involvement will be a part of their career," the company stated in its application.

While he was a student at The Met, PC Troubleshooters helped Padilla with an ambitious senior project. The student set up four computers to be used in a small village in El Salvador. Armed with the upgraded computers and his confidence gained from working with Tempest, Padilla made the trip to El Salvador and trained people there on how to use the computers.

Today, Padilla spends one hour each week serving as a mentor at the Hartford Park Housing Development in Providence, as part of a Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education program. The mission of RISE is to provide scholarships and mentoring to children of currently and formerly incarcerated parents.

The Shorrs believe it's their duty to set an example for other small businesses.

"You do not have to be an enterprise-level corporation to really make an impact," Lisa Shorr said. ■