

Not just for trades: Aon wants other white-collar firms to adopt its apprenticeship program

By Lisa Bertagnoli September 18, 2017

If apprenticeships can work for the trades, why can't they work for the financial services industry?

Apparently they can. That's why Aon today is presenting the template for its apprenticeship program to heads of human resources from 32 companies based here or with a substantial presence here. The meeting, scheduled to take place at Wrigley Field's American Airlines conference center, will be followed by the launch of the Chicago Apprentice Network. That network will help community college students, workforce- and education-oriented nonprofits, and employers develop and maintain ties with one another.

Hyatt, KPMG, Walgreens and Adler Planetarium are among the expected attendees. The planetarium, which employs 200 people, has 16 paid internships for high schoolers each summer and is looking for ways to tap the college population, says CEO Michelle Larson. Two Adler HR executives are attending "because we need to learn more," Larson says.

Aon's apprentice program, **launched in January**, employs 25 students from Harold Washington College in the Loop and Harper College in northwest suburban Palatine. The apprentices, most of whom are people of color, hold entry-level positions in Aon's human resources, IT and insurance business departments. Each week, they spend 20 to 30 hours working and 10 to 15 hours taking classes. Their \$55,000 a year in compensation includes health insurance, a retirement savings plan and tuition. When apprentices receive their associate degrees, Aon will offer them a full-time job that includes a career track. A second group of 25 will begin apprenticing this January. Aon has committed to hiring 25 apprentices a year for at least four years.

The program helps Aon fill positions and reduce turnover; it is neither charity nor a job-creation program, says Bridget Gainer, vice president of global affairs at Aon and **architect of the apprentice program**. (She's also a Cook County Board commissioner.) "These are jobs that existed at the company," she says. A crucial element is that Aon abandoned its four-year-degree requirement for certain entry-level jobs. That requirement, more a habit than anything, created high turnover for some entry-level positions, as overqualified people would take the jobs and then leave in 18 months. "The turnover was distracting," Gainer says.

Apprentices in white-collar industries are common in Europe, says Paige Ponder, CEO of **One Million Degrees**, a Chicago nonprofit that **supports low-income, highly motivated** community college students. In Chicago, students generally attend school while patching together an income from shift work or driving an Uber or Lyft car. Apprenticeships, during which students work and learn at the same time, frees them from "barriers that don't need to be there," Ponder says. Aon pays for a One Million Degrees staff person to be on-site, helping apprentices develop necessary soft skills such as time management and working in teams.

Gainer plans to talk up the benefits of hiring City Colleges students. "These are a group of talented kids in the city," she says. "Most employers don't think about hiring from Harold Washington." If all goes well, she says, all 32 companies will launch apprentice programs. "The opportunity to scale is by getting other companies involved," Gainer says. She adds that working with Aon, Zurich North America—the Schaumburg-based branch of the Swiss firm—began offering apprenticeships in 2016, and Accenture will begin a program based on Aon's template.

The idea for the program occurred to Gainer one day when she realized she could see Harold Washington College from her Aon Center window, but that Aon had never worked with the institution. Aon, CNA, Allstate and Countrywide developed an insurance curriculum with Harold Washington, which launched in 2013. In 2016, Aon then invited students to apply for the apprenticeship. The 100 students who applied took a college readiness exam and sat through several interviews, and the 25 who were accepted began work in January.

Kai Steward, 22, calls her work as a technology apprentice "definitely challenging" and "definitely life-changing," as it gives her an opportunity she wouldn't have had otherwise. "I am not coming out of a four-year university," she says. "I don't have the same track record as the people who'd usually be in this position."

Will she accept a job at Aon when she finishes her degree? "No question about it," Steward says.
