

ICT Training and the ABCs of Employability

YearUp's jobs program for urban youth

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

The ICTD field is filled with individual success stories extolling the benefits of ICT access and fluency. These stories are often highly influential because they are rhetorically powerful, memorable narratives that create lasting frames to contextualize and interpret other data. Unfortunately, they are often driven by the demands of public relations as opposed to rigorous analysis.

When the goal is to share the story of a super star and tug heart strings, important details can be omitted. To understand how ICT programs work for *typical* trainees, to spread narratives that illuminate deeper dynamics and to amplify broadly useful lessons, stories should be researched and constructed with intention and rigor.

CIS is developing a methodology and story series that attempts to tap the rhetorical and qualitative explanatory power of detailed, contextualized, and personalized ICT case studies. While tension may sometimes exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, a methodology built on intensive questioning and storytelling rich in the right details can uncover and communicate evidence of successful programs.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities. Properly constructed, evidence-based stories can serve the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs. Methodological direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by the project lead, Andrew Gordon, of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington.

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Less than two years ago, Rudy had never been to New York's financial district. He dreamt of being a counselor, but ended up working "a dead end job" at the local movie theater. Today, the soft-spoken, professionally dressed man who rides the New York subway number 6 train to the 42nd street exit every weekday works as an Information Technology (IT) support technician at Price Waterhouse Cooper, (PWC). He never imagined that he would be working for a Fortune 500 company with aspirations to move into a management position.

Reflecting back on the time he first heard about the YearUp program, Rudy laughs, "I didn't think it was real. You know, someone paying you to go get an education!" Rudy's life has dramatically changed. Today he is grateful for the program that taught him confidence and introduced him to a world of opportunity. Rudy recalls a recent conversation with a friend of ten years who said, "Wow, Rudy, in high school you weren't the way you are now. You have your whole life in front of you. Nothing's too hard for you." Rudy recognizes the person he's become and attributes the change to YearUp.

One year of skills training and paid work experience

YearUp is a yearlong, intensive training program that builds IT expertise along with complementary professional skills, the "ABC's" that are required to successfully operate in the modern workplace. "Attitude, Behavior and Communication," explains founder and director, Gerald Chertavian. "Technical proficiency is not enough. To bridge the gap between the huge pool of youth in urban areas looking for work and the shortage of skilled labor that companies face, YearUp developed a comprehensive training approach" for urban young adults aged 18-24. The model also provides on-the-job apprenticeships, which in many cases turn into full-time work for YearUp graduates. According to one staff member, the program "prepares students to tackle workplace challenges using discretion and integrity."

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Rudy, on the importance of a stipend for trainees

YearUp also provides a modest, but critical stipend that allows students to devote a year to education and skills building. The educational stipend enables many youth to leave their current jobs and commit their time to the intense program schedule. "If they didn't provide the stipend, some of my friends wouldn't be able to do it. You know, some of them have kids and other responsibilities. Some have to work other jobs anyway." Rudy praises YearUp's approach and the staff's commitment to helping them through the transition.

Caring Staff, Strict Discipline

"Supportive, caring staff are an important part of our model," says Chertavian. "One day I was walking to work and I saw one of our students crying outside the building.

His best friend had committed suicide and I spent the rest of my morning comforting him and making sure he got the help that he needed. Now, I had a full calendar that had to be rescheduled. Was that a waste of my day? No, it was an incredible opportunity to help. That's the kind of atmosphere that we want our instructors to support. We want them to be invested in the outcomes of the students."

Caring, however is accompanied by strict discipline and high expectations. YearUp intentionally screens its students, so that the investment has a high probability of success. For example, students are required to have a high school degree or its equivalent and read at an 8th grade level. Being on time is also mandatory. "At their interview, if they are one minute late, we tell them to come back tomorrow. If they are late a second time, they are not accepted into the program," Chertavian explains. "It doesn't help anyone to lower the bar for these students."

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Founder Gerald Chertavian, on YearUp's approach to discipline and high expectations

Rudy graduated in January along with his cohort and the second class of YearUp New York. Nearly every element of the program intentionally reinforced employability lessons, including the commute. YearUp's location in the financial district helped Rudy imagine himself working there. Riding the subway downtown is part of the training experience that prepares students for a successful career. The dress code and a code of conduct are strictly enforced starting on day one. Participants that don't abide by these expectations are penalized. They lose points from a pre-assigned scale that determines their weekly stipend.

Appropriate behavior has a financial reward. The behavioral expectations apply to everyone at YearUp. The YearUp network--teachers, mentors, and supporters--shows young people consistent respect, a valued complement to strict discipline.

YearUp's stress on technical skills as well as interpersonal skills distinguishes its curriculum from other technical training programs. "Teaching technology skills is not that difficult," one staff member says. "We are good at teaching the technology needed in professional settings. What's harder is helping a young adult from a disadvantaged background gain the communications skills and confidence needed to succeed in a prestigious workplace."

Employer Connections

Karen Fleshman, Director of Cultivation at YearUp Manhattan, attributes part of YearUp's success to active outreach with partner firms, especially through the apprenticeship program and corporate donations. "Our partners have a confidence in YearUp's ability to produce well-trained, motivated young workers."

Employer participation is an important element of YearUp's strategy because firms underwrite a large chunk of program costs. "It costs \$24,000 per student per year. \$16,000 comes from the employer for the apprenticeship. \$4,000 comes from government—we persuaded them of the substantial cost savings of investing in jobs versus paying for public assistance down the road. The last \$4,000 comes from private donors." Chertavian associates YearUp's credibility among employers with early "guarantees" made to firms. "We told them if they weren't satisfied, they wouldn't have to pay. And we've had remarkable success."

The social benefits of promoting economic development in urban communities and increasing the diversity of their employees are not lost on firms, but according to Chertavian, "we never start with that. It always has to be about providing excellent, skilled workers."

Alumni Networks

The stress placed on interpersonal communication helps each cohort feel like family. Rudy regularly meets with other alumni to share stories, offer support and volunteer for the organization that "changed my life for the better." He plans to participate in a summer city festival with the YearUp community. Primarily a music festival, "Summer Jam" happens in Giant Stadium and provides current YearUp students, alumni and apprentices a chance to socialize and have fun while promoting the program.

After graduation and before finding his current position, Rudy temporarily worked in YearUp's headquarters, assisting with communications and operational support. During this period he continued to interview and to look for work. He found his current position as a result of a YearUp staff member who was scouting for additional sites to place apprentices. Human Resources at PWC wouldn't commit to the apprenticeship, but inquired whether any graduates were available to fill open positions. Rudy was interviewed a number of times before receiving the job offer. During that time he was offered a full-time outreach position with YearUp. While he appreciated the YearUp offer, he "couldn't pass up the opportunity" at PWC.

Not all alumni end up working for financial firms. Some attend college or pursue other work altogether. But all benefit from the YearUp experience. Rudy recalls one fellow graduate who chose not to work in IT after completing the program because "his passion is with dance." Intangible benefits of the program are still highly valuable. Rudy explains that his friend "still completed the program because he saw the value in it." Or, in his own case, "When I think back to who I was a year ago, I guess you'd say that I wasn't as polished" as I am now.

The value of the job and spreading the word

Rudy appreciates the impact of his job and the importance of his work. "People get really frustrated and upset when technology isn't working properly." It feels good to "help them through their problem."

Rudy is also conscious of his impact on the larger YearUp community. "I am just trying to work very hard at Price Waterhouse Cooper right now. You might say that I'm the ambassador for YearUp." His performance might mean opportunities for alumni and students, "maybe they're waiting to see how well I do before they think to work with apprentices? I've had managers ask me questions about YearUp. They want to learn about it."

Rudy also promotes the program informally. As a result, 10 of his friends are either enrolled or interviewing for YearUp. Laughing, he recognizes that "most all of them were from the movie theatre." Rudy reflects on how he's encouraged his longtime friend to apply for the program. He recently had specific coaching for his friend's upcoming interview, "I know you can do it, man. I know you're going to be more successful than me. You just have to hit it hard and make the best of yourself."

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Rudy, speculating on how his performance affects the larger YearUp community

AUTHORS

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