Atrion's In-House Training Program To Grow Post Acquisition By Carousel

By Lynn Haber

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When the acquisition of **Atrion Inc.** by its Rhode Island neighbor **Carousel Industries** is finalized, sometime in the next month or so, expect to see Atrion's apprenticeship program, put in place some seven years ago, accelerate.

Why?

Because it works — and it works very well.

"We're very proud of the training programs that Carousel has orchestrated in years past, but the very extensive training program that Atrion runs — we see this as a stellar example of how to develop talent," said Nikki Nemarich, vice president of marketing at Carousel.

With that, Nemarich added that they would crank up the program a notch or two once Atrion becomes Atrion, a Carousel company.

Carousel's Nikki Nemarich

In fact, a new apprentice class got underway on July 11, which is more than a month after Carousel announced its intent to buy Atrion. The new class is made up of 20 students, including four engineers from Carousel and the remainder being new hires specifically selected for the program.

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To date, about 100 people have gone through the apprenticeship program with only a 3 percent washout rate – or dropouts, according to the program's creator, Atrion CEO Tim Hebert. There are

two tracks: One referred to as the standard program is for people who have zero IT background — say someone right out of college, and the other is the accelerator program for those with some experience – usually less than two years – but with gaps in their expertise.

The program currently underway is the accelerator program.

After seven consecutive years of running the apprenticeship program, this is how Hebert sums up the outcome: "If I take someone who's gone through either program [standard or accelerated] and compare them to someone with three-to-five years of experience in the IT workplace, our candidates after one year are more well-rounded, stronger, and more knowledgeable. And, for people in the accelerated program, they compare to someone who has five-to-seven years of experience," he said.

There are three key development areas for candidates in both pathways of the program: leadership training to develop character — making it stronger and more refined; soft skills that address customer service, communication, problem solving and critical thinking; and technical skill-sets training.

All students in the accelerator group put in 2,000 hours of on-the-job training and eight weeks of classroom training. The standard group puts in the same amount of job-training hours, plus 100-120 days in the classroom.

The retention rate of employee students to date is about 90 percent, with employees sticking it out at Atrion for about five years. That's about a year more than Hebert expected when he set out on this path.

Why do it?

Eight years ago, an in-house training program wasn't part of any strategic corporate plan. It grew out of frustration.

"We were looking for three mid-level networking engineers or **unified-communications** engineers around the Cisco product subset. After six months and 100 job candidates later, zero were qualified for the any of the jobs," explained Hebert.

The candidates lacked technical skills, were poor at communication or were simply not desirable.

Then Hebert had a light bulb moment. "I thought, I could take anyone off of the street, train them for six months and have a better job candidate than anyone I interviewed at the time," he said.

Not only didn't his colleagues think too much of his idea, they laughed at him.

"This by far is the most thorough and comprehensive development training program that we've ever seen. Atrion has tapped into something that's very unique. We're thrilled about it," said Nemarich.

Atrion's apprenticeship program is formally registered with the federal government, which means it meets the requirements for on the job training, i.e. 2,000 hours or satisfying certain levels of certification.

"We satisfy both. Students in work in the field job shadowing or being supervised on projects and eventually leading projects. When our students finish the program they get a **Cisco** certification, such as a CCNA or **Microsoft** certification," explained Hebert.

The apprentice program is a two-way street. New hire students also reap benefits — Hebert calls it a life-changing event for them.

"When we started the standard program, most of the students were making $12 per hour on average in jobs that weren't careers," he said, noting that they were underemployed. The apprentice program gives them a career ladder they could climb and from the get-go bumps their wages to $16 per hour.

After they complete the program they get a promotion into an engineering role at a starting salary of $40,000 per year, or about $20/hour.

"Over a five-to-six year window they're making over $70,000 per year on average," he said.

Accelerated program candidates make about $45,000 to $55,000, and once they finish the program they have the right skill sets to maximize their long-term earning potential.

There's a rigorous, multi-step vetting process for the apprentice program. The one in progress had 200 candidates for 15 slots.

When Carousel takes it to the next level, program expansion will include the addition of new technical capabilities such as **security**, which has just been added, plus others, such as virtualization, internetworking and unified communications, etc.

"Our program is very modular, so it's easy to add new technical modules," said Hebert, who will remain CEO of Atrion, a Carousel company.

The program will also grow to include more candidates and outside of New England.

Thirty-year old Atrion is poised to become part of a $500 million plus company with more than 1,300 employees.

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