

A WORK-BASED LEARNING CASE STUDY



Unique Work-based Learning Program Designed to Fill the Unmet Workforce Needs in the HVAC/R Industry by Building Awareness and Experience Opportunities for Youth

CLIENT

Gustave A. Larson (Larson Company) is a leading wholesale distributor of HVAC/R equipment, parts, and supplies for the Midwest, Plains, and Mountain States.

UNIQUE OBSTACLES

Low Career Awareness and a Limited Pipeline for HVAC Technician Careers

THE PROBLEM

Many industries today, like the Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration (HVAC/R) industry, are experiencing a severe labor shortage and are not seeing enough qualified candidates being trained to fill them. At the same time, there are not enough career exploration opportunities for our youth that provide broader exposure to the working world they will one day enter.

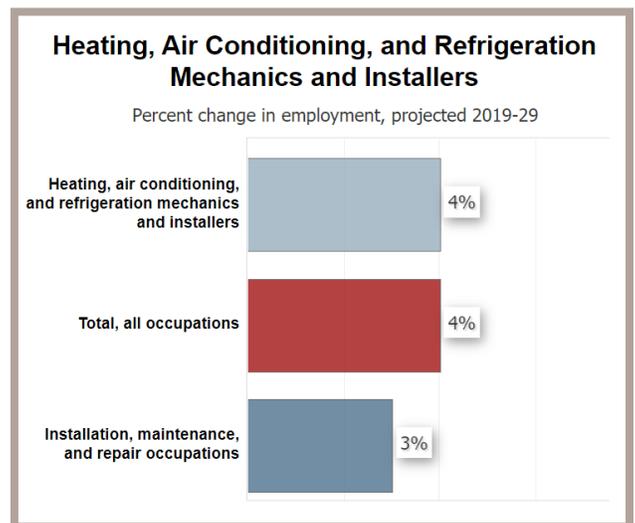
Students who are unable to “connect the dots” between learning and work risk losing motivation to graduate with the skills they need to be successful in the job market—and worse, they will lack key 21st-century workplace competencies, such as critical thinking and problem solving. This is especially problematic for disadvantaged populations who do not have equity in access to a suitable education that leads to career success.

THE OVERVIEW

This is why Gustave A. Larson, a leading wholesale distributor of HVAC/R equipment, parts, and supplies chose to partner with GPS Education Partners (GPSEd). GPSEd is a work-based learning (WBL) intermediary service provider that helps employers connect more young people to career pathways at an earlier age, while at the same time helping them fill the unmet needs of their industry’s workforce.

At the three-year mark, the Larson Company’s *HVAC/R Industry Career Pathways Program™* sees encouraging signs of success:

- Pilot year, 50% of students were placed in the industry.
- Year two, made further investments in developing earlier career awareness programming to serve as a pipeline to youth apprenticeships.
- In the third year, despite the challenges of COVID-19, 100% of students were either hired on by the Larson Company or one of their industry customers or are continuing on their HVAC/R pathway.



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WORK-BASED TRAINING IMPROVES DECISION MAKING FOR POST- SECONDARY LEARNING

Many trade careers, like HVAC/R service installers and technicians, only require specialized skills learned through advanced training, rather than a 4-year college or university degree, yet many high school students are not even aware of the well-paying opportunities these industries have to offer. Because of the shorter training time these careers require and the low awareness rate among high school students, businesses like the Larson Company are taking the lead to develop scalable work-based learning programs that build early career awareness and provide experiences that can lead to apprenticeship opportunities to allow students to enter the workforce quicker and be free from college debt.

Kara Mueller, Career and College Coordinator/CTE Director at St. Louis Park High School in Minneapolis, MN, a feeder school to the *HVAC/R Industry Career Pathways Program*, shares that in her experience, “Schools have become too siloed and work-based learning isn’t even just for tech-ed anymore. We must teach the teachers first so that they have a better understanding of how students learn.”

The nature of work has evolved more rapidly than the way we think about work. And the ways we prepare or educate students have not kept pace with the changing needs of employers. Employer driven workforce solutions are long overdue and those participating in solving these issues demonstrate their belief that our youth are essential to creating a diverse workforce.

Mueller shares, “College is a very expensive career exploration program.”

Work-based learning models can deliver considerable success in meeting the demand for skilled workers for employers. Many employers like the Larson Company believe that it is a necessary strategy to ensure the availability of the next generation of skilled workers that will be required to sustain and grow their businesses.

THE OPPORTUNITY

With a business philosophy that focuses on serving the needs of their customers with value-added, professional services, the Larson Company sought an experienced work-based learning intermediary partner that could provide a consistent and scalable approach to helping them solve their workforce needs—and they didn’t have to look far.

Larson Company was already partnering with GPS Education Partners in another work-based learning program so Scott Larson, President, knew GPSEd could help design, build, and execute a scalable program that delivered results not only for their workforce, but for the workforce of their customers who sell, service, and install HVAC systems. “Partnering with GPSEd is helping accelerate HVAC/R careers among the young student population by providing a future workforce to help fill our talent pipeline as well as a pipeline for our customers,” says Larson.

GPSEd has delivered the Larson Company a unique work-based learning program that begins by building industry awareness through light touch activities such as guest speakers, videos, and career fairs. Students progress along a continuum of learning through exploration where they tour facilities or job sites, participate in boot camps, job shadows, or experiments until they are ready to gain experience through a youth apprenticeship program. Graduates of the program can continue preparation for a career which would include credentialed (post-secondary) training in an apprenticeship program and eventual ongoing development up the career ladder.

HOW WORK-BASED LEARNING HAS BROUGHT EMPLOYERS AND STUDENTS TOGETHER

While not all employer perceptions of how well graduates are being prepared have been favorable, it is in no way the end of the story. With more employers like the Larson Company building bridges between education and work, there is ample evidence that these investments are in fact helping them develop their workforce pipeline.

Joe Schuh, Branch Manager at the Larson Company is afraid that many high school students have the wrong perception of trade careers. Schuh says, “The way I see it, the benefit of our program is that we are able to expose students to multiple areas of our [wholesale] operations, and with the engagement of our customers, our students also get to experience the contractor side with equipment installations and service calls.” Schuh believes that businesses must make a commitment to help students become as prepared for technical careers that do not require a 4-year college degree as those that do. “I think students who get to experience a work-based learning program come into the field with a more realistic outlook and expectations of what the employer is looking for.”

Joe shared that not only do the students benefit from the program, but he has seen their employees become teachers that have developed pride in the work they have done to transform a young person's life.

Gage Rosenbaum was one of those students whose lives were transformed. As a GPSEd Class of 2021 graduate, Gage accepted employment at one of the Larson Company's contracting customers, Bay Area Services, where he will continue his journey in the HVAC/R industry. Gage was a good student in high school earning straight B's but he found himself unmotivated by the careers teachers were focused on, those requiring a 4-year degree. As a person who prefers to be moving about versus sitting at a desk, Gage loved the idea of being able to "test drive" a career in the HVAC/R industry while figuring out his future career goals. "A lot of the technical-skilled jobs were not really getting talked about in my high school, but when I had a chance to meet with GPSEd, they showed me how I could gain exposure and experience and that's when I felt I had found a future career that I could be successful at."



Gage Rosenbaum, GPSEd alum

Gage realized that this was not necessarily the easier path, but he found that the more work he put into it, the more his mentors at Bay Area Services put into him. "It was a lot of, we'll tell you what you need to do, but you'll have to have the motivation and desire to do it," shared Gage.

Jack Beaulieu, Install Manager of Bay Area Services, a full HVAC contractor in northern Wisconsin who paired Gage with one of his younger but seasoned employees for his mentorship told him, "if he's learning, keep teaching. And he was, so we did."

Max Laven, GPSEd Class of 2019 alumni, was another student who found success after joining the *HVAC/R Industry Career Pathways Program*. "Working at the Larson Company taught me how different companies go about their business, how the equipment works, what the equipment is composed of, the purpose of it, and just how the HVAC industry works as



Nathan Carlson (left) and Max Laven (right), GPSEd alumni

a whole—this wasn't something I was going to learn in high school without this program." Laven accepted a position as an HVAC Technician with RJ Heating and Air Conditioning following his youth apprenticeship.

As the Larson Company scaled its program to cover its Minnesota territory, it found more success with another young student, Angel Diaz. Angel found his opportunity in the GA Larson *HVAC/R Industry Career Pathways Program* while attending St. Louis Park High School in Hennepin, MN. When the start of the program was threatened by COVID-19, he decided to pursue it on his own and is glad he did since it led him to his current career in the industry.

Kara Mueller recalled in an article that appeared in the *Hometown Source* by Seth Rowe "Our whole economic system could not thrive and survive if everybody had a 4-year degree. Success in the economy is based off of multiple pathways, and so we [St Louis Park High School] work hard for that." Mueller also went on to state, "The [GPSEd] framework was phenomenal, so after I looked everything over I was like, oh my, we need to bring this to our students, this is a must."

GPSEd plays a key role in helping employers attract the right student to the right career pathways through student assessments. Tricia Munoz, GPSEd's Regional Youth Apprenticeship Coordinator shares, "We encourage students to aim for careers that align with their values, interests, and skills. The classes that a student struggles with most can teach them about a particular skill deficiency, which they need to identify early on so they can either improve in that area or redirect their path. As well, those same classes can also help a student develop resilience—a quality that leaders in today's workforce need."

Stephanie Janke, Larson Company's Director of Human Resources, may have stated it best, "The services we provide are not optional, everyone has seen the results of our *HVAC/R Industry Career Pathways Program* and we are really

excited to continue to impact more student transformations that bring our industry success.”

GPS Education Partners knows the value of work-based learning and believes more employers are learning how these programs can help them close the skills gap and develop a future workforce that not only has the skills necessary to succeed, but is aligned to a company’s culture that provides the sustainability needed for the long haul.

Employer-led work-based learning programs can be a more economical solution to building a talent pipeline when considering the rising costs associated with attracting, developing, and retaining employees that have not had previous experiences that work-based learning programs offer its participants.

IN CONCLUSION

Work-based learning provides employers with a new and fresh talent pool that is sufficiently large enough to develop their future workforce. With today’s highly technical economy, service careers such as technicians, installers, and even customer service, have a profound impact on manufacturing and should be as much of the career planning landscape as are careers requiring a 4-year college degree.

Across the work-based learning journey, intermediaries, like GPS Education Partners, provide the much needed capacity and services to manage and scale programs making them more accessible to more of our youth.

Services such as recruitment (employer and student) and convening and managing partnerships, are integral to all WBL models. Deeper knowledge of industry needs, curriculum design, and aligning work experiences to post-secondary education are key for youth apprenticeships but are no more urgent than developing early career awareness.

The time is now for all employers to consider how their future workforce will be developed and what part they will play to tackle the challenges that lay ahead if schools are unable to close the gap between learning and the real-world of work.

To learn more about developing your future workforce through work-based learning and how you might get started, visit GPS Education Partners at: GPSEd.org/NextGenTalentDev



About Gustave A. Larson Company

Gustave A. Larson Company is the Midwest, Plains and Mountain States leading wholesale distributor of Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration (HVACR) equipment, parts, and supplies. Our business philosophy is to focus on serving the needs of our customers with a value-added, professional and enthusiastic attitude.

REFERENCES

[1] <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/installation-maintenance-and-repair/heating-air-conditioning-and-refrigeration-mechanics-and-installers.htm#tab-6>



Questions? Want to enroll? Contact us today! enroll@gpsed.org | 844.821.8118

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