INTRODUCTION

About 13 years ago, a new blip appeared on the internet. It was September 2006 and Facebook had just become publicly accessible for the first time. It wasn’t the first popular social media site—Classmates went live in 1995 and Myspace in 2003, both with tens of thousands of users—but Facebook would later dominate and play a large part in making social media ubiquitous in American culture. Most people, from teens to seniors, check their social media pages daily, if not more often, sharing content, commenting, conversing, and consuming information.¹ Social media has clearly become a go-to source for information and social engagement. Given the significant role social media plays in most people’s lives, the platforms are a valuable resource for communications and recruiting in TechHire programs.

Maximizing the power of social media for recruitment and engagement may not be straightforward, though. Besides posting content, collecting likes, and amassing followers, how can your TechHire program utilize social media to inspire and engage your target audience? In this brief we’ll explore answers to that question, focusing on the successful strategies of Clackamas Community College (CCC) in using social media to dramatically increase its TechHire program recruitment numbers for youth ages 17 through 29—a target population for CCC and many grantees. This technical assistance brief will start with background on the subject, followed by a case study detailing some promising social media practices road-tested by CCC, with a focus on Facebook, the most widely used platform.
SOCIAL MEDIA TODAY

Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 are the most active age segment on social media, according to the Pew Research Center’s Social Media Fact Sheet. In order, this age group’s preferred social media platforms are YouTube (91 percent of this population use it), Facebook (79 percent), Instagram (67 percent), and Snapchat (62 percent). Thus, while it’s true other forms of social media rival, and even exceed, Facebook’s popularity, an overwhelming majority of young people continue to report using it. They may not be engaging on it as much as on other social media sites, but they are likely, at the very least, to be receiving information passively via Facebook. The research also shows that their older friends and family members are on it too—and they should be part of your target audience as well, because they can play a part in encouraging engagement from your target age range. A young person’s grandmother or next-door neighbor may see something relevant to them and encourage the young person to read and respond to it.

But those who want to leverage the popularity and frequent usage of social media platforms need to know how they actually work. Most people are aware that social media sites like Facebook use an automated algorithm to determine what content should appear on a given person’s feed. While that algorithm is proprietary and the details are not shared by the company, Facebook has published some tips to help businesses engage with customers (e.g., posting when you think your target audience is likely to be online), and those tips are applicable to nonprofit and public programs as well. Other experts have inferred more about how the algorithm works based on experience as well. Some aspects of this might seem obvious: the more overall interaction a post gets (e.g., more comments, likes, and shares), the more likely it is to appear in feeds. It may not be as obvious, however, that the types of interaction are prioritized by Facebook. For instance, it’s surmised that comments and shares are more valuable than likes or click-throughs on posts. So when your program engages on Facebook, likes and clicks are a good first step but, over time, you want to build up to getting more comments and shares of your posts.

As you may already know, there are paid ads available on Facebook that can be utilized for engagement and, while they may help collect more likes, they don’t necessarily lead to the type of engagement that is most beneficial for your program. For example, you could get a lot of likes from people far outside your service area. If you pay for ads, you need to spend time learning how they work and how to best target them. (Please note that TechHire funds may not be used to purchase online advertisements unless the Office of Grants Management approves a written request.)

Save your money: You can build engagement with your TechHire program’s social media page and get more enrollments for free. In the next section, we’ll discuss how this was done by CCC, without paying for a single ad.
CASE STUDY: CLACKAMAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Just about 13 miles south of Portland, Oregon, is an industrious and historic town that marks the end of the Oregon Trail by the name of Oregon City. It is the home of CCC, which serves students from across Clackamas County with a wide range of academic offerings, including nursing, manufacturing, and computer science. Its TechHire grant currently focuses on training and job placement for 17- to 29-year-olds in advanced manufacturing and health care. While CCC has partnerships with local high schools and nonprofits for referrals, and with the local workforce development board for additional supports where needed, the CCC TechHire team administers the recruitment, training, and job-placement services completely in house.

Early in their grant, the CCC team had difficulty recruiting for the programs, despite trying just about everything. They created fliers, posted them around campus, handed them out in the community, and even staffed a table at the county fair, with limited success. Very few candidates showed up for CCC’s TechHire program orientations. From early on, CCC staff maintained a social media presence, on both Facebook and Instagram, but they focused more on Instagram because they had been told that more youth were engaged on that platform. The CCC team posted announcements and other content to both sites on a regular basis but, as with many programs, they weren’t aware of the many other ways social media could be used.

In the fall of 2018, the team shifted its social media strategies under the leadership of a new team member with a marketing background and experience in using social media for businesses. The CCC team started seeing more likes, more comments and shares, and, most importantly, more youths at its orientations, which started to fill up. A few months after implementing the new strategies, the CCC team no longer needed to focus resources on recruitment and could shift to helping students complete their courses and obtain employment. In the first quarter of 2019, they saw their largest cohort of computer numerical control (CNC) machining technician students yet, and also added additional options for students to keep up with the demand, such as water and environmental technology courses.

How did they do it?
CASE STUDY

CCC’S SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

To find out, we conducted a set of in-person interviews with CCC staff to learn more about their strategy with social media. From those interviews, we were able to glean several ideas for how to make the most of social media for TechHire programs. To be as clear and useful as possible, the recommendations below will focus on Facebook, although most of them apply broadly to other platforms.

Make a Plan

Whether you are just starting out or you already have a fairly robust social media presence, it is a good idea to make a plan for how you will use social media. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself in order to begin planning:

- What are your goals for social media? Which sites are you planning to use?
- How often do you plan to post?
- Who will be responsible for posting?
- What type of content do you want to post (e.g., announcements, events, successes)?

Posting once a week should probably be the minimum for programs seeking to capture and maintain engagement; CCC posts more often than that. It’s also important not to post too often, because people can feel overwhelmed and lose interest. You also must think about how to respond to negative or critical comments on your page; publicly responding to fair questions or criticism can be a useful approach, as long as you do it without getting into a public debate. Of course, you can also delete comments that are inappropriate.

The CCC TechHire team’s goals with its social media are to:

- Recruit young adults into the program
- Inspire young adults to think about their career options
- Share successes with the community
- Provide interesting content to the page’s visitors
Build Engagement with Your Page

This is an all-encompassing strategy that provides a useful frame for the recommendations that follow. The key word is “engagement”; if your Facebook page is little more than a virtual bulletin board, it probably isn’t doing you a lot of good. Remember, likes are good, but comments and shares lead to more eyes on your page.

At CCC, they found Facebook pages for local towns and other related groups close by, such as Oregon City Together and Clackamas Workforce Partnership, and posted their content there. In order to build a relationship and invite engagement, they liked and commented on posts on those other pages as well. Essentially, the more pages you engage with, the more people in your community will see your content, and the more likely you are to increase engagement with your own page. As others begin to engage more with your page, you’ll want to be quick to like comments, respond to messages via messenger in a timely fashion, etc.

As you engage other pages and groups, follow their rules and guidelines, which are often posted in the “About” section or via a pinned post at the top of the page’s feed. Post interesting content (see the next strategy) and invite members of other pages to like your page. Be sure to monitor the amount you are posting on other pages to avoid fatiguing them though—perhaps check in with the page’s moderator once in a while on the relevancy and frequency of your content.

Finally, Facebook provides “Insights” that are worth reviewing since they can help you measure how well you are raising the profile of your program’s page.

Create Simple, Interesting, and Relevant Content

While these criteria may be obvious, they are often overlooked when programs post on Facebook. For instance, if you are posting an event flier that was originally meant for print or email, is the text readable in a Facebook-post format? Also think about your target population—what is relevant content that they may be interested in? It may vary depending on your community and your participants, but career- and industry-themed articles and content may be interesting to them. You may consider the impact that visuals can have; a post showing people working and learning provides your target audience with an image they might see themselves in—and that could be more likely to attract the comments and shares that will boost your post in the algorithm.

One of CCC’s goals with its social media is to inspire young adults to consider their career options. Below are two examples of their posts used to attract the target demographic:
CCC has been successful in building engagement with their page by regularly posting videos. They interview students, employers, and instructors using the Facebook Live feature with the camera on a mobile phone. It is advantageous to use this function to create videos because they will be saved within the platform and run automatically in feeds without being clicked—attracting more attention than still images for videos that need to be clicked to run. It is also likely that videos posted using Facebook Live will fare better than uploaded videos.

Don’t worry if your live video feed doesn’t draw a crowd; CCC has found that it often gets a lot of views after the original posting—and the resulting likes and shares are your goal. Here is a recent video showcasing technology used in CCC’s CNC operator class. As of this writing, it has had 746 views. Some of CCC’s TechHire videos have over 1,000 views. Before filming, make sure to have the appropriate media release signed by all of the people that will appear in your video, and be sure that they are informed of the video’s purpose, use, etc.

**WHAT’S NEXT?**

Now that it has ramped up engagement and garnered more enrollments from its target demographic, CCC plans to expand its goals for social media. It is exploring the idea of creating a separate Facebook group for current students and graduates of the program, as a way to support them both during the program and afterward as they seek employment.

**CONCLUSION**

The popularity and widespread use of social media, particularly Facebook, presents an opportunity for TechHire programs. Following the example of CCC, this brief explored four strategies for using social media to benefit your program: 1) make a plan; 2) build engagement with your page; 3) create simple, interesting, and relevant content; and 4) record and post short videos.

Utilizing these strategies and the supporting guidance provided in this brief, your TechHire program can maximize the power of social media—and at minimal cost. So, what’s next for your TechHire program’s use of social media?
ENDNOTES


2 “Algorithm” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a procedure for solving a mathematical problem in a finite number of steps that frequently involves repetition of an operation”; “feed” refers to the main part of a Facebook page that shows various postings from friends and advertisers, and that is constantly updated by the site.