**H-1B TechHire Partnership Grant**

**Participant Voices Podcast Series**

**Guest:** *Joel, State Technical College of Missouri – MoStart Project (Linn, MO)*

**Intro:** Welcome to the *TechHire Participant Voices* podcast series. As part of the Department of Labor TechHire Partnership grant, 39 community colleges, workforce development boards, and nonprofits from across the country spent the last four years developing tech-focused training programs geared toward individuals with barriers to employment, including youth, returning citizens, and individuals with disabilities.

In this five-part podcast series, TechHire participants and alumni share their experiences with TechHire, and insights into what makes a quality workforce-training program.

**Lee:** We are Krista Ford and Lee Domeika, JFF staffers and TechHire technical assistance team members. On today’s episode, we’ll be talking to Joel from State Technical College of Missouri.

State Tech of Missouri's TechHire program, otherwise known as MoStart, focuses on supportive training pathways and expanded employment opportunities within the IT and manufacturing industry.

**Krista:** Hi, Joel. Thank you so much for making the time to join us today. We're really excited to speak with you.

I’d love to start off by just finding a little bit more about you.

**Joel:** Okay. My name’s Joel. I live in Missouri, here. I've been married about 25 years, as a background, so I'm not your average student. I have two kids who are actually out of college and married, both of them, so I'm a little bit older than the normal student you would talk to. But I live in Moberly, Missouri, so I drive about 100 miles each direction every day for school.

**Krista:** That's excellent. And 100 miles, that's dedication.

Can you tell us a little bit more about where you are currently in your TechHire journey? Have you completed, or are you still enrolled?

**Joel:** I have a year and a half done so far. I have one more semester left. We're going to try to finish up next semester and have it done by graduation so I can get my—they say I get a certificate at the end of the program, so that's a good thing for my résumé, I assume. So that's where I'm at. I’ve got one more semester left.

**Krista:** That's excellent. You're really close. And what are you studying in the TechHire program?

**Joel:** So, I'm actually going to school for the HVAC program and refrigeration here at State Tech. I've been learning a lot about three-phase electricity, motor starters, electrical work. I've also been learning a little extra of the HVAC stuff.

**Krista:** That’s excellent.

Talk a little bit about how you heard about the TechHire program and how you got started.

**Joel:** When we got into school, our teacher, Ben, he came out and talked to us about the TechHire program and said there was availability to learn a little bit of extra stuff. It’s kind of a maintenance TechHire module is what I’m in. So he came out and he explained everything. He said, “We’ll be doing some extra training stuff. We’ll be doing extra time. You’ll have to come in a little bit earlier or stay later, whichever you want to do. But it's all free to the student,” which is a bonus for me. I like to learn and get extra knowledge, so he explained it to me. And then we started working on it, and we’ve been going through it for the last year and a half.

**Lee:** That's awesome.

Can you talk a little bit about what the enrollment process was like once you decided, “Okay, this sounds great. I really trust the resource who’s telling me about this program, and I'm excited”? What was it like when you enrolled? Was that process in person, or was it virtual? and maybe, like, what you liked the most about that enrollment process.

**Joel:** I was maybe—what I was going to say, I’m not your average student, a little bit older, so I liked the one-on-one, in-person type of thing. So we’d filled out forms in our class. He came up, did a presentation on it, then he handed out forms to whoever’s interested. Signed this form, you know. So that’s what I did. Signed up. It was pretty simple. It took five minutes to sign up. I think he copied our license, something, just to verify who we were. It was pretty straightforward.

**Lee:** Awesome. That's great.

Were there any aspects of the enrollment process you wish were different or any changes you would have made, and thinking about future or prospective TechHire students who are going through the enrollment process?

**Joel:** The only thing I could see with students coming out of high school, they're going to be more to the online, “Hey, register me for this before I start school,” or “Bring me some information before I start class. You know, when I sign up? That way, I'm already enrolled.” So maybe something—if you could do something with the actual school to get something out when they're registering, “Hey, you're interested. You're going to do this degree, maybe you’d be interested in this TechHire program and get some extra learning too.” So that’s the only thing I might change about it.

**Lee:** Yeah. That's great insight. Thank you for that.

You know, and thinking a little bit more broadly about recruitment, I'm curious to know what your thoughts are around what is good or effective recruitment, especially for people like yourself who have a background in advanced manufacturing or the manufacturing industry. You come to the TechHire program with a lot of experience under your belt, and I'm wondering if you have any recommendations around what good recruitment looks like to meet folks like yourself who come to the table with experience in the industry.

**Joel:** The only thing I can think of is maybe getting the credentials, like for the OSHA training. That’s part of it, you know. We need to have that in our background. Some of the other stuff that’d go along with HVAC. I know I have to have refrigeration stuff, maybe something with that.

**Lee:** Awesome.

And my last question for you and, you know, and hearing about what you really liked about the enrollment process, sounds like you're a very hands-on learner. Are there any recommendations you have for employers who might be interested in working with TechHire partners and recruiting TechHire alumni? Any advice for them in terms of how they can best support TechHire alumni in their workspaces?

**Joel:** know one thing that Ben does—he was my instructor—he goes out and talks to the employers, actually. So there may be more need to get out and talk to different employers, see what kind of experience they're looking for. What do they want them to learn when they come out of this program? What would benefit them the best? That way, you know “Hey, this guy here or gal is suited to go to this type of company. So let's specialize in this, or let's go this other way for this other guy or gal because they need specialized in that. This will help them out better.”

**Lee:** Awesome. Thanks so much.

Krista, I’m going to pass it over to you.

**Krista:** Sure. And Joel, that's a really good point about just aligning the curriculum with the employers’ needs.

And actually, it's a great segue. I wanted to dig a little bit more into your experience, specifically the training component of the program. So I'm wondering, were most of your courses online, or did you mostly take classes there in person at the college?

**Joel:** For the first year and a half I took them here at the college—or mostly year and a half. We used the trainers, the virtual helmet, stuff like that, a little bit. We did a three-phase electricity. We did some circuitry. We did a little bit of HVAC stuff, some pulley systems, lots of different trainers to work with. And I give it a benefit.

Now, when the COVID hit, we tried to go online and do some of it. But where I live, out in the country, I didn't have the strongest WiFi, so I couldn’t use the virtual helmets as much as we had hoped. But online, we just did—we used some of the simulators and stuff like that that we had. But for some reason, the helmet—just the WiFi signal wasn't strong enough for it to work.

**Krista:** Yeah. And that's a really good point. Kind of on that same note, I'm curious, do you have any advice for training providers who might be trying to teach students who live in rural areas remotely? Is there anything that would have made that experience, that transition to remote learning, a little smoother for you?

**Joel:** I don't know if it was that, really, the hardest. We’d need to get the technology out in the rural areas, maybe. Like, right now, if I were to gone on a year later, I would have it because I ran on fiber out towards my house now. So the ability to get that fiber all across the rural country would be a big help. I know it's a lot faster Internet. Like, I think I downloaded three megabytes per second through my WiFi; where this is going to be 100 megabytes, where it’ll be just fine and work perfect for that stuff. So that’d be my biggest focus was trying to get that technology out there.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's an excellent point. And kind of continuing on this remote-learning theme, you mentioned earlier that you really preferred to learn in person and you really enjoy hands-on learning. And so I'm wondering if you have any advice for educators or advice for students, who are more like you and prefer to be in person but are having to kind of grapple with online learning right now.

**Joel:** My biggest thing would be probably to make sure you stay up with technology the most you can. I've been lucky enough to have other jobs in my past where I've worked with computers and building computers, put more memory in them. Just keep up with technology so you can keep up with the times because they are changing. Technology is going along way. There is a lot of online warning out there. So just, as much as you can, keep up with anything you can.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's a really good point. And I'm kind of curious. Before you all transitioned to online learning, what was your in-classroom experience like? Maybe what was the best part of that for you?

**Joel:** The best part of the in-class experience I had is I got to know, like, say, Ben—he's my instructor—I got to know him a lot better one on one. It wasn’t 50 kids around or 25 kids—or students, I should say. Sorry. It wasn't a big crowd. It was more one-to-one learning, so you got to know your instructor better. You got to build a professional relationship with them. So that was a big help to me.

**Krista:** Mm, yeah. It sounds like that relationship building was really critical to your success.

**Joel:** Yeah. In my opinion, it is, but that's just my opinion.

**Krista:** Outside of that relationship building and being able to get that support in person, did you have any other kind of big takeaways or lessons learned around just navigating the TechHire program that you would share with other participants?

**Joel:** I think the biggest thing was being able to realize stuff I didn't see before that I can see now. Ben, again, was really good about going, say, “Hey, did you look at this, though? You know, you're looking at one thing. You got focused on one thing.” He’s like, “You got to take it outside the box.” So that helped me a little bit there, too.

**Krista:** Yeah. Thank you so much. That was really helpful.

And I think the next thing that we’d like to dig into—and I'm going to pass it over to Lee for this—is we just want to cover a little bit more about supports that you might have engaged with outside the classroom. So that could be things like tutoring, advising, or even job-placement services. So, I’ll pass it to you, Lee, to talk a little bit more about that.

**Lee:** Yeah, thanks, Krista.

So, Joel. Yes, Krista already mentioned we're curious to know if MoStart was able to offer any supportive services that you enjoyed tapping into or really helped or are helping you right now in terms of being in the TechHire program. And Krista already mentioned tutoring, any academic support. It sounds like your instructors are really helpful and supportive. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Joel:** Yeah. As far as the instructors, like I say, of just the stuff I said before, been really helpful about coming in and working with you one on one and spend the extra time that's needed to learn that. But it also helped me gain skills where I could go out and find a job, you know. The people that are up there in the grant office, they’ve been excellent help too. So bouncing stuff off of them. Alex and all them up here has been a big information type thing. If I had a question, I can come up here, and they could answer it. No problem. They wouldn't, you know— “I don't have time for you.” You know, some places you go, it’s like, “Well, I don't have time to help you with this. Sorry. Let me find somebody that can,” but never get back to you. But if I come up here and talk to them, they would immediately, “Yeah, let me do what I can do to help you out.”

**Lee:** Absolutely. That’s awesome to hear.

And you kind of touched lightly on preparing for job interviews or job placement or just job skills, job-search skills in general. Was that or is that a big aspect of MoStart’s student support? Have you been able to tap into some job-search help? Or maybe talk to us a little bit about that in terms of them helping you prepare for the workforce.

**Joel:** Yeah. They have offered—they're going—they haven’t started on it yet, but they're offering to help me with my résumé to make sure I got all the skills that I've learned in this program. They have all the information of what I've worked with, so I’ll be able to use them to help me build my résumé to find a job. The big plus was that with me being unemployed right now, I didn't have to pay any of it, and I didn’t have to borrow any money to go through this program. So that was a big plus, too.

**Lee:** That's great. You talked a little bit earlier about tech support and tech access in rural areas, which is such an important issue, and I'm really glad you highlighted it. Were there any supports you were able to tap into, or other students are tapping into right now, from MoStart around stronger tech access now that we're all kind of navigating remote and virtual settings?

**Joel:** Virtual. The virtual help would have helped if I had had, like, say, the fiber of the broadband. I didn't really have to tap into anything. We just figured out, hey, the helmets wouldn’t work out here because of this WiFi signal’s not strong enough. Everything was shut down, so I couldn’t, you know, like, you could normally go to a library or something like that and use their WiFi. It wouldn’t be a big deal. But then the COVID hit. I just didn’t have the opportunity to go anywhere either for that.

**Lee:** Yeah. That makes sense.

I guess my last question around student support, Joel, is there anything you'd recommend to other programs similar to MoStart in terms of services they should offer students to help them through the program?

**Joel:** Like I say, I think the biggest thing that would help is get them interested at the beginning of their degree. Get them tied up with their criteria for their degree. Think of what classes would work best to give them an extra.

**Lee:** Awesome.

All right, Krista. I’ll pass it back to you.

**Krista:** Perfect.

So, I wanted to talk a little bit about the role of technology in the workplace. And I know you have plenty of experience in the manufacturing space. Could you tell us a little bit about how you think technology maybe changed the nature of your work over time?

**Joel:** Well, I’m going to tell you about a past job. I used to be a lead tech specialist at a job. And my program, what they call born units—it keeps track of machine efficiency—that was a big change that we had in our factory. I was there for 14 years. You got a lot of people that used to figure the efficiencies manually, and then they wouldn’t agree with them. But once we tied those computers in—I used to program them—and it’d show them what their efficiencies were. And now it’s just a big screen that’s mounted up above their machines. So, I mean, who would have thought you could see what your efficiency was, how much you’re producing, how much time you’ve been down. I mean, that’s just a big deal.

There was a lot of computer stuff out there on the lines, and I was using it at another job. We used Raspberry Pi’s, which was a new thing to keep track of how long your cycle times were, get their input out, to help us write with our new SOPs and stuff. How much time should it take to do this job? How much time are you taking? so they can kind of see and have a comparison.

So, technology is really coming into everywhere. It's not just—the field I'm going into right now is HVAC. My son, he's in HVAC as well. He showed me that you've got to program these boards with your smartphone when you put in a new unit now. So you got to have a computer or a smartphone to be able to get the HVAC system to even start up. So that’s how much technology’s place in this stuff.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's really interesting. It sounds like a lot of processes are being automated. And I really like that you mentioned using smartphones to kind of help program some of the equipment.

And on that note, I'm kind of curious. Are there other kind of technical skills like that or supports that you think would be kind of helpful for workers to be able to be successful in this new tech-focused economy?

**Joel:** I didn't have to take my [unclear] here at college, so I don't know what they did. If they had computer-based classes where they can learn how to—something simple as surfing the Web, most people know how to do that now. Have it tied where they can learn how to do spreadsheets on the computer, learn how to do different types of stuff that employers need. Again, go back to your employers. Say, “Hey, is there any specialized training that would help this person get a job that we need to teach in our college?” which they do. I think they go back quite a bit. But that’d be my biggest thing is just make sure your technology ties with what's going on in the future because it gets outdated so quick. And it's really more about by the time you learn something, well, it may not be used anymore. So just make sure you keep focused on latest technology that you can get.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's a really good point. Just keeping up with employer needs and then making sure that the technology you're using is really future facing and forward thinking.

And kind of along those lines, I'm curious to know how the TechHire program that you're participating in is preparing you to keep up with the rapidly changing labor market. Is there anything that you've been learning that you feel is super relevant or will be helpful for you as you transition into the labor market?

**Joel:** As far as the technology, I mean, y’all spent quite a bit of money on the trainers and stuff that comes in there. I mean, you're always going to have equipment, like what they're teaching with the electricity. They're always going to have that same kind. Electricity, that's never really going wireless like you would think WiFi and Internet does. So, I mean, they've been staying pretty much on top of the technology with the trainers that y’all bought. It helped us out quite a bit.

**Krista:** That's excellent.

And then, in terms of things that are super helpful for participants to be able to be successful in the TechHire program, I know you mentioned the importance of relationship building and being able to work with your instructors one on one. You mentioned making sure that the curriculum is aligned to employers’ needs. And you mentioned the importance of kind of keeping up with technology and making sure that the software and the equipment that you're using is up to date and modern. And I'm curious if you have any other kind of key takeaways that you'd like to share that we maybe haven't touched on yet.

**Joel:** I think my biggest thing is don’t focus on one thing. Keep your mind outside the box. Look for other things that you can learn. Like I say, just don't concentrate on one thing. Make sure you learn as much as you can while you do it.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's excellent advice.

And so kind of to close us out, I'm curious to know what's next for you. How has participating in your TechHire program affected your long-term career goals?

**Joel:** Well, my long-term career goal, I’m getting, like I say, older, older as I go. But me and my son—my brother used to do HVAC as well—so me and him and my brother were talking about maybe starting up a company of our own to do heating and cooling. We're not sure where that's going to go to, but I don't think I’ll have a problem finding a job anywhere. As far as the HVAC/refrigeration field, there's always a demand for it. So I'm pretty excited to get done with it and see what is out there. I know they will help us look for jobs in the spring. In February they have a job fair that helps us out. So I always look for different opportunities out there besides looking for what you might be going into.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's excellent. You've got big plans for the future. I definitely wish you the best as you kind of wrap up your last semester here and start to think about the labor market.

Lee, any other questions or anything you wanted to add?

**Lee:** No, I think this has been great.

Joel, we've really learned a lot from you and your experience, so thank you so much for taking time to speak with us.

**Joel:** Thank you for giving me the time to visit with y’all.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to the *TechHire Participant Voices* podcast series. Please be sure to check out our other podcast episodes found on WorkforceGPS. For more information on the TechHire Partnership grant, please visit www.doleta.gov.