**H-1B TechHire Partnership Grant**

**Participant Voices Podcast Series**

**Guest:** *Malaysia, Wake Technical Community College – Project SECURE (Raleigh, NC)*

**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 Malaysia from Wake Tech Community College.

Wake Tech’s TechHire program, Project SECURE, provides support services and training programs targeting computer-related occupations and IT industries locally and nationally.

**Krista:** Awesome.

So, welcome, Malaysia. And thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today. We're really excited to speak with you and learn a little bit more about your TechHire experience. Did you want to start off by just introducing yourself?

**Malaysia:** Sure. Thank y’all for having me.

Again, my name’s Malaysia. I live in North Carolina. And I'm currently in the TechHire program. I've been in the TechHire program for a little over a year now, which kind of led me on to working at Wake Tech myself. Actually, I was taking the training classes there at Wake Tech, which transitioned to me actually being a full-time employee at Wake Tech, doing help desk [unclear].

**Krista:** That's awesome.

Could you tell us a little bit about how you heard about TechHire and what made you want to be a part of it?

**Malaysia:** So I actually went up to the Wake Tech campus, and I was interested in getting back into curriculum classes. And I just happened to come across a TechHire flier, and I was grabbing all types of fliers just to see what I'd be interested in doing next. And I read over the TechHire flier, and I was really interested in just seeing what was in it for me as far as the program and just what I had to do. And I filled out my interest, and they got back in contact with me, and it started from there.

**Krista:** That's awesome.

And so you said you are currently still training with TechHire. Can you tell us a little bit about your journey with TechHire, like maybe where you started out and what you've been able to accomplish so far?

**Malaysia:** Sure. So, again, I started off in TechHire by doing the interest form. After I did the interest form, they got back in contact with me just to let me know about information sessions that were available in my area. I went to the information session, and I filled out the proper paperwork for myself, just explaining my situation, my financial situation, and just my interest in information technology. I provided that, and they called me in after I did that, just to schedule testing, just to see where I fail as far as my knowledge for information technology. And I really—I mean, I knew enough, like knew how to work phones and knew how to work my laptop and things like that, but I didn't know the inner workings, I guess, of IT, which was found in the tests. So I started off in the IT fundamental program and kind of built upon there.

Every certification, I would say, kind of led me on to the next one. Every one of my instructors, I feel like, has been a part of my success. I had great instructors that kind of try to get me going into it, just not to be reading a book, just to kind of show us. We had an instructor that we took a computer apart and kind of put it back together. We did different activities just to kind of get us moving around, just so we wouldn't get too stuck because some of the classes were very long. We had some classes that were four hours long. So just to get us up and moving and make us a little bit more, I guess you’d say, interested in the information.

**Krista:** That's excellent. Thank you so much.

And I might actually pass it to Lee to talk a little bit about recruitment.

**Lee:** Yeah. So Malaysia, I'm interested to hear, you talked a little bit about the flier. I'd love to hear a little bit more about what the recruitment process is like at Project SECURE. What worked really well for you, having gone through the recruitment process, and is there anything that you think could have been a little bit stronger or elements that you think were missing from a recruitment standpoint in garnering people's attention for the program?

**Malaysia:** I feel like everything was pretty much laid out for me to understand. It wasn't anything that I was kind of like, confused about, because I feel like for every step that we went through, they kind of put us in the know as to what was going to go on or what we needed to bring. And it really is, for me in my mind, it's about will and skill. Like, they can teach you the skills, but it can't give you the will to, like, go and do those things. So, I mean, of course, there will be people that will complain about things like that. But I mean, no one can make you do anything that you don't want to do. So I definitely tried to keep up with everything that I needed. I got folders to get organized just so I could kind of follow up on what I need to do and have those things when I needed to have them.

**Lee:** That’s great.

Similar question related to enrollment, and you kind of touched on this already too, but I’d love to hear a little bit more. There are some programs, I think, where enrollment is really quick, to get folks in the door. And then there are other enrollment processes that are really intensive and in some ways kind of grueling. And I'm wondering, did you feel the enrollment process worked for you in terms of getting the information you needed to make a good choice about this program? And what were the best elements of the enrollment process in your experience? And maybe similar to the recruitment question, what elements could have been strengthened?

**Malaysia:** I can't think of anything as far as the recruitment that I thought would be strengthened, but I definitely feel as though, like I said, everything was pretty clear cut. Everyone that I came in contact with as far as recruitment kind of was pretty much straight up with me and just let me know what I needed to do and what I needed to have. I would say it was definitely fairly fast as far as me going into classes and just having all those documents ready and just letting me know the deadlines of when I needed to have them.

**Lee:** Awesome.

All right, Krista, I will kick it back to you.

**Krista:** So, Malaysia, I wanted to just dig in a little bit more into your actual training experience. You mentioned that you started off in the IT fundamentals and that you're kind of still making your way through the program. I wanted to know, over the course of your experience with TechHire, was there anything in particular about the training or the classroom experience that has been particularly helpful in helping you be successful?

**Malaysia:** I definitely feel like having instructors that have been in the field, it was great just to know these people have been in the field and just knowing kind of the things that I may need or things that I may come into, because you can have someone just telling you things and not actually knowing. They’re just reading out of a book. But these people have actually been in the field for years. They've been in, like, before the big technology wave, after the big technology. So just having that definitely meant a lot, and just knowing, like, as far as things like with a degree being a big deal or would I be able to just get into the door with certifications, just having someone being able to be honest with me and let me know what I need and what I need to do going forward.

**Krista:** Mm, yeah. That's critical.

Were most of your classes in person or online or a mix of both?

**Malaysia:** In the beginning, before COVID, they were in class. After COVID, it was online.

**Krista:** Hm. And which one worked better for you? Were there any particular advantages to being able to study in person versus online ?

**Malaysia:** I definitely feel like there are advantages of being in person, but just the convenience of being able to do the class from home are always great. I love, love, love, online classes. But it definitely helps being there and just being able to speak with the teacher and things like that. It is available through Teams, but it's just different virtually than it is speaking to someone face to face.

**Krista:** Yeah, definitely.

Has there been anything that was particularly challenging or difficult about your training experience?

**Malaysia:** No. Just personally, I guess, having a social life outside of things like that. Like I said, I didn't have any IT experience at all, so I just wanted to make sure that I knew the ins and outs. And sometimes some of the things that weren't needed on that certification may need to be used on the next certification. So just keeping up with all that and still having a balance of, like, my work and school life. So definitely, I would say that would be the biggest thing.

**Krista:** Yeah, absolutely.

And I know that you’ve earned a few different certifications through the TechHire program. Would you mind walking us through that journey? I know you said you started off with the IT fundamentals. Could you tell us what other certifications you’ve earned and what you've been able to do with them so far?

**Malaysia:** Yes, ma’am. So, I actually started off with the IT fundamentals. That just kind of went over very basic things of pretty much IT in general. It just kind of—it was very broad, just to kind of give you information about hardware, about software, about programing, about virtualization, and just different things like that. And then from IT fundamentals, I went on to my A+. A+ was a little bit more thorough with the hardware and software as well as the virtualization. Then, I went on to my Network+, CompTIA Network+ certification. That was more so dealing with networking and switches and routers. And then, I went on to get my Security+, and that more so is just securing that network and just being able to identify threats as well as, just like I said, making sure that everything is secure and your encryption is up to par and things of that nature.

**Krista:** Excellent. Excellent.

I know you started to talk a little bit about just balancing being in a TechHire program with life outside the program. That's actually a perfect segue. I’m actually going to hand it back to Lee to talk a little bit about supports that you might have been able to tap into outside of the classroom.

**Malaysia:** Okay, sure.

**Lee:** Yeah. Malaysia, we’d love to know your thoughts on supportive services that were offered to you or are still offered to you at TechHire and at Wake Tech, and certainly, pre COVID-19 or even in the wake of COVID-19, because, yeah, as we've been listening to you, you take on a lot with these TechHire trainings, especially on the certifications that you're able to tap into. It’s a lot of work and a lot of time, and life still goes on. So I just would love your thoughts on any ways that you feel Wake Tech has been really instrumental in providing the support that you need to carry on with the program.

**Malaysia:** In all honesty, I don't feel like I put any of that burden on Wake Tech. I just more so dealt with it myself. Just as far as some of the things I feel like Wake Tech or just the resources that I've had access to with this program, I would definitely say I was kind of—before I get—before I got into IT, excuse me, I was actually doing customer-service work. So I was kind of stuck in a customer-service groove, where I was just, like—I was comfortable, and I knew I could make enough money to do this. And they were saying, “The money's fine. But just kind of keep in mind of you're getting these certifications. You want to be able to utilize them and not just,” you know what I mean, “just be passing time, just getting certifications.”

So I started to apply for more technical jobs, and that's how I came across the student position at Wake Tech. They actually had someone come in to speak with us that was working at Wake Tech, and he was actually kind of in the same position as us, but not through the TechHire program. He was a Wake Tech student, and he just kind of came across the job at the Wake Tech ITS help desk, and he kind of grew within that position. And I was like, “Okay, well, if he did that, and he's kind of in the same situation, and he didn't have any experience, I could do it, too.” And I went on to apply, and I got the job. And like I said, I moved up to a full-time position working at Wake Tech doing the same thing.

**Lee:** That's awesome.

I'm curious to know, given what you were just talking about with regard to your current position, are there any supports or services that Wake Tech has offered around job placement, or with all the certifications that you are working on, are there ways in which you feel the supportive services are helping participants prepare for those positions? Or if not, do you have any thoughts on how those support services could be built in?

**Malaysia:** I feel as though they do. Like I said, but that goes back to kind of will and skill. They give you all these resources, and it's kind of up to you to utilize them. I myself, I'm the type of person if I'm not without, if I don't have employment, I'm going to be on Indeed, putting in at least 10 applications a day. So I'm not looking for help as far as those things. I need help in other situations that they may not be able to help me with. But they do offer things like that.

I've received emails from NCWorks, just kind of as far as job fairs that are going on in the area. Or Wake Tech also provides information as far as, like, job fairs or current employers that are looking for a certain amount of employees, and things of that nature. So as far as job placement, I don't feel like—I wouldn't say that they're placing people in jobs, but they're definitely placing these resources in front of you that you could take advantage of.

**Lee:** That’s great.

All right, Krista. I will pass it over to you.

**Krista:** Thanks, Lee.

Actually, just wanted to ask a little bit, before we transition to talking about the future of work and technology in the workplace, I wanted to ask a little bit about just the sense of community and peer support. In your classes, before you all transitioned to online, did you find yourself working closely with the other students? And if so, that's something that was helpful to you?

**Malaysia:** I would say it was more so independently. Of course, we did, we were in class with other people, and sometimes they did pair us up. But I wouldn't say, like, we were getting together at Starbucks or something like that and studying. I wasn't doing anything like that. There are a few other people, like, especially when we're doing a class after class after class, there are a few people that you end up in classes with, and you’d be like, you know what I mean, “How did you do?” or like, “Are you worried about this next one?” I mean, things like that, definitely, but not studying together or anything like that.

**Krista:** Okay. Well, let's jump into the future of work. Especially having given your position working help desk, I'm really curious about how things have changed that’s involved in working remotely with the pandemic. And I'm curious if there are particular things that you experienced online through TechHire that were helpful to you in your job working help desk.

**Malaysia:** I would say, definitely I've utilized a lot of that, that I've learned from TechHire to pass my certifications as well as in my current job. A lot of things that we did or just practiced in class, I have seen it again at work. And I'm like, “Oh, I kind of remember that.” Just kind of familiarizing myself with it before I'm actually utilizing it, I definitely feel like it made a difference, because it may be where you don't remember everything, but you have a foundation of it. So it's like doing it again after you've already kind of done it maybe months ago. It's kind of like a refresher. So I'm definitely saying, I would say, that that was a help with TechHire.

**Krista:** Absolutely.

And I'm wondering if you have thoughts in general on the role of technology in the workplace and maybe how it's been shaping your work, especially now given the pandemic.

**Malaysia:** I definitely feel like technology is kind of—it's another learning curve that seems to be coming again. I would say there's definitely a learning curve what technology but it's kind of accelerating now. With a lot of—everything kind of incorporates computers into it now, and it's kind of like if you don't really understand, you're kind of left behind. So I definitely feel like I've gotten a little bit more familiar with some of these things that I'm coming into, come into contact with. And sometimes some things are a little bit more advanced, and it'll be a little easier for me while it not may be easier for someone else. And there's definitely profit in knowing things that other people don't know. That's kind of where support comes in.

**Krista:** Definitely, definitely.

I'm kind of curious. If you had to sum it all up, what would you say are the top three takeaways or high points from your experience with TechHire that you would urge other training providers to consider, just to help their participants be successful?

**Malaysia:** I would definitely say invest in people that are not more familiar with technology. I feel like a lot of people kind of write people off who don't understand or don't have any foundational knowledge. Computers aren't that perplexed. And if you kind of—you know what I mean—can have a foundational understanding of it. So I think just providing people with that foundational understanding has definitely made a difference, like I said, when people don't know anything. As well as, like I said, having those instructors who are dealing with people who have no experience, just kind of having that face to face was great. As well as online, just having the access to my instructor via Teams and being able to speak with them or chat with them if I'm not comfortable with saying it in the classroom setting.

The third thing I would say is just all the resources that have been provided to me, whether I use them or not, just knowing that they're there and just knowing that I can have someone to come to and say, like, “Hey, I'm having this issue. Is there any resources available to me?” Just having that person that can kind of place me with who I need to speak with if I do need help. Or if it's, like, a transportation issue, just knowing that I have those resources available, it definitely made me feel a little bit more confident in the program.

**Krista:** Thank you. Yeah. Those takeaways are very helpful.

**Lee:** Malaysia, I think you were talking about how you love online learning and online classes, and I also love online classes. And I think, obviously, right now we're at a time where online learning is on the rise, whether you're in college or whether you're in a credentialed training program, whether you're in elementary school. But I'd love your thoughts on maybe, like, one thing that you find really innovative with online learning or a tool that you've witnessed either Wake Tech with Project SECURE or in your own time that you would maybe recommend for other workforce-training programs to use amidst online learning as we continue to navigate the pandemic.

**Malaysia:** I would definitely say just the convenience of Teams has been great. That's kind of what we were using for the online version kind of when we came home. Just being able to kind of have that screen sharing and still having that screen time with my instructor. Even though it's not face to face, just having that screen time. And like I said, the convenience of not having to leave my home. I can just turn on my computer and kind of edge in the class. So I definitely found that beneficial as well.

As far as the online, though, like I said, there are drawbacks. Just having that willpower. Like, you can just not log in to class, but you're going to miss class, and you’re going to miss out on some of this. You know what I mean? If you miss one thing, it’s kind of like you're behind. So just keeping up with that is a lot. But the benefits, I feel like, kind of outweigh the cons for me.

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

Malaysia, is there anything else you want to add or maybe some questions we didn't get to that you want to touch on?

**Malaysia:** A lot of me not getting into IT before I did was me feeling intimidated or just other people around me, like I said, telling me that this is something that I couldn't do or just telling me how the IT field wasn't going. And I just kind of, like I said, I went with my intuition, and I just did my own research and saw what it was for myself.

**Lee:** I love that.

What's one piece of advice you would give prospective participants who are thinking about taking on a program like TechHire but maybe are feeling the way you did in the beginning?

**Malaysia:** I would definitely say do your own research and just kind of see if it's something that fits for you. I've seen companies where they are making you pay thousands to do what I just did, and it was something that I didn't really have to come out of pocket for. The only thing that I paid really with was my time and my dedication. So it's definitely something to do your own research on. And if it fits for you, definitely, I would take advantage of it.

**Lee:** Awesome.

**Krista:** Malaysia, I wanted to ask you one final question. I know that in your intro you shared that you came from a customer-service background, and in your time in TechHire, you’ve been able to earn several certifications. So I'm curious about how participating in the TechHire program has maybe changed your career trajectory and what you see in the future for yourself.

**Malaysia:** In all honesty, before the TechHire program, I wasn't exactly sure where I wanted to be or what I wanted to do as far as a career. But it kind of set it in stone for me. Like, that IT was kind of the place that I wanted to be, and it was definitely something that I enjoy doing. Like I said, I come from a customer-service background, so I'm always willing to help, like the Chick-fil-A “My pleasure.” So that was always me. So just getting into the TechHire program, I definitely feel like it gave me a chance to kind of marry my customer-service skills with my technical skills, and just bring them both together, just making people feel as though, like, you know what I mean? Sometimes when you talk to IT, they kind of make you feel as though you're dumb or you just don't understand. So just being that person to say, like, “Hey, I understand. I've been in your place. Whatever you need help with, I'm here to help you with.” And just kind of making it comfortability and being that bridge between them not understanding and them understanding. As well, I was able to take some of the certifications that I received and put them towards college credits, so I've actually been able to substitute credits for having those certifications. And just, like I said, working towards my degree, I'm actually working towards a cybersecurity associate's degree right now.

**Krista:** That's outstanding. Thank you so much.

Malaysia, it's been a pleasure talking with you and learning from your TechHire experience. We're really grateful for all the advice and insight that you shared today. Thanks again for making the time for the conversation.

**Malaysia:** All right. Well, thank you, all, for having me.

**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.