Prison Inmates Learn ICT Skills for Re-Entry Success

The Tower of London may be England’s most historic prison, but Carl Wotowis was more interested in the prison innovation being implemented at Her Majesty’s Prison Wandsworth in London.

Carl and his team from the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) visited Wandsworth to learn about training inmates with voice and data cable installation after release. Wandsworth delivered the Cisco/PANDUIT academy workshops inside their facility.

Carl is the assistant director for the CDOC Offenders Program. The CDOC wanted to become the first prison in the United States to implement a similar program that met the needs of offenders, in compliance with their network security requirements. Upon returning to Colorado, Carl and his colleagues John Jubic from the Governor’s Office of Information Technology (OIT) and Ross Kimbrel, assistant director of the CDOC Division of Education, contacted Cisco to learn how to establish a Networking Academy program at their facility.

Cisco introduced them to nearby Arapahoe Community College and Red Rocks Community College to identify instructors willing to teach in a prison environment. Next, John’s team took on the challenge of creating a secure classroom and computer lab at the facility.

In 2010, the CDOC became the first U.S. prison offering Cisco Networking Academy courses. The first students invited to apply for the pilot training program were women inmates. Out of approximately 1,000 applicants, 12 were accepted after extensive screening. Carl has this to say about the initial launch:

“We fervently believed that we could change the lives of women in the prison system by encouraging them to learn in-demand ICT and networking skills. This was a tremendous commitment for these inmates — it was a demanding 20-week program and participants signed a waiver that delayed possible early release until they completed the courses.”

It was a surprise to the team how much the inmates in the program supported each other. The women knew they were pioneers whose success would impact their future and opportunities for other inmates coming after them. They overcame tough odds to succeed in the pilot program, motivated by Cisco’s commitment and the knowledge that ICT skills are in demand.

The dedication and perseverance of these students exceeded everyone’s expectations. Eleven of the 12 women completed the Cisco IT Essentials class and earned a CDOC certificate to reflect their skills and knowledge.

Word of the women’s achievement — the first in the nation — touched many in Colorado, including Executive Directors from the Departments of Corrections and Public Safety, the Secretary of Technology, and Cisco staff, who attended and spoke at the graduation. Pride and tears were apparent around the room, as the women listened to speeches praising their landmark accomplishment.
Academy Impact Story: CDOC

Shortly after graduation, the CDOC received the extraordinary news that it had been awarded a U.S. Department of Justice grant through Second Chance Act Technology Careers Training Demonstration Projects for Incarcerated Adults and Juveniles. Ross Kimbrel’s team at the CDOC Division of Education, including Melissa Smith and Karin McGuire, had worked tirelessly for months on the grant application.

“I remember one night we visited the Denver Women’s facility when they were having a class,” says Karin. “We heard the women talk about how they cried when they thought they weren’t smart enough, and how they helped each other through when it was tough. The Cisco courses have given these women hope, encouragement, and greater self-esteem, and provided a bridge to successful re-integration.”

The CDOC is one of only six recipients of the Second Chance Act grant. The grant will allow the CDOC to bring classes to more prison facilities across the state, and expand the curricula to enable students to study computer networking and earn Cisco certifications. John and his team are working around the clock to prepare 21 new classrooms at 7 additional prison facilities.

With the grant money, the CDOC plans to bring 547 inmates (both men and women) through academy courses. In response to the scale and scope of the new program, it has moved under the CDOC Division of Education, which is working in parallel with John’s OIT team to set up relationships with additional community colleges, and has launched a program to certify its own instructors.

“The grant has been a catalyst for a complete restructuring of our basic computer courses to better prepare inmates to move into Networking Academy classes,” says Melissa. “It has required all of us in the education division to move out of our comfort zone. It changes the very direction of the correctional education vision state-wide, and provides more opportunities for inmates who need a second chance.”

The OIT Service Center itself is routinely staffed by inmates who have gone through CDOC’s basic computer courses. One of the Networking Academy graduates, Valerie Rudnikvagher, recently joined the staff, and according to John: “There was a clear difference between Valerie’s confidence and knowledge compared to other inmates. I routinely heard how she solved problems that other call center staff couldn’t. She is getting ready to take the first Cisco CCNA class under the new grant. If we didn’t know it before, we now know first-hand the quality of the training that these inmates are getting through Cisco Networking Academy.”

View a video of CDOC students at the Service Center (4 min 21 sec). “Cisco Systems UK and the Ministry of Justice were our inspiration,” says Carl. “Now we hope to inspire them with how much further we’ve taken the dream.”

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