

TRI-M GROUP, LLC



BACKGROUND

Tri-M Group, LLC, headquartered in Kennett Square, PA, was founded by two brothers, Tom and Dick Musser, in 1964. Tri-M is an industrial electrical contractor offering comprehensive solutions and services in electrical infrastructure, building automation systems, energy analytics, security, and data and telecommunications. The company, which describes itself as a merit shop, has over 400 employees working out of five offices in three states.

From its inception, the company realized that it was challenging to find the skilled labor needed to perform the work. As the company grew from two employees and some part-time labor, Tom Musser started an RA program in 1979. Early in its history, Tri-M was strictly an electrical contractor, so the RA program reflected that. As the company added complementary services, however, it simultaneously increased the training offered to employees.

Tri-M has a four-year RA program, during which apprentices focus on one of three specialties: electrical construction, building automation, or high voltage. Each discipline has a different set of skills that the students must master.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

The RA is managed internally by the Human Resources Department and the Training Department.

RECRUITMENT

Tri-M has sought to be creative with its recruiting techniques because of a lack of interest in the trades. It has established co-op programs with local technical schools that function similarly to pre-apprenticeship programs.⁶⁰ Tri-M works closely with Cecil County School of Technology, Chester County Technical College High School, Pennsylvania College of Technology, and Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology. Tri-M strives to educate young people and their families as well as high school counselors and advisors about the benefits of being an electrician.

As part of the candidate screening process, applicants are given a placement test in part to identify the need for any remedial education, such as in math or English. If a need is identified, an instructor or Tri-M's training coordinator, who is a former teacher, provides supplemental assistance after class hours. Apprentices are given electronic tablets to use during their schooling to become familiar with the technology used on job sites.

ON-THE-JOB LEARNING

Apprentices must obtain 8,000 hours of OJL in order to complete their apprenticeship. The starting wage of a first-year apprentice is typically between \$13 to \$15 per hour, depending on academic history and previous employment. The average starting wage upon completion of the apprentice program is \$21 per hour.

RELATED TECHNICAL INSTRUCTION

Tri-M, which recently decided to provide its apprenticeship training and instruction in-house, built its own lab for hands-on learning and contracted with Independent Electrical Contractors (IEC) to provide the curriculum and send an instructor to train students on-site. The IEC instructor evaluates apprentices and provides feedback to Tri-M in the form of an overall grade and class ranking. The curriculum is approved by the American Council on Education, enabling apprentices to earn 34 credits toward an associate degree in construction management.

Tri-M's apprentices experience what the company calls "a blended learning environment" that includes classroom and hands-on training at its training lab in its Kennett Square headquarters. The apprentices must complete four, 40-hour weeks of classroom training each year of the program. All the apprentices attend classes together. Tri-M's satellite-office students are housed in company-provided accommodations for the duration of their classes. Tri-M believes there are major benefits in bringing all their apprentices to one central training facility. It allows the apprentices to learn from each other, share best practices, and build sustainable relationships so they have a trusted resource they can reach out to throughout their career.

⁶⁰ Tri-M does not have its own pre-apprenticeship program.

RESULTS/IMPACT

Tri-M currently has 37 apprentices. The average starting wage upon completion of the apprentice program is \$21 per hour. Once apprentices become journeypersons, they can earn from \$21 to \$35 per hour.

Tri-M reported it has sustained “incredible” results from its apprentice program, especially with the recent transition to in-house training. The amount of time that apprentices spend in the lab applying their classroom training is dramatically increasing their skills and abilities in the field. The apprentices demonstrate their technical knowledge daily on the job site, and their supervisors and other coworkers are extremely happy with the value apprentices bring to the team.

PROGRAM COSTS AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Tri-M firmly believes that the value received from its RA program far surpasses the cost. James T. Horn, president and chief executive officer of Tri-M, said: “Our reputation is built on the foundation of growing and employing top-performing industry professionals. We view the expenditure as an investment in our employees and our company; in fact, we see instant return on investment.” (Note: Tri-M does not calculate an actual ROI.)

Tri-M fully funds all aspects of the RA program. The company’s investment to train its apprentices surpasses \$250,000 a year, including tuition, housing, salaries, supervision, and additional training programs. Tri-M was awarded a grant under WEDnetPA,⁶¹ which was put toward a portion of the training costs of Pennsylvania residents.

INSIGHTS

Amanda Novak, director of human resources at Tri-M, said: “Tri-M believes that the trades offer many opportunities for young men and women to use their minds and their hands. Finding the non-college-bound student is key.

“Managing an apprenticeship program and working with individuals as they progress through their professional careers and develop into a seasoned journeyperson is an extremely rewarding experience. Apprentices are viewed as valuable assets within the organization. Many of the apprentices perform at a level well above what is expected. They are sought after and given the opportunity to take on more responsibility and learn new areas of our business.

“Very robust classroom instruction supplements the apprentices’ related training and instruction and on-the-job learning. When working in the trades, there is nothing like hands-on training and putting the classroom learning to work in the field. Also, in a recent reassessment of the RA program, Tri-M learned that the most effective way to train its apprentices is extensive hands-on lab experiences.

⁶¹ See www.wednetpa.com/.

“An integral part of the Tri-M apprenticeship program is the use of mentors. The mentoring program allows the apprentices to be paired with a more senior member of the team, a process that helps apprentices’ professional development. Mentors are selected based on personality, skill set, and the job sites where they are working. Tri-M’s mentors complete preparatory mentoring and coaching programs. Tri-M’s Training Department meets with mentors and mentees before they start to work together in order to define expectations and set goals. Mentees complete a self-evaluation during this process. Mentors who excel are recognized for this service in their annual performance review.

“Tri-M’s recent decision to manage its program in-house reflected in part a desire for its employees to maintain a good work–life balance as well as meeting the needs of the next generation. Training is now provided on site and during normal working hours. Previously, apprentices had to travel to an alternative training facility some distance from apprentices’ homes and job sites, attending evening classes two nights a week. This has been a great recruiting and retention tool since it limits interference with employees’ work–life balance.”

CONTACT INFORMATION

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TRI-M GROUP, LLC, REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Historical Program Data (From date started to April 28, 2017)

Program start date	1979
Number of apprentices who started program since inception	240
Percentage of apprentices who completed program (completers)	70%
Percentage of completers who are new hires vs. incumbents*	85% new hires 15% incumbents
Percentage of completers who are still working for apprenticeship employer	45%

Current Data as of April 28, 2017

Number of apprentices enrolled in program	37
Average age	22
Gender	100% male 0% female
Race/Ethnicity	65% White (not Hispanic or Latino) 20% African American (not Hispanic or Latino) 15% Hispanic or Latino (any race) 0% Asian (not Hispanic or Latino) 0% Other race/Two or more races (not Hispanic or Latino)

* Incumbent workers were already employed by the employer when they started the RA program.