



SUCCESS STORY

C I S C O A C K N O W L E D G E S S U C C E S S A N D A C C O M P L I S H M E N T S

Cisco Systems, Inc.
170 West Tasman Drive
San Jose, CA
95134-1706

A Diverse Community Realizes Its Potential

A Bible College offering first-class networking training, under the leadership of two ministers? It might not seem an obvious combination, but it makes perfect sense once you hear about Hampstead Bible College (HBC). Located in South East London's Elephant and Castle district, HBC has for over 17 years been offering a variety of vocational training and other education to members of the local community, whether or not they are churchgoers. Elephant and Castle is a multi-ethnic area, and unfortunately it's no secret that even in 21st century Britain, people from ethnic minorities often have trouble getting their abilities recognised by employers.

HBC sees the provision of excellent training in sought-after skills as a way to achieve its mission of helping people realize their potential. Jan Owbridge, Principal of HBC and now herself a Cisco Certified Academy Instructor (CCAI) explains, "In general, the people in this area are hardworking but have a low skills base and low wages. We want ways to lift and empower them, and identified the Cisco Networking Academy Program as a way to do just that." The robust demand for networking skills - even in an economic downturn - is one reason that the Cisco Networking Academy Program appealed to HBC.

Diverse Demography

The program has an unusually high percentage of women – 22%. (In contrast, recent research from IDC, commissioned by Cisco Systems, revealed that at the end of 2000, only 5.6% of Internet networking professionals in Western Europe were women). The fact that the two course leaders are women may be helping to draw female students in, even though it's not a fact that gets advertised.

"But when women call in to ask about the course, they find themselves speaking to women. And if they doubt whether they're up to it, we say, 'If we can, you can,'" adds Jan, whose own previous experience of computers was mainly as a user of Apple Macs. The student body is ethnically diverse – Jan believes that virtually every ethnic group in London has been represented, with over 90% coming from ethnic minority groups. And students' ages have ranged from 14 to the late 50s [with an average age of 30].

Catering For Different Levels Of Prior Knowledge

Virtually all the students, whatever their prior experience, thrived on the course.





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Edith says, "At first I kept complaining 'it's hard, it's hard', but even so it was always enjoyable, and now, of course, I'm very happy to have graduated." Hardest of all for Edith initially was the reading required, but interactive material such as quizzes made life easier. She took full advantage of the labs in her spare time – HBC tries to make the Cisco equipment freely available whenever possible, for students who want to continue their studies outside official course hours.

Even Nalini, with her telecommunications degree, found plenty to interest her. "I got that hands-on exposure that I'd been looking for, and although it wasn't hard work compared with my degree course, it was never boring. I really enjoyed it."

Benefits To Students

What makes the Networking Academy program of outstanding value to these students is its practical, business-oriented nature. "The lab exercises can push students to their limits," says Deborah, "but they guarantee that graduates emerge with skills they can apply in the outside world." As well as technical skills, the students have acquired interpersonal ones. These will be particularly useful for people who, as a result of their studies, may well catapult themselves from low-paid jobs to those commanding a salary of £25,000.

The program places a heavy emphasis on working as a group, particularly during the case study that runs through semesters three and four. This case study, which involves designing a solution for a small business or school, also gives the students experience of presentations: the case study concludes with the team presenting recommendations to a real or imaginary entrepreneur or head teacher.

Deborah says, "That really helps the students learn how to sell themselves - something that they may never have previously been encouraged to do." Perhaps the biggest single benefit is the confidence boost for people who haven't necessarily been handed life's best opportunities up until now. "We had some students who started off very uncertain of themselves, but now their self-esteem is up to the sky," says Deborah.

Looking Into The Future

Deborah finds the first graduates confident about their futures. "There's a real buzz among the students about going out and getting a job, which we've fostered by working with recruitment consultants to organize career days." Both Nalini and Edith have attended one of these events, and came away with leads to follow up with agents or prospective employers. There's justification for the graduates' optimism.

Despite the downturn elsewhere in the IT jobs market, for Cisco-skilled individuals like these the prospects remain rosy. IDC has predicted a shortfall of over 700,000 networking professionals by 2004, even taking account of the current slowdown.



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Some HBC students plan to pursue degree courses or further professional training, either prior to or in parallel with getting a relevant job.

William, now tackling his GCSEs, doesn't have to make those decisions yet, but admits to having been bitten by the network bug: "I'd like to go to college and venture more into IT. Eventually, I'd quite like to work for a large IT organization like Cisco, if I can."

Conclusion: A Practical Program That Demands Only Commitment

"This is one of the most invaluable courses we have run," sums up Deborah Skyers. "You can't help but notice the students' sense of empowerment. Not only are they in line for some very well-paid jobs, but more importantly they can accept those jobs confidently, knowing that they can configure a router, or indeed explain how the technology is relevant to a business.

Unlike graduates of some less 'hands-on' courses, no-one can accuse our students of simply having swallowed the manual." Ex-dressmaker Edith has the last word, "I would encourage anyone who's interested to come on this program. As long as you're determined enough, there really are no limits to what you can achieve."

