



IMPACT PROFILE: YOLONDA MORRISON



11 TONS OF OPPORTUNITY

Yolonda Morrison knew nothing about forging metal or operating massive mobile machinery when she first donned a hard hat at a high-tech titanium manufacturer last winter.

Yolonda, a 43-year-old single mother from Martinsville, VA, had spent years churning out sweatpants, T-shirts, and kitchen cabinets in Southern Virginia's textile and furniture factories. But all five of her factories shut down one after the other, shipping all their jobs overseas.

Yolonda was helping clean out the closed furniture factory where she used to make cabinets when she learned about an on-the-job training program just down the street at RTI International Metals, a titanium forger that supplies the aerospace industry.

"The economy here is so bad," she says. "I jumped on that opportunity to try to do better."

RTI trained her and three others to move 11-ton titanium ingots into gas furnaces that reach 2,200 degrees. They eventually learned every manufacturing function, from running sophisticated equipment that pounds metal into smaller pieces used by other manufacturers, to tracking data on computers.

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"Getting to this point was kind of hard," Yolonda recalls. "But my trainers were at my side. They didn't leave me alone until I felt comfortable."

One of the best parts of this story is: None of these workers had to pay for their training.

In fact, RTI paid them to learn everything they needed to become permanent employees. The company hired them before their training began and retained them all as full-time workers once they completed the three-month program.

Costs were covered in part by subsidies from the Boeing Manufacturing On-the-Job Training (OJT) Project, piloted by the National Fund for Workforce Solutions and funded by the Boeing Corporation. Yolonda and her colleagues earned \$12 per hour during training, and \$13 per hour upon completion.

Less than a year later, Yolonda is earning more than \$15 per hour, and is enjoying the steady pay and hours—at least 40 each week.

"I'm sitting on top of these huge machines at RTI, moving them around the floor," Yolonda says. "I've had training on all the equipment. I'm making more per hour. It's just awesome."

ABOUT THE BOEING OJT PROJECT

The National Fund coordinated the Boeing OJT Project to assess how on-the-job training can help bridge our nation's manufacturing skills gap.

In all, 101 unemployed workers were trained and hired at 39 advanced manufacturers nationwide since 2012. Employers received 50-percent wage subsidies during training periods of 10 to 15 weeks.

RTI Martinsville Human Resources Manager Glenn Wood says the Boeing funding was tremendously beneficial; the company had just opened the Martinsville plant.

"We have to train everyone here from the ground up to know how everything works," he says. "So this funding just couldn't have come at a better time."

Julie Brown, project director of the Dan River Region Collaborative, which brought OJT to Yolonda's new employer, said training new hires on the job is a powerful workforce development strategy for the technological requirements of today's businesses.

“This is a great opportunity for us to engage employers to address their hiring needs and to get folks into jobs that can lead to family-supporting careers,” she says.

The Dan River Collaborative is now expanding the OJT program in Southern Virginia with different funding to help more low-wage workers learn higher skills and advance their careers.

As for Yolonda, she’s finally found her career and mastered skills that she intends to rely on for a long time.

“I plan on retiring from RTI,” she says.



The National Fund for Workforce Solutions is a national partnership testing new ways to bridge the large gap between the skills many workers have and the skills many employers need to compete. The National Fund works closely with employers and leaders from the public and nonprofit sectors to test how the lessons learned from groundbreaking pilot projects in workforce development can be applied on a national scale. More than 200 foundations and 900 employers are part of this effort.

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