A Better Way to Find New Jobs and Careers

Google Cloud helps Rhode Island close skills gaps and connect workers with employers.

Like many states, Rhode Island has searched for ways to overcome a critical economic challenge: how to close the skills gap between what employers need and what job seekers offer.

The COVID-19 pandemic only intensified the hunt for answers. Since March 2020, tens of thousands of Rhode Islanders have filed for unemployment assistance, many of whom were already among the state's most vulnerable workers and families. In response, Rhode Island officials doubled down on technology innovation. They launched "Back to Work RI," an initiative designed to relieve pandemic-related workforce disruptions and create a foundation for connecting workers to new or better jobs for years to come.

"Sometimes you need a catalytic event to really jumpstart innovation, and COVID-19 has definitely been that catalyst," says Sarah Blusiewicz, assistant director of workforce development services for Rhode Island's Department of Labor and Training (DLT). "We are harnessing the urgency arising from desperate circumstances to stand up new data solutions in a matter of weeks. The goal is to take people beyond filing for unemployment and get them into their next career."

The centerpiece of the effort is the Virtual Career Center (VCC), a jobs clearinghouse and counseling site powered by the cloud, artificial intelligence, and a digital bot that encourages workers to reimagine their careers and connects them with state and private services to help them reach their goals. The VCC is a model that shows how a combination of cloud technology and creative thinking can modernize government services.

Personalizing Career Opportunities

The first step in getting Rhode Islanders back to work and addressing skills gaps is a meeting with Skipper, an interactive digital assistant developed by the technology for social good nonprofit Research Improving People's Lives (RIPL).

"We designed Skipper to make the VCC a welcoming place rather than another complicated government website," Blusiewicz says.

The bot leverages VCC's underlying data management and analytics infrastructure to pull together information that traditionally has lived in separate, disconnected databases. The information includes current job postings from the state's Workforce Exchange website and commercial job boards. Wage data reported by the state to the U.S. Social Security Administration tells Skipper what individuals earned in previous jobs. The bot also uses demographic information that residents provide when they register for the VCC, and it checks if they applied for unemployment insurance. Skipper then asks job seekers to complete a career skills survey

Key Takeaways:

✓ Rhode Island uses cloud and artificial intelligence to help residents get back to work.

✓ Innovative Virtual Career Center (VCC) helps workers reimagine their careers and connects them with training and resources.

✓ The VCC pulls together data from multiple sources to match job seekers with open positions they may be good at.

✓ VCC counselors can connect residents with childcare, transportation and other services.

✓ Job seekers can use Google Workspace to connect directly with career coaches, job recruiters and potential employers.

created by RIPL. Prospective employers complete similar surveys to detail the types of skills they are seeking.

Using the VCC's advanced data-crunching algorithms, Skipper advises workers about relevant reskilling opportunities and new career paths.

"People notoriously struggle with learning what's out there in the job market and what types of new jobs they may be good at," says DLT Director Scott Jensen. "It's important to expand people's horizons, especially during such an upheaval like the pandemic."

Armed with Skipper's analytical foundation, job seekers then schedule a videoconference with a VCC job counselor who can tap into a large network of public services and employer-sponsored training programs, as well as relevant resources from educational institutions and nonprofits.

"People who successfully complete a training program have an improved chance at finding a job and perhaps even a new career with better benefits," Jensen says. "In addition, the lack of affordable transportation and childcare can derail employment success even if someone has sought-after skills. We're putting a team of support around each job seeker to give them a much greater likelihood of success."

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>
> *— Scott Jensen, Director, Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training*

The VCC uses cloud-based collaboration tools to connect job seekers with representatives from other public, private and nonprofit organizations for help with overcoming hurdles to employment. For example, if applicants need childcare or advice about food stamps or public transportation, VCC counselors can direct them to the appropriate resource and even schedule appointments.

"The Virtual Career Center is designed to bring crucial services together at the right time and in the right place to help a person pursue a potentially life-changing opportunity," Jensen explains.

"It makes that happen without a lot of red tape that otherwise might make people drop out of the search process."

The VCC also is designed to deliver employment information when it will have the biggest impact for job seekers, adds Blusiewicz.

"The white whale for workforce development has long been giving job seekers the best data that's available at the moment that it's needed — not so late or so early that it's not helpful," she says. "Rather than sending people into the black hole that is online job searches these days, we're prioritizing results that we think will be most beneficial for that individual to see and to work through first."

Scaling Service Delivery to Meet Demand

The VCC is powered by Google Cloud, including the BigQuery analytics platform, Cloud SQL database service and Cloud Storage resources. In addition, the VCC uses the Google Cloud Talent API and Job Search API, as well as discovery tools powered by machine learning and artificial intelligence to help job seekers find employers or explore career opportunities best suited to their skills and interests. Google Workspace, including Google Meet, enables job seekers to schedule video meetings with career coaches, job recruiters and potential employers.

"The cloud offers a multitude of services that support the sheer scale of demand we're seeing," says Amelia Roberts, director of data and performance at DLT. "We built a number of tools in the cloud to address the many Rhode Islanders who need help."

As of November, more than 39,000 Rhode Island residents were unemployed and actively seeking work. The state's current unemployment rate is 7.3 percent, more than double the year-earlier rate.

A Model for Government Modernization

The full set of capabilities envisioned for the VCC will launch in early 2021, but preliminary iterations of the rollout are already receiving positive reviews. For example, users say Skipper is intuitive to use and successfully connects them with practical career information.

"Once the other features come online, we believe the VCC is going to change the face of how we conduct our business and how we're able to serve people," Blusiewicz says. "But Rhode Island is a starting point, not the end of the story. This approach could change the way that job searches and the support around those efforts are conducted nationwide, across many agencies and organizations."

To hear more about Rhode Island's story, watch COVID-19 Recovery: Getting Rhode Islanders Back to Work now available on-demand from the Google Cloud Public Sector Summit 2020.

This piece was developed and written by the Government Technology Content Studio, with information and input from Google Cloud.