

Case Study: Next Generation Apprenticeships at Aon

February 2023

In 2017, Aon launched an apprenticeship program in Chicago with City Colleges of Chicago. The program recruited community college students who would study toward an associate degree in business-related fields while working at Aon. Upon completion, apprentices transition into full-time employment at Aon, continuing careers in growing fields such as insurance, technology, and human resources.

Within the last few years, Aon expanded the apprenticeship program into six additional cities, including Houston, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington DC. Aon has supported six cohorts of apprentices to date, including four Chicago-only cohorts of about 20 apprentices each and two multi-location cohorts about 100 each.

About Aon

Aon exists to shape decisions for the better – to protect and enrich the lives of people around the world. Aon provides clients in over 120 countries and sovereignties with advice and solutions that give them the clarity and confidence to make better decisions to protect and grow their business.

Getting Results

Aon's apprenticeship program has drawn widespread attention for a reason. It works.

Since inception in the US in 2017, the firm has supported nearly 300 apprentices. Within the Chicagoland cohorts, Aon reports an apprenticeship completion rate of more than 80%. Successful completion requires that students meet performance standards for both work-based learning and academic program requirements. The program is intentionally inclusive, supporting apprentices of color, women, and first-generation students as they move into good jobs. Students graduate from their programs debt-free, as Aon covers all costs of attendance at partner colleges. Aon also pays salary and benefits for apprentices, with starting salaries of \$42,000-46,000 depending on location.

Upon completion of the program, apprentice graduates are offered full-time employment and work in many departments, including insurance, IT, and human resources, and enter those roles as experienced, valued colleagues who earn competitive wages with exceptional benefits packages.

Why Apprenticeship?

Aon had two goals in designing the apprenticeship program: building a talent pipeline of skilled and diverse professionals and removing barriers to entry-level employment, particularly for the local workforce. Those barriers include the cost of college, either through upfront payment or debt load, and the lack of clear pathways into roles without bachelor's

degrees. By creating their apprenticeship program that blended on-the-job experience with in-classroom learning, and supporting students with professional skills development, networking, career navigation, mentorship, compensation, and benefits, Aon has closed the gap for hundreds of apprentices.

Aon chose a US Department of Labor (DOL) registered apprenticeship model, which requires specific wage progression, academic learning, and job-related learning requirements. Apprentices at Aon receive a graduated wage progression at six-month intervals based on performance outcomes. Daniel Serota, director of public affairs at Aon, tied the decision to register the program to quality assurance: "We thought it benefitted us because it gives us credibility that we are creating a high-quality apprenticeship program.... But it's an opportunity for the apprentice, too, to be able to have a credential and everything else."

In Chicagoland, Aon worked with Harold Washington Community College through its downtown location and with the College of Lake County through its Lincolnshire, Illinois, location. [One Million Degrees](#), a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that provides wraparound services to community college students, receives funding directly from Aon to support college success and career navigation. Similar relationships exist in expansion cities, as well, and are embedded in Aon program operations.

Location	Academic Partner	Support Partner
Chicago	Harold Washington College and College of Lake County	One Million Degrees
Philadelphia	Community College of Philadelphia and Montgomery County Community College	Summer Search
Minneapolis	Normandale Community College	Project for Pride in Living
San Francisco	Solano Community College	Summer Search
Houston	Houston Community College	Capital IDEA Houston
Washington DC	University of the District of Columbia Community College	CityWorks DC - CityBridge Education
New York City	Borough of Manhattan Community College	Summer Search

Aon selects which institutions to work with based on a variety of factors, including proximity to office locations, capacity to support students, and capacity to ramp up the program to accommodate hiring needs. Apprentices typically work 40 hours per week, which is split between work at Aon and classwork for their full-time courseload. Aon also tries to ensure regular schedules for apprentices, who are physically in the office during set times.

In the Chicago-area offices, apprentices study in three tracks: IT, human resources, and insurance. In expansion sites, at the current time, all apprentices are enrolled in the insurance track.

What We Learned

Aon followed the requirements of the DOL registered apprenticeships, creating learning plans and structured benchmarks. Using this structured approach, in addition to creating the culture and infrastructure necessary, Aon operationalized, sustained, and grew the program, both as it started in Chicago and as it branched out into other locations. Lessons from their practice may be helpful to other companies considering new programs or adapting existing apprenticeships.

Manageable Growth

Key to Aon's success, and advice they regularly give to other companies exploring apprenticeship, is to start with a manageable scale and a learning mindset. The program launched with about 20 apprentices in Chicago, with key organizations to support the program in place. Additionally, Aon resourced the program sufficiently from the outset, dedicating a new project management role to the effort and empowering that role with the responsibility and resources to sustain and grow the program. This was an important decision. Rather than locating the program within an existing role in HR, a typical practice that often adds responsibilities to people with already full plates, Aon created space for the program to thrive. Stressing this point, Daniel Serota noted, "An HR department might do the same thing." But "an [apprenticeship] is going to be brand new. It's a change in culture, it's a change in the way an organization looks at their talented workforce."

This new role also oversaw other early career programs, including a preexisting ten-week summer internship open to students from four-year institutions and other pipeline development programs. Combining responsibilities for the entire early career program slate created the foundation for success – apprenticeship programs should not be separate from other pathway development initiatives. Meghan Parrilla, vice president of global early careers at Aon, commented, "Whether you come in through a pathway through college or through apprenticeship, both are viable pathways into Aon."

The Important Role of Supervisors

While the early career manager role changed significantly as the program grew, the opportunity to learn within the role was important. One of the most important lessons the team learned was about the role of supervisors.

Education and training programs are often championed by corporate leadership and adopted by early career employees, but supervisors are a lynchpin of success. Their buy-in and support can make the difference between limited uptake and lackluster results or rousing success.

Early in the program, Aon leaders recognized the importance of engaging supervisors directly to help them understand that apprenticeships are strategic investments in the future of the company, and that increasing representation and diversity within the company's ranks is a benefit. Noting as much, Meghan Parrilla commented, "You can just tell that their job has changed their perspective of how they look at things and how they want talent ... and that there is a continual path of moving this person up your chain and up the ladder, which is exciting."

At the start of its apprenticeship, Aon informally helped apprentice supervisors grow into this new role, responding to individual requests for help from those asked to supervise the first cohort of apprentices. Aon leaders soon realized the need to develop more formal and robust support structures, designing new programming and facilitating communication among apprenticeship supervisors to foster peer learning and mutual assistance.

Much like the Aon apprentices, supervisors interact as a cohort. As a group, they attend monthly calls over the course of the apprenticeship period, sharing ideas, drawing out common challenges, brainstorming possible solutions, and, when needed, formulating requests for additional help. They also receive structured training from workforce experts that coach them to adopt better supervising techniques and strategies. This learning cohort model contributes to program improvements, with feedback channels that allow program managers and apprenticeship supervisors to test out and refine shared protocol and procedures.

As the program has expanded, Aon created new structures to formalize supervisor capacities. Like apprentices, supervisors complete monthly assessments about their apprentices and their own work. Program staff, including workforce experts from One Million Degrees and other support organizations, engage directly to address capacity issues, challenges, and areas for growth. Aon has also created an early career manager profile, identifying and describing traits that contribute to apprentice success. Effective apprentice managers are engaged in the development of their early career colleagues. Managers exhibiting an "Aon United" mindset hold themselves accountable and are approachable, instill confidence, and model stress management. Aon also prioritizes inclusivity, identifying managers who advocate for their teams, embrace differences, and are skilled team builders who can provide in-person support to apprentices. The profile is shared with HR colleagues, supporting forecasting and recruitment needs and ensuring those traits are taken into consideration in hiring decisions.

Listening and Learning

To support and sustain the program, Aon established an apprenticeship advisory council, composed of senior leadership, managers and supervisors, and former apprentices who completed the program and transitioned to full-time employment with the firm. The council is charged with oversight and strategy roles. As an example, the advisory council developed and supported the implementation of a manager profile. They also prioritized in-person work-based learning upon the experiences of virtual cohorts who experienced new challenges from not being able to engage with each other, their manager, their team, and their career navigator. The council, which is drawn from all levels of Aon, makes

recommendations to program leadership based on their experiences and insights. While the advisory council started in Chicago, there are now councils in all the expansion locations.

The inclusion of former apprentices on the council as equal peers is an important aspect. Many corporate initiatives plan and program for early career workers, but do not necessarily program with those workers. In this model, Aon is modeling effective practice in elevating worker voice, a vital component of job quality.

Council members have also taken a lead role in actively promoting the program to their colleagues and reaching out to managers within teams that haven't had apprentices. That advocacy work has raised interest in apprenticeship supervision across the organization, expanding the potential career options for incoming apprentices.

The program has also spurred learning for incumbent employees. New apprentice orientation at Aon is designed to give incoming apprentices a flavor of the entire organization, including a chance to understand what is happening within and across different departments. As apprentices move through the two-year program, they are strongly encouraged to take full advantage of continuous learning opportunities supported by Aon's "open door" culture. As part of that commitment to career development, Aon connects apprentices to leaders across the entire organization, structuring these exchanges to allow apprentices to assess where their own career interests most align.

Existing employees within large, multidivisional organizations rarely have this same opportunity, as they are often tied to busy schedules and focused on meeting internal deadlines. It can be hard for them to keep up with the latest happenings within other areas and thus be able to think through the implications for their own goal setting and project development. Aon apprentices now help them out, bringing their learning back by sharing with co-workers what they have absorbed through their various conversations, seminars, and trainings. This process strengthens knowledge-sharing across the firm, adding to the knowledge repertoire and providing creative material for driving further improvement and innovation.

Creating Demand, Sharing Success

Through the efforts of the advisory council and the organic buzz about the program, Aon has seen steadily increasing interest in both the expansion of the program and in engaging directly with the apprentices.

Of course, an option for increasing apprenticeship numbers is simply a top-down mandate. While the program is certainly supported at the top, with significant leadership from Aon CEO Greg Case in escalating the work, the program has gained strength from internal advocacy and enthusiasm. Noting as much, an apprenticeship manager commented, "Anything that comes from [the top] or HR pushing this ... sometimes takes away from the reality of 'this is a really great program.' So having actual influencers in the business able to champion it and really share the impact for their team or things they've seen, that's been incredibly helpful."

Program expansion, according to Aon leadership, was driven primarily by requests from local leadership in cities. Seeing the program work well in Chicago created confidence in Aon's office leadership that it could work elsewhere.

Through its work in driving the good news about apprenticeships across Chicago, Aon is also sharing insights about its success, creating champions in other businesses. Aon is a co-founder of the [Chicago Apprenticeship Network](#), a consortium of nearly 80 employers in the region committed to creating new pathways to mobility. With a goal of creating 10,000 apprenticeships across the country through other Apprenticeship Networks by 2030, the Network is well on its way. Network member employers have hired 1,400 apprentices already.

Conclusion

Apprenticeships are among the oldest forms of education, blending work-based and academic experiences to support high-performing skilled employees. While they have dipped in and out of vogue over the decades, their value has not changed. Apprenticeship programs, done well, lead to well-trained, loyal employees who are more likely to stay with the organization and grow in their roles.

Aon's apprenticeship program has been a transformational experience for hundreds of apprentices starting out their careers. As importantly, the apprenticeship program appears to be creating significant change within Aon, from hiring practices to corporate culture. While the program was created to build a new pathway for entry-level employees to learn and grow, equally important has been the associated changes in defining the role of a supervisor and strengthening supervisory talent. Aon's high-quality program, where apprentices are supported holistically in their learning and development and where corporate practice is intentionally inclusive, is an exemplar, showing how the model can work for nontraditional apprenticeship occupations and how companies can meet their talent pipeline with diverse talent.

Acknowledgements

UpSkill America thanks the many leaders at Aon who contributed to this study for their time and insights. This brief was prepared in partnership by Nichola Lowe, professor in the department of city and regional planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Haley Glover, director of UpSkill America, and Ranita Jain, former associate director for research at the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program who is currently a program officer with the Center for Economic Opportunity at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. UpSkill America thanks Amy Blair and Vivian Vázquez for their contributions, as well. This study was enabled by the Apprenticeship 2020 Fund, hosted by the Chicagoland Workforce Funder Alliance.

About UpSkill America

UpSkill America supports employers and workforce organizations to expand and improve high-quality educational and career advancement opportunities for America's front-line workers. We seek to create a movement of employers, civic organizations, workforce intermediaries, and policymakers working collaboratively to implement education, training, and development strategies that result in better jobs and opportunities for front-line workers, more competitive businesses, and stronger communities.

Follow us at aspeninstitute.org/upskillamerica and linkedin.com/company/aspeneop

