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Suffolk Construction's Career Start program: Building young talent from the ground up

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A cornerstone for the success of any company is the quality of the people it recruits and retains. Suffolk Construction takes that seriously and has created its innovative Career Start program to find the best next-generation construction professionals and provide them with hands-on training in estimating, field operations, and project management, Suffolk's main operational areas. Career Start is part of Red and Blue University, Suffolk's overall training and development program, which has been ranked 40th on Training Magazine's Training Top 125 list, the most elite ranking among Fortune 500 companies for learning and development. The goal of Career Start is to train and place the right talent in the right job and to be able to grow Suffolk organically, allowing new employees the chance to build successful, long-term careers within the firm.

Career Start is the brainchild of Suffolk CEO John Fish. In 2004, he decided it was necessary to start identifying target schools from which to recruit talent and to provide intensive training in order for new employees to enhance their skill set, learn how they match with the various roles in the company, and pursue the positions that will allow them to further their careers and professional development. This approach to training ensures that new employees build working relationships with coworkers throughout the firm and fosters a strong sense of teamwork, which is an essential part of Suffolk's corporate culture.

When I came to Suffolk as director of Career Start, I was well aware of the importance that recruiting, team-building, and mentoring play in building a successful organization. Prior to joining Suffolk, I was the assistant coach of Boston University's men's basketball team. Fish believed in hiring someone with a coaching background to help personally develop new employees and build a team capable of working together. As a coach, I not only recruited players but mentored them, facilitating their success throughout their college career, and teaching them how to work together as a cohesive unit. That is exactly what we are doing at Suffolk with Career Start—we are recruiting the best, coaching them well, and building a successful team.

In 2005, Suffolk launched Career Start with seven candidates. Today, there are more than 25 people in the program. Career Start is an intensive, two-year program in which new employees gain on-the-job training in each of Suffolk's three main operational areas—estimating, field operations, and project management. As Career Start employees rotate through each eight-month work assignment, experienced team leaders identify and assess their strengths and skills, helping the employees to choose and pursue confidently the right positions within Suffolk. Senior advisors work with employees throughout the two-year program.

Within each eight-month assignment, employees are assigned a mentor. The mentor works with the employees on their assignments, ensures that they develop an understanding of requisite skills of the jobs, and familiarizes them with Suffolk's corporate culture. By providing mentors, we help new

employees quickly adapt to the way the company does business.

As director of Career Start, I am involved in all aspects of the program's development. During the recruiting phase, I lead our team's efforts to find candidates who show a passion for the construction industry and who have shown exceptional communication and leadership skills through academic and/or athletic achievement. Once we find the appropriate candidates, our goal is to continue to push them to improve in all aspects of their careers. In order to do so, we set and achieve high goals within Career Start and develop opportunities within all aspects of Suffolk's operations. The education we provide truly prepares our candidates for success. We educate through on-the-job and classroom training, focusing on professional presence, company strategies, and construction-specific courses. I believe that this formula sets the stage for continued success for Career Start employees in all areas of Suffolk.

That formula clearly is working. Graduates of Career Start, the first of whom completed the program in 2007, have entered Suffolk's workforce with the skills necessary to succeed in the construction industry. These employees have become proficient in start-up and mobilization procedures, budgeting and financial analysis, managing change order processes and potential project delays, quality and safety procedures, teamwork and communication. These Career Start "graduates" have also demonstrated that their hands-on experience in various construction areas has given them the skills and knowledge they need to excel in their careers because they have a better understanding of the role each of these very different competencies play in constructing a building and providing superior client service.

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