

Kama'aina Come Home: Recruiting Engineering Talent with Hawai'i Roots

Abstract

Hawai'i's engineering and technology employers create a strong demand for engineers that is not currently met by the local labor pool. Shortages are exacerbated when students with local ties graduate from mainland schools and do not return home, or move to the mainland to escape the high cost of living in the islands. Many other areas in the U.S. experience similar "brain drain" as local young professionals gravitate to select urban centers.

This paper will describe concerted efforts, over the past 5 years, to recruit women, Native Hawaiians and persons with local ties and qualifications to return home to Maui to work. It will also discuss the potential to replicate these efforts in other communities. To date, these efforts have reached over 5,000 expatriates, attracted nearly 800 applicants and resulted in more than 70 job placements.

One event in this multi-strategy initiative is the annual High Tech Maui Job Fair, held over the winter holidays when potential returnees are home visiting their families. In addition to the job fair, the paper will discuss the evolution of efforts to conduct mainland recruitment of persons with Hawai'i ties. These have included targeted events designed to attract students to presentations regarding job opportunities in Hawai'i, working with college and university career centers, and providing visibility for Maui employers at expositions and cultural events that draw people with Hawai'i ties (e.g. Hula festivals). Contact with qualified potential returnees consistently indicates that many are unaware of opportunities for them on Maui, and welcome the chance to find work that will enable them to come home to their family and cultural roots. The opportunity to work near extended family is a valued option for those juggling career and family and may help efforts to retain women in engineering careers.

The Maui Economic Development Board (MEDB) is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation established in 1982 to assist the County of Maui in diversifying its economy into high technology. MEDB partners with private and public organizations and government agencies at the county, state and national levels to achieve this goal.

The Women in Technology Project (WIT) of MEDB was established in 1999 as a workforce development project focused on encouraging women, girls and other underrepresented groups into science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education and careers. WIT works in partnership with educators and businesses to encourage a pipeline from education to employment in STEM that includes these under-utilized demographics.

A skilled resident workforce is a critical component to achieving full development of any region's technology industry and to sustain the effective/competitive operations of other industry sectors. Without targeted programs—women and minorities, who are an important resource to meet projected technical skill shortages in both the state and the nation's labor force— may remain untapped.

Employers without sufficient local resources have to bear the added expense of long-distance recruitment and the retention risks of relocated workers. Severe shortages of local STEM-trained workers reduce a region's capacity for innovation, productivity and competitiveness in world markets. This paper focuses specifically on two of WIT's initiatives to address that target potential employees with local ties: Kama'aina Come Home and the annual High Tech Maui Holiday Job Fair. Although neither outreach program is targeted specifically to women, the opportunity to work near extended family may help efforts to retain women in engineering careers. It is certainly a valued option for those juggling career and family.

It is difficult to track exactly how many job placements result from these efforts as the employers themselves may not track the referral source and often funnel all applicants through a mandatory on-line start to the hiring process. However, WIT is able to track the number of candidates it interacts with, and will often receive feedback through word of mouth from successful candidates or the human resources departments that hire them. Based on a combination of formal tracking and anecdotal evidence, WIT estimates that to date, these efforts have reached over 5,000 potential applicants with Hawaii ties, attracted nearly 800 applicants and resulted in more than 70 job placements.

High Tech Maui Holiday Job Fair

Each year, WIT coordinates and implements the HTM Job Fair ("Fair") held at the end of December when people who now live outside of Maui return home to visit their families over the winter holidays. The Fair is held at the local Research and Technology Park and showcases Maui-based employers with jobs in STEM fields.

WIT promotes the event throughout the year by highlighting it as part of presentations made in cities on the U.S. mainland as part of the “Kama’aina Come Home¹” (KCH) program described below. Interested job-seekers are encouraged to pre-register for the Fair on-line.

The Fair’s database becomes available in mid-November. Interested persons can use the HTM website to do their own research about Maui employers that hire STEM graduates as well as register to participate in the Fair. Encouraging pre-registration through radio and print advertising makes the registration process efficient and drives traffic to the website. The significant number of participants registering online also validates that the media announcements are reaching the interested public.

In addition to publicizing the Fair via KCH presentations, on the radio and in the local newspaper, WIT sends out email blasts through all MEDB programs. WIT is in frequent networking contact with Maui’s tech employers and maintains a high profile for both the Fair and KCH.

The following table shows the consistent reach of the event over time.

Year	No. of employers	Women as % of job seekers	Total No. of job seekers	Total No. of job seekers with local ties
2002	16	32%	203	180
2003	15	31%	203	159
2004	20	31%	233	106
2005	20	38%	125	109
2006	18	34%	147	113
2007	19	32%	135	120
2008	19	49%	203	173

Funding for the Fair has come from Maui County and the U.S. Departments of Labor and Commerce, and in-kind assistance from co-sponsors Kama’aina Careers, the Maui County Workforce Investment Board, the Maui News, and some of the tech employers. Feedback from employers indicates that the quality of job seekers typically meets or exceeds their expectations.

Kama’aina Come Home

The term “kama’aina” is commonly used to mean someone born and raised in Hawaii. In April, 2006, WIT/MEDB launched a partnership with Kama’aina Careers, a company based on the West Coast working to connect people on the U.S. mainland with job opportunities in Hawaii. This company had an established network and resources for conducting outreach to students and other former residents.

¹ Kama'aina Come Home is trademarked by and used with permission from the Hawaii Island Economic Development Board.

WIT receives funding for this work from the County of Maui, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce. WIT subcontracts with Kama'aina Careers for presence on their website, access to their networks and expertise, and help staffing KCH events.

The partnership was dubbed “Kama'aina Come Home” because it focuses on connecting Hawaii students graduating from mainland colleges and other former residents interested in returning home to pursue their careers with available jobs in STEM on Maui. Maui employers are eager to hire highly educated and motivated candidates with island roots. Employers experience a lower attrition rate with employees who have family and cultural ties to the islands, and are already familiar with and prepared for the high-cost of living and geographic isolation.

KCH conducts outreach in areas with demographically high concentrations of people with Hawaii ties, which the team refers to as “kama'aina clusters.” These areas include Denver and Colorado Springs, Colorado; Los Angeles and San Diego, California; Seattle and Puyallup, Washington; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Portland, Oregon.

The information provided at these outreach events includes general information on local STEM employers, and information about specific job opportunities, referral services and resources. Before each trip, WIT sends an email to the hiring departments of Maui's tech companies inviting them to share information they would like KCH to convey about job opportunities.

The KCH team has held receptions and/or staffed booths at job fairs, conferences and college events likely to draw those with STEM-related qualifications, and at Hawaii-themed events likely to draw crowds with Hawaii ties. The team works directly with colleges and universities to inform students about the events it hosts. KCH has had the most consistent success working with the Career Center staff at colleges and universities.

KCH looks for opportunities to present where groups from a number of colleges and universities are already converging. One regular event in this category is the Mountain Pacific Association of Colleges and Employers Conference held annually in Colorado. This conference draws Career Center staff from colleges and universities all over the Western United States (Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Colorado, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Guam and Hawaii). KCH staffs a booth in a centralized location at the conference. KCH conducts outreach to these staff and provides literature about KCH and brochures from Maui's tech employers via an information booth. The KCH team makes use of opportunities for contact with conference and event participants beyond the booth presentation by conducting follow-up conversations with potential contacts and applicants during meals and at networking events.

Throughout 2007, KCH hosted a series of “stand-alone” events in “kama'aina cluster” cities as additional vehicles for presenting the latest career information and job opportunities to former residents and Hawaii-born college students interested in coming

home to work and live. Occasionally, tech employers would also send representatives to showcase their companies and job opportunities.

A variety of mechanisms were employed to publicize the events, including disseminating email announcements and flyers in the target city, and running newspaper ads in Maui so that local residents could encourage their friends and relatives in the target city to attend. These stand-alone events typically drew several dozen candidates who enthusiastically received the information and stayed past the events official close to network. Most were previously unaware of the kind of STEM job opportunities available. Despite the clear impact on those who did attend, attendance at these gatherings was deemed insufficient to justify the cost of the events. WIT determined that attendance was subject to too many uncontrollable variables—from inclement weather to the attendees' divergent schedules—to risk the funding investment required for stand-alone events.

As a result KCH discontinued these events and increased its reach by instead seeking out opportunities to make presentations to existing groups with Hawaii ties, such as “Hawaii Clubs” on various campuses, hula *halau* (troupes) and other civic clubs with Hawaii connections. Scheduling was no longer a problem because the candidates already had the groups' meetings on their calendars. KCH helped increase attendance by providing food for an existing meeting.

Thanks to these better-networked gatherings, a visit to a given area by the KCH team now typically results in direct outreach to more than a hundred people. Presentations follow an established format, beginning with a PowerPoint presentation that summarizes MEDB's Mission and History, and provides an overview of the high tech community on Maui. Then the services offered by Kama`aina Careers are explained. Attendees get a chance to introduce themselves and ask general questions. Later, they are split into smaller groups so that they can be approached more individually.

In 2008, KCH rolled out new resources, including an interactive website (www.kamaainacomehome.com) and a new marketing brochure. The brochure concept was designed by a WIT summer intern representing the KCH target demographic: a student from the islands attending school on the mainland. It features real *kama`aina* professionals working at the Maui Research & Technology Park and highlights companies located on Maui with job opportunities in STEM. The website was developed by a *kama`aina* firm headed by a woman who returned to work in Maui. It features profiles of Maui tech employers, a calendar of events, and contact information. A job-search component is currently under construction where employers will be able to advertise openings and job-seekers will be able to upload their resumes and register their information for employers to peruse. Ultimately, the HTM Job Fair and KCH will run off the same database and website.

Due to the success of KCH events, KCH trips now sometimes include representatives from not only Maui, but Kauai, Oahu, Maui and Hawaii Island Economic Development agencies as well, who want to talk to KCH audiences about job opportunities on their islands. KCH continues to expand its reach with more events in more cities. This

expansion focuses both on geographic areas known for large concentrations of people with Hawaii ties and conferences within industry areas being targeted by KCH's high tech business development organizational partners. In the past year, added the BIO International Conference in San Diego for biotechnology companies, as well as Aloha festivals, Dragonboat festivals, and new locations such as Washington, D.C., and Orlando, Florida.

KCH's reputation has built such that there are now applicants who contact WIT's KCH project manager directly first rather than potential employers. At KCH presentations this contact is invited so that KCH can help applicants determine which companies are compatible with their objectives and let the relevant human resources departments know when applicants are responding to KCH outreach.

Replication

WIT's recruitment efforts benefit from the strong and specific sense of identity people connect to having roots in Hawaii. In addition, Hawaii's geographic isolation means that people who leave family there behind to pursue education and careers must return to the islands if they want to be much "closer." However, even if these factors are not quite as strong, other regions can use the pull of returning to family and roots to encourage educated "expatriates" to return.

Timing a job fair so that it occurs when people have returned home for the holidays is a widely replicable strategy. Much of what KCH does to get information about local job opportunities to students who have gone away to college, or graduates who have gone away for work, is also replicable. Any city or state's economic development entity might pursue such strategies. The alumni associations of local high schools, colleges and universities are a place to start. The proliferation of identity-based groups on social networking sites is also likely to be a future source of reaching a regional-roots-based audience.

If there are colleges and universities where students from the region tend to "cluster," then an information booth at those schools' career fairs might be a good investment. It may even be worth putting on employment information events that the career services and registration departments of those schools can be encouraged to help publicize.