

Young man back in school with the help of his employer

Disability RMS participates in program to encourage higher education for employees

BY JOYCE GRONDIN

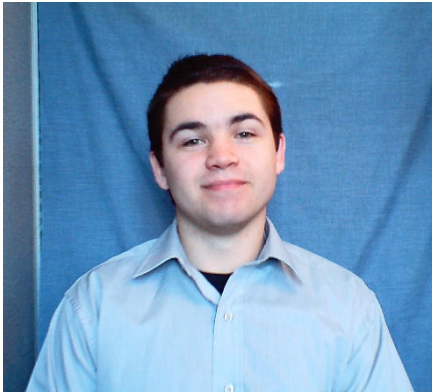


Photo: Disability RMS

Twenty-eight-year-old Louis Page of Westbrook is taking college classes through a benefit offered by his employer, Disability RMS. The company, which serves as an intermediary to insurance companies, has recently hooked up with the Maine Employers' Initiative for assistance in finding ways to help employees further their education.

WESTBROOK – Louis Page attended college a few years ago, but had to drop out because he couldn't afford the cost of tuition and living expenses.

Now, with the help of his employer, Disability RMS of Westbrook, Louis, 28, is back in school. He recently started his first semester at Southern New Hampshire University in Brunswick, where he is working toward an associate's degree in business administration.

Page, who works as an imaging clerk at Disability RMS, said that upon interviewing for a promotion at the company, managers encouraged him to explore higher education so he'd have more opportunities for advancement.

"The job market is difficult right now and there are lots of overqualified people applying for entry-level jobs. This can make advancement difficult," he said.

Carol Taylor, human resources consultant at Disability RMS, said the company has offered this benefit to its 300 or so employees all along, but many workers have not been taking advantage of these opportunities for various reasons.

Then along came a program called the Maine Employers' Initiative, which is funded by grants through Lumina and Ford foundations under the auspices of the Maine Development Foundation, a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to guide economic development in the state.

"We became interested in the Maine Employers' Initiative because it offered the opportunity to re-engage with our adult employees who may be considering returning to school to complete a formal degree or attain a professional designation, but are held back because they are either unaware of the resources available to them or simply do not know where to begin," Taylor said.

In mid-2009, Taylor compiled information from the Maine Development Foundation's Web site, Disability RMS's Employee Assistance Program and other resources available through DRMS's educational policies to create an easy-to-read guide for employees on how to continue their education. The guide was then distributed to employees as part of a larger internal professional development marketing campaign.

Since then, Taylor said Disability RMS has seen a jump, from seven to 15 employees who are participating in the company's tuition reimbursement program and seeking either a bachelor's or master's degree. In addition, she said, several employees are studying for professional exams through insurance organizations. And, she expects the 2010 fall university enrollments to increase as Disability RMS plans to continue the campaign.

"It is important for us to regularly circle back with our employees and remind them of the myriad of support mechanisms available to them as they work to secure degrees, designations, professional licenses, etc..." she said.

The Maine Employers' Initiative, explained Senior Program Director Patricia Hart, urges employers to take "One More Step" to increase college attainment among their employees. Hart said that Maine's level of educational attainment is much lower than the rest of the New England states. According to Census numbers, Hart said Maine was ranked 35th out of 50 states in the nation on personal income in 2007. That low income, she explained, correlates with the lack of higher education in the state.

As of January 2010, 75 employers have come on board with the Maine Employers' Initiative and committed to working with their employees to further their education. Some of the ideas offered that employers have pursued include: taking steps to build awareness about the value of higher education, actively supporting employees in planning for college, and creating a pathway for the employee to pay for college or a certification.

Once Page obtains an associate's degree, he plans to go on to pursue a bachelor's degree. He is not yet certain whether it will be in business or another area, but he knows that the additional education will provide him with more chances to move up the ladder.

"A degree will open many opportunities within DRMS that I did not have before," he said. "If this benefit were not available through DRMS, then I would be forced to take out loans or seek other ways to pay for my education."

For more information about the Maine Employers' Initiative, contact Patricia Hart at 626-3124 or via e-mail at pathart@mdf.org.