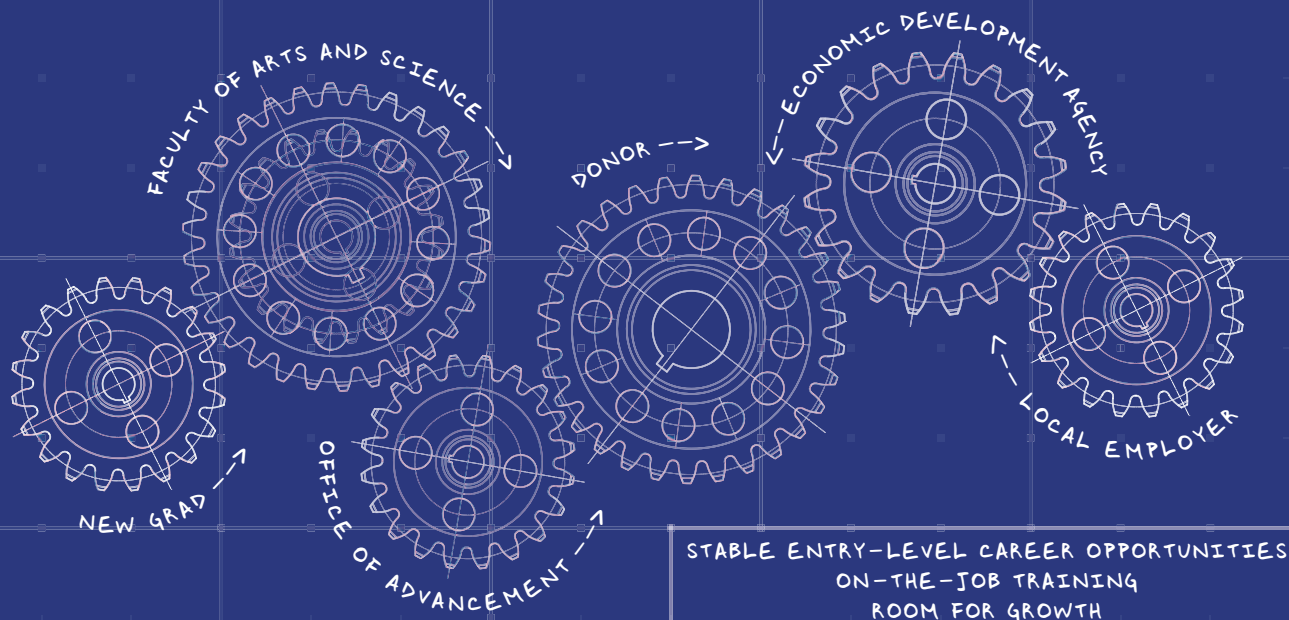


A blueprint for success

*The Queen's Career Apprenticeship:
Kingston program tackles the
roadblocks to getting that great
first job after graduation*

BY ANDREA GUNN



It's an ongoing conundrum for new grads. You can't get a job without experience. But you can't get experience without a job. And it can be even tougher for a new grad with an arts or humanities degree to find that great first job after university.

But combine this with the ongoing challenge of attracting and retaining new talent, particularly in smaller communities, and you have an opportunity waiting to happen.

All that's needed is the right partnership to leverage that opportunity.

Just over three years ago, entrepreneur (and Queen's parent) Alan Rottenberg got the ball rolling, in a conversation with Tom Hewitt, Chief Development Officer at Queen's. What if – Rottenberg asked – there was a program that matched new grads with employers, who could show them the ropes while giving them full-time, meaningful employment that could utilize their university degree? A kind of white-collar apprenticeship program. Rottenberg was willing to provide a financial incentive that would encourage employers to take on new grads without work experience.

"Alan saw that there are a lot of young people on the sidelines of the workforce," says Hewitt.

"Their employment is not taking advantage of the skills they have learned at university."

"Traditionally, Arts and Science grads have had a little more difficulty getting that first job," says Hewitt. "Alan wanted to help accelerate their entry into meaningful work, here in Kingston." He adds, "When I graduated from Queen's in 1982 from Political Studies, I would have loved to have stayed in Kingston." But at the time, like many new grads, he sought opportunities in a larger city.

Hewitt connected Rottenberg with colleagues at Queen's and in the Kingston community. And that led to action, very quickly.

"This was in November 2017," says Donna Gillespie, CEO of the Kingston Economic Development Corporation (Kingston EcDev). "I met Alan at a meeting at Queen's. He started telling me his idea about supporting arts grads. And I remember smiling and saying, 'I know! I'm an Art History and Classical Studies grad!' [She is a 1997 Queen's alumna.]

"So, we had a vision," she continues, "but we had no rulebook. But we all said, 'We can do this.'"

Two months later, the career apprenticeship program was formally launched to the local business community. And in May 2018, eight recent graduates, having been matched with local

THE BLUEPRINT

- A grant of up to \$4,000 a month is provided, through the philanthropy of Alan Rottenberg, to qualified employers for the first four months of the first year of guaranteed employment.
- Job opportunities must offer a minimum salary of \$35,000.
- Employers must have been in operation for at least two years and have at least five employees. This ensures that the new employees have access to both sufficient support and learning opportunities in the workplace.
- Students apply for jobs through the Faculty of Arts and Science, which also promotes interview and resumé workshops and other job supports available through Queen's Career Services.
- Area employers submit job postings through Kingston EcDev.
- Job interviews take place from late February to late March, with successful candidates starting work in May.
- Apprentices are matched with mentors for workplace advice.
- Employers have access to additional workplace supports through Kingston EcDev.

employers, were starting their new careers in a range of industries, from group benefits to video production to real estate management.

Today, Queen's Career Apprenticeship: Kingston has grown exponentially. After successfully matching 20 new grads with employers in 2019, this year, the program is aiming for 40. And in January, a spin-off career apprenticeship program launched in Guelph, Ontario, connecting University of Guelph grads with local employers. Representatives from other communities across Canada have expressed interest in adopting the successful Queen's-Kingston model.

"I'm very excited that the University of Guelph is launching its own apprenticeship program this year based on the blueprint of our previous success," says Barbara Crow, Dean of Arts and Science at Queen's. She was instrumental in planting the idea in the minds of colleagues at the University of Guelph. "The program perfectly encapsulates the value of studying the liberal arts," she says. "Businesses are recognizing that these soon-to-be graduates bring real value to their company."

The partnership that got QCA:K started: Tom Hewitt (Queen's Office of Advancement), Donna Gillespie (Kingston EcDev); Greg Bavington (Dunin-Deshpande Queen's Innovation Centre), Shai Dubey (Smith School of Business); Dave Carnegie (Kingston EcDev), Barbara Crow (Queen's Faculty of Arts and Science); Alan Rottenberg.



What employers need to know

Onboarding new grads into your business culture, processes, and procedures takes time and attention. And while in the first year of the program, some grads were matched with local start-up companies, the screening process for employers was tweaked a little in the second year. While a small start-up certainly has enough work for new employees, it may not yet have the capacity to provide longer-term training and growth for them.

"We want to make sure that we give new grads the best first career opportunity," says Gillespie. "When you have other colleagues, then you get to really see office dynamics. And we also wanted to ensure – with start-ups – that they're beyond the base sustainability level. So, when they are onboarding, that they're already thinking longer term."

That long-term planning is key for any employer, says the man who got the program started. "The funding is the fuel," says Alan Rottenberg, "but the motor running all this is the efforts of all the people – at Queen's and in Kingston. The fuel is just there to incent employers to get over that hump and say, 'You know what? I am going to hire this young person who doesn't have five years of experience.' But as employers, they want to retain their employees, after that first incentive. They need to commit to the program for a year. But it doesn't make sense to invest a year in an employee and think that's good

enough. If you spend a year getting an employee into your company – incentive or no incentive – you want that employee to grow and flourish over a longer period of time, whatever their level of experience. You need to think about their growth over three to five years."

Troy Southward, Managing Partner of Benefits by Design (BBD), says that this type of growth mindset is an integral part of his company. "As a growing organization, we've put a considerable focus on recruitment and retention of employees. Experience for some positions may be more ideal, however, we have always put a greater emphasis on the fit and the candidate's talent."

When BBD took on two new hires through the apprenticeship program, the company just adjusted its onboarding process a little. "Traditionally, all our new employees go through a rotation of most departments. In most cases, this would be a three-month training cycle. With our apprentices, we cycled them through all the operational departments over a year. The reality is, there is no better way to learn the business than to experience all facets of the organization."

One of the first apprentices hired at BBD, Justin Karch appreciates the exposure he had to all aspects of the business. "It's a little bit daunting

*Justin Karch and Troy Southward
at the BBD offices in Kingston*





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in a bigger company, not knowing what other people do. So, I had four months in each department, from client services to underwriting. And I built up a knowledge of the company, a knowledge of the benefits industry as a whole, and I also got to build working relationships with managers and staff across the company.”

After his first year as an apprentice, Karch was hired full-time by BBD as a business analyst and project coordinator. One of his big projects these days is implementing a customer relationship management tool that will meet the needs of several departments at the company. Having spent time working in three of the teams, he’s already got a good handle on the project and what will work for his colleagues.

As Karch was finishing up his degree in Global Development and Geography, he says, “I thought I needed to further specialize in order to secure meaningful employment. I was fully prepared to pursue a college graduate certificate in project management when I stumbled upon the career apprenticeship program.”

While Karch is able to leverage his research experience from his undergrad days in the workplace, he also credits his Queen’s extracurricular activities with some solid transferable skills. “During my final year, I worked as an operations manager with the AMS. That helped me develop leadership and problem-solving skills. I also volunteered as an Orientation Week leader for international students and I think that helped to develop my communication and teamwork skills in the process.”

*Donna Gillespie and Nour Mazloun
at the Kingston Economic Development
Corporation office*

A new model for skilled workforce retention

Thinking long-term about your workforce is critical not just for employers, but for communities. Rottenberg says, “When I came up with the idea, I was really thinking just about the young people getting their first job. But what I’ve learned, first in Kingston and now in Guelph, is that cities, as they grow, need to have plans for retention of young people in the workforce.”

Donna Gillespie says that’s top of mind for the city of Kingston. “Workforce shortages are becoming more and more critical across the country,” she says, “and we’re competing with other communities for talent. We are blessed to have Queen’s and the colleges here; we have an ongoing pool of talent coming through our community, and we can work together to retain them. I think this type of program completely changes the way we think about careers. It’s breaking down the myth that you have to have three to five years of experience in a particular field. It’s showing how you can train someone on the job. So, even without the investment from Alan – which has been a wonderful thing for the Kingston community – I think it’s important that businesses really start to look at this model.”



A successful first year

"We were really excited that all of our matches who finished their first year successfully were offered extensions to their contract, a promotion, or another opportunity within the company," says Gillespie.

"The 2019 cohort was hired last May. We participated this year, hiring a new grad. She's a rock star and we hope that she will stay with us."

She's talking about Nour Mazloum, who graduated from Philosophy and Political Studies last year. Mazloum is now the communications and events assistant at Kingston EcDev. As part of her role, she organizes corporate events, including those for the Career Apprenticeship program that bring together employers with students interested in the program.

"The most interesting component of my work is the social aspect of my role," she says. "I meet people from a variety of industries. I find it interesting to learn about what they do and how they help our community and how they started – or expanded – their business."

Her job involves a lot more than networking, however. "Economic development is a dynamic world," says Mazloum, "so being able to be agile and adapt quickly to change is extremely important." In her work developing and writing public reports and presentations, she taps into the research, writing, and critical thinking skills honed through her studies. Transferring those skills toward the needs of her workplace, she says, "I've learned how to efficiently solve problems and make reasoned judgments."

The benefits of mentorship

"Last year, when we expanded to 20 placements," says Gillespie, "we reached out to Queen's alumni in Kingston to ask if they were interested in being mentors to new grads. Sometimes, when you enter

the workforce, or you're in an office environment for the first time, you may not know the rules, or the workplace culture. It's helpful to have someone who can give you practical advice, like "How do I get my boss's attention when they're never in the office?"

Justin Karch definitely sees the advantage of having a mentor. He was paired with Tom Hewitt during his apprenticeship year. "We met regularly for coffee. And we still meet occasionally. His advice and guidance have – undoubtedly – contributed to my success at BBD. I think it's important to have an unbiased third party to discuss your career with. So, for example, near the end of my one-year contract, I was approached by the director of the partnership development team at BBD for a promotion to a sales position, based out of the Port Coquitlam office. It was an exciting – yet life-altering – opportunity. I reached out to Tom, and we discussed the pros and cons of the move." (He decided to stay at the Kingston office.)

Alan Rottenberg also volunteers his time as a career mentor, a role he really enjoys, even when his advice isn't necessarily taken. "The first issue I faced as a mentor was with a young woman who had been at her company for four months. She was doing well, getting more responsibility. She called me up and said, 'I'm going to ask for a raise.' So, I said – diplomatically – that it might be a bit premature to ask for a raise four months into a new job. She took my advice... at that time. But a few months later, she called me up for another one of our talks," he laughs, "and she told me, 'I asked for a raise...and I got it!'"

Rottenberg knows that he's not there to micromanage the apprentices he mentors, but to offer his support and experience to help them navigate their own way in the workplace. After all, that's why he kickstarted the program in the first place, to give smart young grads the opportunity to flourish.

Alan Rottenberg chats with Queen's students at a 2019 networking event.

