



Navigate to the Front of the Line

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS PLOT THEIR OWN COURSE AT FIRST UP

BY
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PHOTO
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STARTING A NEW CAREER CAN SEEM DAUNTING, BUT IT HELPS TO HAVE A SUPPORTIVE EMPLOYER THAT ENCOURAGES LEARNING.

West Michigan is full of young professionals and businesses eager to hire them. One of these young professionals is Jeff Clay. One of those businesses is Wightman, a full-service consulting firm with locations in Kalamazoo, Allegan, and Benton Harbor.

Clay works as a Reality Capture Technical Lead at Wightman. He knows a lot about changes—personally and professionally. Clay is originally from Fresno, California, and he became a father this year. While adjusting to transitions is nothing new for him, Clay said that it's still encouraging to know that his employer embraces change and supports its employees' professional development.



THE NEXT SESSION OF **FIRST UP** IS EXPECTED TO BEGIN IN FALL 2019. TO LEARN MORE, GO TO CATALYSTUNIVERSITY.ME/FIRST-UP

“I’ve been learning that, if you want to be a leader, you don’t necessarily have to be in a leadership role,” Clay said. “You can really lead from within the middle of the pack.”

It’s through his employer that Clay connected with Southwest Michigan First, which started a new leadership development program called First UP. The goal of the program is to give up-and-coming talent—who are in the first five years of their career—information and resources that will help them succeed in their various job fields. Clay and more than 30 other young, diverse professionals are participating in the first cohort of the program.

“They’ll learn some basics, such as communication skills,” said Kim Weishaar, chief financial officer at Southwest Michigan First. “Also, a lot of employees are coming straight out of college. They are asking, ‘How do you manage your time in a professional setting? How do you hone your leadership skills?’ It’s important for them to know that just because they’re fresh out of college and starting their career, it doesn’t mean they can’t be a leader.”

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First UP is broken into three curriculum-based sessions and meets at the Catalyst Center in downtown Kalamazoo. Southwest Michigan First also hosts educational luncheon opportunities where participants learn from area professionals who work in various fields in the private and public sectors, including education, medicine, and the military.

“A lot of the programs out there right now are really geared toward more seasoned workers,” Weishaar said. “We wanted to fill that gap in the market and develop a space for individuals who are younger leaders and are still trying to figure out how to navigate the working world.”

The U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics defines young professionals as people ages 20 to 34 who are working in a professional or technical job. In 2016, these government agencies said there were more than 17 million young professionals in the workforce nationwide.

“It’s really important for the younger generation to start building those leadership skills,” Clay said. “Because if you look around, there are a lot of good leaders around us and some big shoes to fill. So, we need to start early.”

Weishaar said that entering the first phase of a career can be tough for young professionals because they might be surprisingly unprepared. They might not feel that they are capable or confident.

“First UP was born out of conversations that we’ve had with some of our more seasoned local leaders about how we can get our younger people engaged immediately,” Weishaar said. “How do we get them feeling involved, not feeling burnt-out right out of college? It’s a huge transition going from college life into professional life. And we realize too that [companies] want to help these people develop professional skills immediately instead of waiting five, 10 years down the road.”

As Clay builds out his professional skill set, he’s found that mental resets play an important role. At Wightman, Clay and his co-workers take breaks during the day to play basketball in the office’s garage. During the few minutes of casually passing the ball back and forth, dribbling, and dunking, anyone watching Clay and his teammates would see smiles on their faces and hear loud laughter, followed by handshakes and pats on the back.

“[The breaks] give me a clear mind and [help me to] be more efficient when I get back to work,” Clay said. “When I originally came out and interviewed with Wightman, I got the feeling that they really did care about the people whom they serve as well as their employees and families. We had a basketball tournament at this office, and a bunch of families were here watching and hanging out. We just had a really good time.”

Between the encouragement of his professional development and the knowledge that he is valued, Clay’s decision to join the Wightman team appears to be a slam dunk.

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