

USU EXTENSION IMPACTS: RURAL ONLINE INITIATIVE (ROI)

During the 2018 Utah General Legislative Session, the Rural Online Initiative (ROI) and the Rural Economic Development Incentive (REDI) were signed into law by Gov. Gary R. Herbert, changing the landscape of Utah's rural economic development.

The focus of the ROI program is to provide Utah's rural workforce and businesses with education, training, and services for online opportunities in remote employment, freelance work, and e-commerce. Funding for the ROI was appropriated to Utah State University Extension for program development and delivery across targeted rural counties. After 1 year, we have made measurable progress toward empowering rural communities through remote work.

Sincerely,

Paul Hill, USU Extension associate professor, principal investigator of ROI program funding

Amanda D. Ali, ROI program evaluator

Russell Goodrich, ROI senior program coordinator



"The best working talent Utah has to offer is not possessed exclusively by those who live in urban counties. Utahns from across our state are embracing remote work as a new opportunity to improve their lifestyle and build up their communities."

- Lt. Governor Spencer J. Cox

The ROI program's focus is to provide:



EDUCATION



TRAINING



SERVICES

for online opportunities in remote employment, freelance work, and e-commerce.

1 THE CHALLENGE

Utah's economy has experienced steady growth in recent years; however, this prosperity has not been evenly distributed. In rural counties, the unemployment rate has been as high as 10% (GOED, 2017), and in most communities, the unemployment rate has been more than double the state unemployment average of 3% (Burkitt, 2017). Far commutes, access to job opportunities, and automation were employment challenges facing residents in rural Utah communities.

Utah Unemployment Rates:

<u>State Average</u>	:	<u>Rural Counties</u>	:	<u>Most Areas</u>
3%	:	≤ 10%	:	> 6%

2 WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?

The ROI was created in response to:

INCREASING
UNEMPLOYMENT

INTERGENERATIONAL
POVERTY

NET MIGRATION OF YOUNGER
POPULATIONS TO URBAN CENTERS



Counties were
divided into
3
geographic
regions

1
program
coordinator
for each
region

Goal to generate
1+
remote jobs per
month in each
region

The Rural Online Initiative (ROI) program came about as a legislative response to increasing unemployment, intergenerational poverty, and net migration of younger populations to urban centers. Under the ROI program, USU Extension created the **Master Remote Work Professional (MRWP)** certificate course aimed at providing Utah's rural workforce with education and training for online opportunities in remote employment.

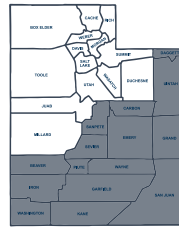
The target counties in the legislated ROI service region were divided into three geographic regions, with an identified program coordinator for each region. A key employment goal for the program was to generate at least one remote job per month in each of the three regions, with an annual goal of 36 jobs generated in the first year.

3 IMPACT

A preliminary analysis provided unemployment statistics for the 15 counties within our service area. There was no change in the unemployment rate for Beaver, Daggett, Kane, Uintah, and Wayne counties.

10
counties showed declines
in the unemployment rate
since the inception of the
program.

The average decline
in unemployment
across the 15
counties served was
0.2%



754 participants graduated from
the MRWP course

58* graduates found
remote work since
completing the course

Income for
those who
found remote
work
increased by

67%
of graduates who found
remote work believed their
salaries would likely increase
by 52% over the next year

21%

78

"skill scholarships" were
awarded to students who did
not find remote work, but
wanted to develop specialized
remote work skills

Of those who had
not yet found
remote work,
81%
said they were more
confident in their ability
to find remote work



Commutes to a physical workplace
decreased significantly

75% fewer miles per week were
driven by all participants who
found remote work

9,960 fewer miles per month were
driven by participants after
they found remote work

\$1,225 per month was saved on fuel
for all participants who found
remote work as a result of
this reduction in miles driven

-3.37 fewer metric tons of carbon
emissions were released as
a result of this reduction in
miles driven

*The economic impact of creating these 58 remote jobs in rural counties is equivalent to 7,079 jobs in Wasatch Front counties (Source: Utah Department of Workforce Services 2016. Analysis based on the goal of reducing unemployment by ½%. Statistics based on county labor force current rate of unemployment and extrapolated number of jobs required.)

4

RECENT SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

On average, participants felt they had better abilities to:

Communicate digitally

Solve problems

Manage their careers

Manage their professional and personal productivity

Balance their professional and personal lives

Use online technology

Work as a team member



Of the 281 participants in the May-July 2019 cohorts:

71%

did not have remote work experience before the course

92%

indicated it was important or very important to them to acquire remote work skills

87%

felt their value as a remote worker improved after completing the course

87%

felt empowered to seek remote work after completing the course

100%

showed significant increases in knowledge across all eight modules of the course

5

SUCCESS STORIES

High participation numbers demonstrate the ROI program has generated extensive interest and enthusiasm. As a grandmother who provides sole care for her grandchildren noted after attending a recent Town Hall, the program also provides hope for the future:

"This program gives me so much hope. Before learning about the Rural Online Initiative program, I had decided my only option was to leave the county and move to Salt Lake, but I can now see exciting possibilities and opportunities I had not even considered."

- Grandmother who is sole caregiver of grandchildren, Duchesne County

"After completing the course from the ROI, I was able to find a remote job just 1 month later! I loved the Master Remote Work Professional course and learned so much about how to conduct myself as a remote worker. I am more confident with the skills I gained and tools I need to succeed in this new job. I would recommend this course to anyone and everyone looking to work remotely. I am a freshman at SUU in Cedar City this fall and will be able to take my job with me as I pursue my bachelor's degree in biology."

- Orin H., Iron County

"I managed our local newspaper for years until it was acquired. Not long after, I found myself unemployed. I love my community and had no desire to move but was worried that I might have to. After completing the Master Remote Work Professional certificate course, I was able to integrate my existing writing skills with what I learned in the course to become a successful freelance writer. I now contract with multiple clients and love working as a freelancer."

- Patsy, Emery County



PROGRAM EXPANSION

In its first year, the ROI program has built out the infrastructure, systems, and key institutional partnerships needed to scale specialized remote work training courses statewide. Plans for the future include:



“Remote work options for employees mean that everyone wins. Employees win. Managers win. Our air wins. Rural wins. The taxpayer wins. It is time for more of our employers, both private and public, to seriously consider this more sustainable, efficient, balanced mode of work.”

- Lt. Governor Spencer J. Cox

- **Provide specialized remote work training to all rural counties.** Currently, the pilot program serves 15 rural counties in the southern and central parts of the state.
- **Expedite 25K jobs initiative.** There is overwhelming interest in remote work opportunities across rural Utah, especially among females 25-40 years old with children. This demographic (previously not considered as part of the workforce) makes up 73% of ROI participation.
- **Expand specialized remote work training to urban counties.**
- **Support State of Utah's new teleworking program.** This would support the Governor's Office of Management and Budget (GOMB) by providing the **Master Remote Work Professional** certification course to state employees transitioning into the telework program. GOMB expects that this program will reduce carbon emissions via reduced commute times, lower the state's expenditure on buildings, bring 200 state jobs to rural counties, retain employees, and improve worker productivity.
- **Reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality.** Fewer people commuting to a work location eases traffic woes and reduces traffic-induced air pollution.
- **Reduce carbon emissions.** Based on data from participants in rural counties who found remote work, households on average reduced the number of miles driven per week by 75%.
- **Increase demand for GOED's REDI grant program.** Provide training to business leaders through the **Master Remote Work Leader** certificate course on how to manage remote employees and create remote jobs for certified remote workers in rural counties. Included in this certification course is training on how to qualify and apply for the Rural Economic Development Incentive (REDI) grant program.
- **Increase supply of remote workers in rural co-working spaces funded by GOED's RCIC grant.** Train more people statewide in the best practices of remote work, thus increasing the use of co-working spaces funded by the Rural Co-working and Innovation Center (RCIC) grant program.