Economic and workforce development professionals and teachers are using a newly launched Spokane-based online business, Access2Experience LLC, as a platform for connecting business professionals with students and educators to inspire future career decisions.

Greater Spokane Incorporated is among those spreading the word about the site, which launched in May, along with Tyler Lafferty, who co-owns the business with Nick Murto. Lafferty says the website is designed to register to speak in classrooms and to offer student internships, tours, and job shadowing.

Lafferty and Murto also are business partners in Spokane-based Seven2 Inc. and 14Four Inc., sister companies that provide digital and Web-based design services for national clients’ online and mobile application projects.

The new venture’s website, www.access2experience.com, also enables educators to search for and network with listed business professionals for student learning opportunities, as well as for students and job seekers to search career options and companies here based on work interests.

“The goal is not only to connect professionals and teachers, we’re also trying to get students to understand what they might be interested in working as a career,” Lafferty says. “As we get more people to connect with them, hopefully it will grow. We would like to spread the website’s networking to other cities in the state, likely starting with Seattle, Tri-Cities, and Vancouver, and eventually to expand it across the U.S.”

Access2Experience helps bridge that gap between education and businesses, Benson says. “Tyler has been a catalyst for this in our region. By early 2014, Lafferty and Murto likely would like to expand the website’s networking to other cities in the state, likely starting with Seattle, Tri-Cities, and Vancouver, and eventually to expand it across the U.S.”

Access2Experience has a drop-down menu that will enable users to select separate locations, such as Seattle, to access registered business-educator networks for those areas.

Lafferty says the Spokane platform currently has 25 educators, 81 businesses, and 31 speakers registered.

“Ideally, we’d like to push that number up to 300 professionals who are in Spokane,” Lafferty says. “We’re working on tactics right now and starting to do a big push going out and speaking to people in Spokane who would be interested.”

Because Spokane is the pilot city for the website’s launch, Lafferty says the business currently doesn’t have any incoming revenue and isn’t charging GSI or any other organizations here. He says he doesn’t have a clear timeline for when that might happen. The business likely would charge an annual fee based on population, and for Spokane, that amount would be roughly $20,000, he says.

The venture also might offer sponsoring opportunities to businesses in the future, Lafferty adds.

For now, Lafferty says he and Murto are paying for all capital investment toward the website, which they began developing about a year ago. In addition to the owners’ work, Access2Experience has one employee, a program manager, who is based at the Seven2 and 14Four offices at 244 W. Main in downtown Spokane.

Lafferty, who graduated from Mead High School and earned a political science degree from the University of Washington, says he speaks at least once a month in schools. The visits are mainly at high schools and colleges here to talk about career and education opportunities.

“It’s been a real passion of mine,” he says. “A lot of people talk about the value of connecting educators with professionals. Our goal is to help bridge the gap between industry and education. We’ve talked to educators, and they want more access to professionals in the real world.”

Major goals for the business include sparking career interest, perhaps even in jobs young people hadn’t thought of before, and ultimately to build a stronger workforce for the future, Lafferty says.

He adds that he’s talked to young people who returned from a job shadowing experience, and they either returned excited about the option or found it didn’t appeal to them the way they’d thought it would.

“Both experiences are valuable,” he adds. “It helps them maybe understand what they might want to do as a future career.”

He says he envisions that the site will be valuable to teachers of students from primary grades all the way to college. For students using the website, it likely will be most attractive to those in middle school to college-aged students, he adds.

The workforce council here also operates the Next Generation Zone, a youth employment center, located at 901 E. Second, Karber says. She says counselors at the center likely will refer students offers to the site as a tool to gain work-related experiences.

The center offers job search assistance, work readiness classes, financial literacy assistance, and links to internships and volunteer opportunities to more than 2,000 Spokane-area youth a year.

“We want a student-employer connection,” Karber adds.

GSI’s Benson, meanwhile, says that one of the organization’s overall visions is to increase educational attainment for students as the future workforce here, and so aligning with Access2Experience makes sense.

“Having a highly educated workforce is critical from an economic development standpoint,” she says. “The first step is the linkage between business professionals and teachers. The next component is being able to create a way to grow job shadowing opportunities, internships, and tours to bring students into a work environment and learn about the skills they need to work in a 21st century local economy.”

She adds, “We’re excited to be a partner with Tyler and with the workforce council. The next piece is really inviting business professionals. We’re not going to create the workforce of tomorrow without bringing business and education to the table.”

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