



## How the Swiss May Shape the Future of Colorado Apprenticeship Programs

*RK Participates in a Colorado Delegation to Switzerland and Learns About Progressive Models*

**By: Jon Kinning, COO / EVP, RK Mechanical, Inc.**

A group of 50 delegates from Colorado and Washington D.C. traveled to Zurich, Switzerland during the first week of February 2016 to gain insight from the successful Swiss dual system apprenticeship program known as Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training ([SFIVET](#)). The goal of this educational trip was to expose Colorado educators, government officials, local nonprofits and industry leaders to the proven Swiss model for apprenticeships.

In the Swiss program, 66% to 75% of all primary school graduates enter into apprenticeships between the ages of 15 - 17. Switzerland has 250 defined occupations and unique apprenticeships in both the trade and professional fields. Between 30% - 40% of all Swiss businesses (nearly 13,000 companies) participate in sponsoring apprentices. The apprenticeships are between two to four years in length, based upon which program is selected. In general, apprentices work at a company three to four days per week and are in the classroom one to two days per week, depending on the program in which a student is enrolled. Currently, there are over 220,000 apprentices (2.75% of population) in the Swiss system within a total population of around 8,000,000 people.

Students participating in apprenticeships are not guaranteed employment after completing their program. However, the apprentices are treated favorably by the employers in a system where you can "try before you buy." In fact, we learned that the apprentices are not only treated favorably, but participating companies actually take on more apprentices than necessary to ensure they have great options to offer permanent employment upon completion of the apprenticeship program. Additionally, the participating companies encourage apprentices to gain outside experience to ensure a well-rounded and capable employees.

Under the Swiss system there are three different types of apprenticeship programs:

1. **Full employer sponsored apprenticeships:** Employers teach the classes and the students learn while on the job. This approach most closely resembles the RK Apprenticeship Program.
2. **Association hosted apprenticeships:** The apprenticeship programs are hosted by an association of companies that work together to ensure a pipeline of talent into their industries. For example, the Swiss banking sector built a massive, shared apprenticeship program that is highly sought after and has tremendous success. To view a video produced by CYP, click link [here](#). If your German is up to speed, you can translate the LIBS website [here](#). LIBS is a training networks of more than 80 companies that hosts 85 employees training 950 students.
3. **State sponsored apprenticeships:** This public education program most closely resembles the typical American high school-level vocational school. Most work is completed at school rather than in a business environment and this route is typically viewed as a remedial program.

The success of the apprenticeship culture in Switzerland comes from some key changes that were made starting 20 years ago. The Swiss changed over 300 pieces of legislation over the past 20 years and built a new system of permeable education. Apprentices now have the ability, with on and off ramps, to build an education with clear lines to university, if they desire. The Colorado delegation visited many highly successful companies where the CEO's boasted of starting out as apprentices and working their way up through the organization, often attending university following their apprenticeship. If Swiss students want to attend university after their apprenticeships, the apprenticeship programs help them to build credits towards a degree, which is a route that is much respected in the Swiss system.

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Apprentices are treated as "talent," as well as the future of the Swiss economy, and as a way to sustain their many industries and technical trades. Swiss unemployment for the 16-24 age group is less than 3.5%.

Unemployment rates from the U.S. [BLS](#) for January 2016 for ages 16-24 are detailed below:

- 16 – 19 – 16.0%
- 20 – 24 – 8.2%

Apprenticeships generally cost around 8,000 CHF (Swiss Franc - currently 1 CHF = \$0.98) per year, including wages this can be over a 100,000 CHF investment from employers for apprentices. Apprenticeships are open to all citizens and free if the individual has lived continuously in Switzerland for the preceding two years. For anyone that is not Swiss, participation in the program is available for 50,000 CHF. Apprentices are expected to take a wage at around 25% of a typical salary. Most salaries range in the 700-1,000 CHF per month. However, since the average age to start apprenticeships is 16 years old, the students commonly live at home or are subsidized to live near their company and leave the education system with no debt and virtually guaranteed employment.

The Swiss government does predictive economic forecasting to determine how many apprentices should be in each career path or trade segment. The economic forecasting helps level out economic downturns and keep employment levels very high with the right amount of graduating apprentices gaining direct employment upon completion. Additionally, there is a national apprenticeship marketplace where all employers post openings and provides a dashboard of labor needs for the next five years.

Many of the apprentice programs in Switzerland are held to a higher standard than their counterparts in the United States. In one hospitality school we visited, [Schweizerische Hotelfachschule Luzern](#), students must maintain a 4.5 out of 6.0 grade average over a three-semester period or they are dismissed from the program. If an apprentice drops below a 4.0, they are also kicked out of the program.

### What Does This Mean for Colorado – and for RK?

Being part of this delegation invigorated me and Rick Kinning, Chairman | CEO of RK, to invest in rebuilding our apprenticeship program and double our enrollment. RK will be soliciting a very large class of first-year apprentices to help drive our future workforce and growth. We will be asking our company leaders to select these future apprentices and commit to their growth and development.

### About the Colorado Delegation that Visited Switzerland

The delegation included representatives from the Colorado Department of Labor and the Federal Department of Labor. Both assured me and have committed to approving RK to hire students at age 16 into the trades. Both Denver Public Schools (DPS) and the Superintendent from Cherry Creek Schools have committed to helping RK pipeline up to 50 students to our apprenticeship program for fall semester.

Colorado's Governor, John Hickenlooper, was part of the delegation and attended the entire four-day session. The U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, the honorable [Suzan LeVine](#), held three sessions with the Colorado delegation and vowed her support towards Colorado bringing the Swiss apprenticeship methods to the United States. We were proctored by Ursula Renold, Head of the Division Comparative Education System Research for [ETH Zurich](#), during the entire trip and she committed to assisting Colorado in making this a success.

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# RK WHITE PAPER

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The President of all Community Colleges in Colorado, Nancy McCallin, and the Executive Director of [Emily Griffith Technical College](#), Jeff Barratt, also participated in this delegation



Two Colorado companies that are based in Switzerland are prepared to launch apprenticeship programs this year in Colorado. [Pilatus Aircraft](#) (URL) and [Mikron](#) will be building Swiss-style apprenticeships with the assistance of [Community College of Denver](#) and [Emily Griffith Technical College](#).

In addition, Dr. Stephen Jordan, President of [Metropolitan State University of Denver](#), is committed to building a degree program for graduated apprentices that want to pursue a bachelor's degree. Currently, RK is working with MSU Denver to build a Bachelor's of Construction Technology and a Bachelor's of Manufacturing Technology. Both will be four-year programs and the students will be granted credits for a good portion of the first two years of the program following completion of an accredited apprenticeship program. Our goal is to weave college classes into the program to help our apprentices graduate our program with 60 credit hours of the 120 credit hours required for a bachelor's Degree. Currently, we do not charge our students for our apprenticeship program, so in essence, an RK graduate could enter a bachelor's degree program with no student debt and 60 credit hours completed. This initiative will fall under RK's Human Resources department and our entire company will be fully committed to its success.

For more information, please read the great [article published on CompanyWeek.com](#) digital magazine by Tim Heaton, President of [Colorado Advanced Manufacturing Alliance](#). It provides a great overview of the Colorado delegation trip. SFIVET also published a news article on this trip [here](#).

Please contact me if you'd like further information about Swiss apprenticeship models or RK's plans to evolve its current [RK Apprenticeship Program](#).

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