

BANKING MATTERS

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A woman with dark, curly hair is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top, a necklace with teardrop-shaped pendants, and large hoop earrings. The background is a vibrant mural featuring a large, stylized face on the left and abstract yellow and black patterns on the right.

**Building a Better
Future with
BankWork\$**

Supporting Careers
in Banking

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BankWork\$ Prepares Job Seekers for Roles in Financial Services

By Tom Unger, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

After **Vanessa Spinks** of Portland graduated from high school in 2016, she signed up with a temp agency and worked at a variety of jobs. The Oregon native cleaned cars, stacked crates at a berry farm, unloaded trucks at a warehouse, sorted fish parts at a factory and worked as a sales associate in a department store.

Spinks yearned for her first “adult job.” After signing up for – and completing – a free, eight-week training course in 2017 called **BankWork\$**, she found her career in financial services.

Spinks, now 23, started out as a teller at one bank. She later served at another bank in Clackamas for three years as a teller, vault teller and merchant teller. Spinks now works at Wells Fargo as an escalated complaint specialist in the Credit Card department at one of the company’s call centers in Washington County.

Spinks is among the more than 3,600 success stories for BankWork\$, which a retired Wells Fargo executive (**Les Biller**) started in Los Angeles in 2006.

The program is now headquartered in Seattle and is operated under its umbrella organization named CareerWork\$. It seeks out local workforce development nonprofit organizations to provide the financial services training courses in 13 locations across the nation, including Portland.

Here is more about the impact BankWork\$ has had on its participants in general, on Spinks in particular and how the OBA Education Foundation is helping:



◀ *Vanessa Spinks, an Oregon graduate of BankWork\$, is now employed at Wells Fargo.*



Open to All

The program is open to anyone who is interested, said CareerWork\$ President **Sherry Cromett**. There are only five criteria for applicants. They must:

- 1) Be 18 years of age or older
- 2) Have earned a high school degree or GED.
- 3) Be fluent in written and spoken English.
- 4) Possess basic computer skills.
- 5) Pass a background check.

Most of the trainees are between the ages of 18 and 34. BankWork\$ will accept an older applicant who has faced career barriers, is trying to change their life or needs help getting started.

As it turns out, almost 80% of the applicants are female and 83% are from communities of color, Cromett said. More than 70% nationally are placed in a financial services position.

“There are so many people who have never been given access to a career in financial services,” said Cromett. “BankWork\$ opens a door for those who might otherwise not have known they could be successful in a banking career.”

Sue Davis is a career navigator at SE Works, the nonprofit group that provides the BankWork\$ training in Portland. The group advertises the program and typically gets 50 to 60 applicants. Interviews narrow the class (called a “cohort”) down to 15-20.

“They vet you to make sure you won’t leave the program once you’re in it,” Spinks said.

A typical candidate has worked in retail or a restaurant and has developed good cash handling and/or customer service experience, said Davis. They want to take their career to the next level and find work at a place that offers career opportunities, better wages and more stable hours, she said.

“I didn’t feel like I would do well in college right away,” said Spinks. “I felt BankWork\$ would help me with my education and career.”

A Variety of Skills

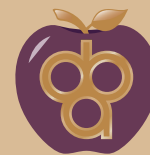
Besides teller training, BankWork\$ also teaches a variety of “soft skills.” For instance, the students learn how to set up a professional-sounding voicemail message and how to write a proper business email. They learn corporate jargon, how to dress properly for work and how to navigate office etiquette.

The nonprofit Dress for Success partners with SE Works to provide professional outfitting for many of the female participants.

There are group activities and role playing. Representatives from banks are invited to conduct mock interviews.

“We got so comfortable interviewing that it felt natural,” said Spinks. “They get you comfortable doing small tasks you haven’t done before in a corporate setting.”

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“I give 100 percent of the credit to BankWork\$. I love this program so much.”

SE Works' Workforce Development Director Tim Finnegan addresses a cohort of BankWork\$ students.

OBA Among Sponsors

SE Works runs the program four times a year in Portland at a variety of locations, said **Tim Finnegan**, the Workforce Development Director at SE Works.

Banks and credit unions financially sponsor the program. Sponsors seeking new employees are given the first opportunity to interview the trainees at a job fair held at the graduation ceremony.

Nine state bankers associations in the country, including the Oregon Bankers Association and OBA Education Foundation, also endorse and sponsor the program.

“BankWork\$ fills an important need for both banks and those looking to ready themselves for a career in the profession,” said OBA President and CEO **Linda Navarro**. “We in the banking industry often focus on

college-level recruitment, but so many positions in banks don't require a degree.”

“Banks can benefit by attracting job-ready, diverse and motivated candidates who are trained in the basics of banking and ready to take on a new, professional challenge,” Navarro added. “This is exactly what BankWork\$ provides.”

Support After Graduation

After the trainees graduate, BankWork\$ career navigators such as Davis continue to provide them employment guidance for at least a year.

“The staff members have supported me from the beginning and even now. I feel I can lean on them if I need it,” said Spinks. “They gave me lasting connections with people with whom I wouldn't have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. Most of my LinkedIn contacts are BankWork\$-related.”

Spinks has been a guest speaker at BankWork\$ graduations and even interviewed some of the grads for jobs.

The Future

The pandemic forced SE Works to put the program on hold last year but revived it this year as a virtual class, said Finnegan.

BankWork\$ classes in other parts of the nation also incorporated virtual training to augment their in-person classes, said Cromett.

“We believe that's the winning model,” she said.

The plan is to expand BankWork\$ to at least 10 other cities over the next four years, primarily in locations where it currently has no presence, Cromett said.

As for Spinks, she feels she's landed at a bank where she can sink roots and start a long-term career.

“It has worked out great,” said Spinks. “I give 100 percent of the credit to BankWork\$. I love this program so much.” ■

Tom Unger is an independent communications consultant based in Milwaukie, Ore. He blogs about writing and communications on his website www.NewsWritingPro.com.

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Tom Unger is accredited by the International Association of Business Communicators, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and Toastmasters. He is also a member of the PRSA College of Fellows.