



Using Broadband to Further a Career: Earning a Degree From Home

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Interview with Sheldon Spence

Information Systems Director, Memorial Hospital (Guymon, OK)

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets
are also available on our website at:
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

Introduction

Broadband Internet access presents a world of opportunities for rural residents. Because of its ability to transfer large amounts of data almost instantaneously, rural individuals can now work, learn, and find entertainment right at home in their small towns rather than have to commute to larger cities. More and more rural citizens are taking advantage of broadband access to do a multitude of tasks online – including earning advanced degrees, reaching new markets for their business, gathering pertinent information about their job (such as weather predictions for farmers), staying in touch with relatives or friends, or even creating their own information-based job or business. This fact sheet describes one of these rural broadband success stories in detail – an Oklahoman who decided to use the power of broadband access to earn a graduate degree online and boost his career in the process.

Background Information

Sheldon Spence always knew how much easier things were with broadband access from home. He just never knew how much it could add to his career (and paycheck) until he completed a master's degree online.

Sheldon grew up in the relatively small town of Guymon, Oklahoma (population 10,500), and graduated with a bachelors degree in psychology from Oklahoma Panhandle State University in 1998. He worked a part-time job at Radio Shack while in college, which is where he started working with computers. He returned to Guymon and became a store manager at the local Radio Shack when he could not find a well-paying job in his chosen field of psychology. During the next six years, Sheldon became more and more familiar with computers, becoming certified by IBM and Compaq.

In 2005, Sheldon applied for the job as an Information Systems Technician at Memorial Hospital of Texas County in Guymon. His experience and background made him a well-qualified candidate, but when the discussion turned to salary, Sheldon could not make a strong enough case for a higher salary range since he did not have a master's degree. After starting the job and doing a little research, he made the decision to complete a master's degree online – which allowed him to continue working during the day and complete his coursework at night. Sheldon decided to take courses through the University of Phoenix, a school with 100 percent online courses offering



associates, bachelors, masters, and even doctoral degrees. Using broadband Digital Subscriber Link (DSL) access from his home in Guymon, he completed a Master's degree in Information Systems (MIS) in 18 months, earning a nice raise and an upper hand for the rest of his career. In fact, he was promoted to Information Systems director for the hospital in 2007.

The following information is taken from an interview with Sheldon Spence:

How did you become interested in taking coursework online?

After obtaining the job at Memorial Hospital, I knew to progress in my career (and earn a higher salary) I needed a master's degree. Being out in the panhandle portion of the state, Guymon is pretty much isolated from any universities that offer graduate work. I knew that I wanted to keep working while I earned a degree, so looking online seemed to be the best solution.

Did you always have a broadband connection from home? What type of connection do you have? What made you switch from dial-up to broadband?

I started out using dial-up for my Internet connection during my college days, around 1996 to 1998. I made the switch to broadband when DSL service became available through Panhandle Telephone in 1999. (For more informa-

tion on Panhandle Telephone and their progressive attitude towards rural broadband, see Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet AGEC-1001) My primary reasons for switching were for speed – nobody likes to wait around for dial-up – and reliability. Getting “kicked off” dial-up access is frustrating. Having DSL made things much easier.

How did you decide on the University of Phoenix? Did you research any other online colleges?

I did research other online colleges, in particular Southwestern (physically located in Winfield, Kansas) but most of them required you to sit in an actual classroom at least one night a month. Living where we do, that is just not realistic. Taking time off of work just to commute several hours for a class made no sense to me. The University of Phoenix, on the other hand, was 100 percent online, which made it much easier to complete. They seemed to really tailor their classes to working adults with real-world responsibilities. I also checked into their reputation a little bit, and found them to be well-respected and fully accredited. I also really liked the fact that they had an entire online library, which made research for my classes much easier.



How much did it cost to take a course? Did you compare this to traditional colleges when making your decision?

The courses typically cost around \$1700 each. I didn't compare this to the cost of traditional colleges because, as I mentioned, those were not really an option for me. I do know that most employers offer some kind of tuition reimbursement for people earning degrees or simply taking relevant classes – one of the survey questions at the end of every class asked about employer reimbursement for that particular course.

How do you compare learning in an online environment to learning in a more traditional classroom setting?

I actually liked the online courses better than the traditional classroom setting. A lot of the work we did was real-world based, and the assignments made us think. In traditional college courses you sit back and listen to lectures a lot, there was a little of that in my online courses as well, but for the most part they were more interactive. You also need to make sure that your writing skills are up to par, as many of our assignments were writing-intensive.

How much time did you spend on coursework during a typical week? What was the most challenging part of taking a course?

I spent an average of about three hours a night on coursework, for five days during the week. Some days I would have to do reading online, some times we would have group projects or discussions, and there were quite a few papers and/or tests. It does take a lot of time, especially after working a full day. But it was pretty nice to be able to do the reading in my own home instead of having to commute to school after a long day's work. In my opinion, it was easily the best option for me to earn a graduate degree.

How long did it take you to earn your degree?

I took a total of 13 courses – they were three credits each, so I ended up with 39 credit hours to get my master's degree. I completed all of these courses over a period of about 18 months.



That is shorter than what it would have taken me if I would have gone back to school full-time – the typical length is two years. Plus, I kept getting a paycheck during that time!

Being an IT specialist, you must be pretty computer savvy. Is this something that other, non-computer experts can accomplish?

Absolutely! In fact, my wife is earning both her associate's degree and bachelor's degree in business online from the University of Phoenix – and she has very limited computer experience. There were no complicated programs or software installations to do. Most of the assignments were completed through simple file uploading and downloading. I would say that if you can play solitaire on your computer, you are computer savvy enough for an online course.

What advice would you offer to others interested in obtaining an online degree?

Two simple words - Do it!! There are lots of programs out there and tons of varieties in the degrees you can get online. Advancing your career from the comfort of your own home is definitely the way to go. With broadband access, downloading the readings and assignments and turning in your work is very simple. There is nothing holding you back!

This concludes the interview with Sheldon Spence.

Other Broadband Opportunities for Rural Citizens

While this fact sheet tells the story of how one citizen used broadband access to earn a graduate degree and further his career, there are a number of other ways in which broadband access can enhance the lives of rural individuals. These include:

- Job creation:
 - Help desk/customer service
 - Virtual personal assistant
 - Website development
 - Writing/editing
 - Software development
 - Medical transcription
- Reaching new markets
 - Market rural products to previously unserved areas
 - Attract urban customers to rural locations
- Continuing education
 - GED/Bachelors/Graduate degrees available online
- Communicating with friends/family
 - Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)
 - Email

For more information about broadband access and why it is so vital to rural citizens (including more examples of rural individuals and businesses making productive use of broadband), check out the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service website located at: <http://agecon.okstate.edu/broadband/>.

What if My Community Does Not Have Broadband Access?

There are a number of resources available to assist those rural areas without broadband in bringing some type of access into their community. The USDA rural development telecommunications program offers several grants and loans to communities and private firms interested in constructing broadband infrastructure in rural America. These programs

include Community Connect grants, Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants, Broadband loans, and Rural Utility Service loans. Additionally, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has a program that involves strategic planning to uncover various options for obtaining broadband infrastructure. These strategic planning options include interacting with the local cable and phone company providers, forming a public-private partnership for sharing infrastructure costs, and even operating a municipally-owned broadband system. Other organizations, such as the Oklahoma Technology Council (OTC) and the Oklahoma Municipal Services Corporation (OMSC), are also interested in helping rural areas obtain broadband access. Contact your county extension director, or any of the rural development specialists or other parties listed in the table below, for additional information.

Table 1. List of Resources for Broadband Access.

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Contact</i> | <i>Phone</i> | <i>Website</i> |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|
| OSU / OCES | County Extension Directors | | |
| OSU / Rural Development | Brian Whitacre Stan Ralstin Jack Frye | 405-744-9825 405-237-7677 580-332-4100 | http://agecon.okstate.edu/broadband/ |
| OTC | Jim Mason | 405-239-3669 | www.oktechcouncil.com |
| OMSC | Alan Holt | 405-528-7515 | www.oml.org |

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

Bringing the University to You!

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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