



# Ascend Plays Matchmaker Between Job Openings and Available Talent

Ascend's high-tech and high-touch matchmaking connects job openings with available talent

**Idriss Bah needed a job.** He'd graduated from Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis in 2018 with an associate degree and was getting ready to continue his education studying informatics at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Ivy Tech recommended several ways for him to find work. The one Bah chose was Ascend Indiana. Using a combination of online algorithms and personal assistance, Ascend matched him with a digital marketing firm called Hanapin Marketing, where he landed a position as an IT assistant.

Then, in fall 2019, when he needed an internship to fulfill his course requirements from IU's Luddy School of Informatics, Computer, and Engineering, Bah went back to Ascend. This time, he was connected with enFocus, a non-profit based in South Bend, Indiana. He landed not only the internship but a two-year fellowship.

"Informatics is a vast field. There are so many things you can do with technology and data," says Bah, who came to the United States from Sierra Leone with his family when he was about 4. "Ascend's ability to narrow that down and almost curate for what I'm looking for and am interested in is incredible."

Ascend, which is an initiative of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership, launched its services in November 2017 with a mission to work with schools, employers and prospective employees to close the gap between open jobs and available talent. To do so, it developed three solutions. The Ascend Network provides a software platform that invites applicants to build their profile and then seeks to match them with employers. Ascend Services connects employers that have a common, recurring need for a specific kind of talent—nurses, for example—with schools that can develop the

talent to fill those positions. And Ascend's research arm educates policymakers on how to best respond to a changing economy.

What Ascend did for Idriss Bah, it has now done for more than 1,500 people in a little more than three years. By the time the \$12.75 million Lilly Endowment grant to support the charitable and educational aspects of Ascend ends in December 2022, Ascend expects to have placed at least 2,500 students and other job seekers into gainful employment in Indiana. Of those, 35 percent will come from communities that are often underrepresented in higher education. It also anticipates having 1,200 employers participating in its network and plans to meet with more than 8,000 screened candidates to ensure they are better prepared for the job market.

## Expanding Scope to Help Workers Displaced by COVID-19



And now, because of COVID-19, Ascend is providing services for displaced workers. New software will enable colleges, community-based organizations and workforce investment boards to provide case management to individuals who register through Ascend.

“We see Ascend's work as a critically important social innovation bringing together technological innovation with

the spirit of a non-profit that aims to ensure people, irrespective of their background, are able to succeed and find employment,” says Ascend cofounder, President and CEO Jason Kloth.

Ascend's work has caught the attention of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, a research arm of the Brookings Institution, the Washington, D.C.-based public policy organization.

In a report called *State of Renewal*, which came out in February 2021 and focused largely on the state's economy during the pandemic, Brookings praised Ascend as “a flexible, scalable, Hoosier-built tool for improving worker transitions.”

Robert Maxim, a research associate, says Brookings began looking at Ascend as part of a larger examination of Indiana's economy. He noted that one of the challenges Indiana faces is that only 42 percent of the jobs in Indiana met Brookings' definition of good jobs, as measured by salaries, benefits and other criteria.

“One thing Ascend's done that impressed us is they played an important role in signaling the importance of good jobs for Indiana's recovery,” he says. “That was a major theme of our report. Ascend made sure that the jobs they were connecting workers to paid at least \$13 an hour. That type of commitment from employers in general but also workforce intermediaries is going to be important to ensure that Indiana's recovery is on a sustainable trajectory not only for the state's economic growth but also workers' well-being.”

## A Way to Level the Playing Field

Ascend began to take shape when Kloth was deputy mayor of the city of Indianapolis, a position he held from 2012 to 2015. His focus was on education and workforce development. In that role, he wondered: How do we more effectively align the education of individuals in our community with good jobs, and how do we do that in a way that's fair for people irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds?

- Ascend Indiana, under the leadership of Jason Kloth (left), connects college students and recent graduates to careers with Indiana companies.
- Idriss Bah works in IT at enFocus, a South Bend, Ind., non-profit organization (opposite left).
- Ascend helps colleges and universities in Indiana, including the University of Indianapolis, strengthen career preparation efforts (below).



In conversations with businesses looking to come to or expand in Indianapolis, he noted that they were looking for more than tax incentives—they wanted a skilled workforce. Initially, Kloth and his Ascend cofounders Stephanie Bothun and David L. Johnson, the president and CEO of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership, raised \$855,000 in early funding and assembled a steering committee that included corporate executives and university presidents and chancellors to identify issues and potential solutions.

By 2016, Ascend had lined up \$9.7 million in funding, including \$5 million from the Endowment. It took another year for Ascend to design, build and populate the Ascend network with employers and job seekers and connect with college and university partners.

As Ascend has grown, much of what it provides can be done online, though unlike commercial sites, there will continue to be case managers providing education and personalized support.

“No other system blends those two components across everything from students looking for apprenticeships coming out of high school

managers with her to schools to sell the company to prospective employees and interns and try to do as many interviews as possible. That proved to be highly labor intensive. Ascend came to them and says, ‘Let us be an extension of Roche. Let’s leverage technology.’

As a result, Roche now is in contact with the higher education institutions it wants to target. Ascend has helped Roche spread the word about the company and Ascend “is able to glean information about candidates and use their technology and their algorithms to make great matches,” Boyle says.

For summer 2021, Ascend helped Roche sign up more than 70 interns from 30 schools. “No way would we have been able to get to 30 schools or more in the amount of time they were able to help us. And they were able to target schools we never would have been able to target, and so our diversity statistics are going up just the way that we want them. In the past, maybe our summer intern classes used to be about a third of diverse candidates. Now they’re nearing half.”

University of Indianapolis President Rob Manuel was another of



to college students looking for internships or jobs to dislocated workers trying to find their way back into employment following COVID,” Kloth says.

## Reaching More College Students, More Efficiently

Roche Diagnostics was one of the first companies to work with Ascend. Bridget Boyle, head of people and culture, says Roche needed help reaching as many colleges and universities as possible to help promote Roche as an attractive option for job-seeking college students. It also accessed Ascend to help screen candidates for summer internships, its two-year rotational program for recent college graduates and for direct-hire positions like technicians.

“They help us cast a much wider net to a lot of schools that we wouldn’t normally have the capacity to reach,” she says.

Prior to Ascend, Roche’s college recruiter would bring a team of

Ascend’s early partners. Under his leadership, one of the school’s goals has been to create degree programs that feed the workforce need while also producing students who graduate with jobs and careers.

“Our relationship with Ascend helps the University of Indianapolis to extend our services and the social capital of our students to more corporate relationships and employment opportunities than we would be able to do ourselves,” he explained.

When the university received a \$1 million Endowment grant to create the Professional Edge Center—its new version of career services—it worked with Ascend.

● University of Indianapolis President Rob Manuel and Bridget Boyle, an executive at Roche Diagnostics in Indianapolis, say Ascend is helping develop the college-to-career pipeline in Indiana.

“The Endowment’s grant enabled us to reimagine our traditional career services and create a program centered on helping students develop human, social and cultural capital,” says Manuel. “Using the Ascend model, we are better able to connect our students in more meaningful ways to a broader array of job opportunities and corporations.”

Just as Roche had been unable on its own to reach all the schools it wanted, UIndy lacked the ability to connect with as many employers as it would have liked. Ascend solved that problem.

One successful aspect of their partnership has been connecting UIndy and Community Hospital. The hospital operates health and physical therapy clinics in the UIndy Health Pavilion, and students in health professional programs get clinical placements there as part of their education. Because of the proximity, they’re also able to do joint research with faculty and students.

“Thanks to Ascend’s intermediary work between Community and the competitive bidding process, we were able to build new connections with Community, including a customized educational program for students in the nursing field that paves the way for advancement,” Manuel says.

## An Unexpected Opportunity

Idriss Bah, who aspires to become a chief information officer, never expected his career to start in the non-profit world. But he’s happy that Ascend connected him with enFocus, whose focus is on talent attraction and retention in the South Bend-Elkhart region. He’s getting professional experience and enjoying the opportunity to try out a new place to live after so many years in Indianapolis and Bloomington.

He doesn’t know what will happen after the summer of 2022 when his fellowship ends or what kind of job he’ll pursue.

“I’m not sure where I’m going to be, but I’m working on it,” he says. “And I’m going to reactivate my Ascend account in the near future so I can start prepping for it.”

● Nursing students at the University of Indianapolis train on campus for careers in healthcare.

