

“Ideally, fine jewelry occupies a compelling intersection—one where art, technology, history, precious materials, craftsmanship and emotion meet.”

Alara Jewelry, located in Bozeman, reflects on what drove them to create an apprenticeship program for their business and takes a look at their program a year in.

Due to the lack of genuine jeweler apprenticeship opportunities in the U.S., this country now faces a shortage of skilled jewelers. By contrast, sales in the jewelry sector continue to grow.

In Europe, the apprenticeship system for jewelers is alive and well, and is part of a tradition that goes back literally hundreds of years. Sadly, the last notable group of jewelers in the United States that went through any kind of true apprenticeship are literally already retired or getting very close to doing so.

As jewelry crafting is a highly technical skillset, learning under a more experienced jeweler, in person, is invaluable in developing a trained fine jeweler. While we (and other jewelers nationwide) can locate schools where the skills are taught, completion of such programs does not “a jeweler make.” Practice, particularly under the wing of an experienced jeweler, is an essential part of turning a jewelry school graduate into a skilled and reliable jeweler.

Without any post-apprentice jewelers in the pipeline to be able to hire, we decided to take matters into our own hands, and craft an apprenticeship program for Alara’s needs.

In addition to now having an apprentice jeweler working in our atelier alongside our other jeweler, the entire Alara team has access to the knowledge our apprentice is gaining through formal and on-the-job training. The excitement of the apprentice is contagious and has energized the team. On a practical level, a greater percentage of the team has fine-tuned their repair knowledge, because of the apprentice’s excited sharing of information. Such benefits are not always accessible when hiring someone who has been in the business for a long time.

Obviously, when you first start an apprenticeship with the goal of staffing your own store, you know that the financial investment will most likely not be returned at a fast pace. The commitment to funding and executing an apprenticeship is a hefty undertaking for any business, regardless of size. We personally have chosen not to receive our apprenticeship tax credit, as we wanted continued access to the IWT Grants that are available through the Department of Labor. There are plentiful resources from our wonderful state and this department that can help get your similar project off the ground.

As we are now approximately one year into our first jeweler’s apprenticeship, we could not be more pleased with the results. His skillset has grown at a rapid pace.