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Tech whiz kids, left to right, Jacob Schrum, Daniel Davenport, Doris Tang and Elayne Man. The four created an Internet-based e-mail newsletter.

Competition provides experience for young

technology whizzes

HiTech Quest provides coaching and access to working professionals

By Lyn Danninger
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In the fall of 1999, a group of about 50 high school students competed in the state's first ever information technology competition.

The goal was to identify local youngsters with potential and let them showcase their ideas and skills through IT projects presented to other schools, businesses and industry professionals.

The event, called HiTech Quest, has grown every year.

But perhaps more importantly, HiTech Quest got industry professionals, businesses and legislators to take note of a growing group of talented students.

Out of that competition, an internship program was born that brought together students who won in various classifications of the competition to work in teams on IT applications using a real world business model to accomplish their task.

Jeff Bloom of the Computer Training Academy and his staff worked weekends with the students on the project. High school teachers also volunteered their time.

Bloom, who also heads employment agency Select Staffing Services Inc., has heard first hand complaints from employers about lack of work experience in youthful new hires.

For him, the internship is about nurturing students with potential who could one day be leaders in their field.

"There's a real disconnect between the business and the education communities. Most new graduates don't get real world skills. So for technology, it's a matter of how do we identify some of these kids, help them along and not wait until they enter the real world," Bloom said.

"It's like being a farmer having some seeds that just need to be watered," he said.

This year for the first time, a \$15,000 work force development grant from the state Department of Business and Economic Development was added to the internship program. It helped buy computer software and hardware for schools and compensated four teachers who worked on the internship program.

Last week, students Doris Tsang, Jacob Schrum, Elayne Man and Daniel Davenport presented their effort, a Internet-based e-mail newsletter.

The four, who ranged in age from 14 to 18, represented the 24 students who participated in the four-month program. They role played showing how their newsletter would be created and finally published.

The youngest team member, 14-year-old Kapolei Middle School Doris Tsang, has ambitions of being a computer programmer. She said the project was an opportunity to not only improve her skills, but also gain a lot of confidence.

At first it was daunting being younger than everyone else on the team, she said. "The hardest thing was getting used to all the people. I was shy. But now I ask a lot of questions. That's helped at school too," she said.

Jacob Schrum, the oldest and most experienced member of the team and a recent graduate of Kalani High School, will be heading off to college this fall to major in computer science. Schrum said the experience altered his perspective.

"We learned why and how you work together," he said.

Learning a new computer program, Microsoft Solutions Framework, was just one challenge, the students said. But applying it, working together as a team, getting everyone to agree, setting priorities and adhering to deadlines were the biggest challenges.

"They had to break into teams, learn how to work together then come back and fit all the pieces together," said Bloom.

Bloom is optimistic about the future after seeing the student's results.

"We have an incredible group of young people who just needed a little bit of attention and nurturing," he said.

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