

Next Chapter: A proposed blueprint for action

How to build on-ramps to tech careers for formerly incarcerated and re-entering individuals

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Slack developed Next Chapter, a pilot program designed to shift perceptions about the potential of people who have been incarcerated and to generate new opportunities in skilled, long-term employment in the technology sector for re-entering individuals.

Since that time, Slack and its partners—The Last Mile, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and FREEAMERICA—have built and successfully implemented a yearlong apprenticeship to train and mentor three formerly incarcerated individuals.

This blueprint offers an overview of how Slack implemented the program, what it learned along the way, and insights and steps for companies to consider when launching similar programs.

THE ISSUE

Today, 2.5 million Americans are imprisoned in the United States¹. Ninety-five percent of these currently incarcerated individuals will return home and re-enter their communities. Because of the stigma associated with a criminal conviction, the unemployment rate is nearly 5x as high for formerly incarcerated individuals than that of the general U.S. population². Moreover, research shows that a lack of stable employment drastically increases the likelihood that an individual will return to jail or prison—making joblessness a leading predictor of recidivism³. This counterproductive cycle of release and poverty hurts everyone—including re-entering individuals, employers, and taxpayers.

The technology industry—which will see an estimated 1 million U.S. engineering roles go unfilled by 2020—has a powerful opportunity to help break this cycle⁴.

The re-entry population consists of driven, energized, determined and talented people desiring meaningful work, offering the tech sector a robust employment pipeline. A sectorwide investment in re-entering individuals would transform communities, support

dedicated and resourceful individuals, and inspire hope in those looking to be more, and do more.

“This is an issue that you can’t just throw money at. If you want to make a real impact on people’s lives who are leaving prison, you have to create different opportunities. You have to create real pathways to jobs.”

STEWART BUTTERFIELD

Slack CEO and Co-Founder

THE KEY PLAYERS

Next Chapter is Slack’s yearlong engineering apprenticeship that hires and mentors graduates from The Last Mile, a rigorous software engineering training program housed inside numerous state prisons. Slack’s program partners—each of which are critical to the success of this program—include:

- **THE COMMUNITY PARTNER** The Last Mile is a nonprofit which prepares incarcerated individuals for successful reentry through business and technology training. In this program, participants build tangible skills by creating websites, applications, and capstone projects—all without access to the internet. The Last Mile has significant experience working within the prison system, and modified some of its training curricula to meet Slack’s standards.
- **THE INVESTOR** The W.K. Kellogg Foundation supports the health and vitality of underserved children, families, and communities, and served as Slack’s racial equity expert and initial funder.
- **THE AMPLIFIER** FREEAMERICA was crucial in shifting internal and external perceptions around the realities of America’s criminal justice system, and the systemic hurdles that lead to mass incarceration.

BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

1. Establish an executive champion for the program

In 2016, Slack CEO and co-founder Stewart

In collaboration with



Butterfield took a small group of employees to visit San Quentin State Prison in California, where the Last Mile program is based. That visit was a tipping point, and subsequent visits are now a central part of the company's strategy to engage employees in the Next Chapter program.

This first visit helped counter bias by showcasing the rigorous engineering training the apprentices undertook to ensure qualification for tech sector positions. Building on that experience, the Slack team outlined its mission for the program and practical next steps, including determining what engineering roles the apprentices would fill, and the eligibility criteria used to evaluate candidates. The team also devised a process to undertake background checks that appropriately balanced the apprentices' unique circumstances with company standards and needs.

“It takes a C-Suite leader to make a program like Next Chapter a priority. Given the cross-functional support that was needed for this program to be successful, it was critical to have the leadership team on board.”

DEEPTI ROHATGI

Head of Slack for Good

2. Educate current employees about the value of the program and create an open dialogue to share concerns and/or questions

Slack leadership convened early in the process to determine which of The Last Mile graduates would be eligible for Next Chapter. The team needed to create a safe space for employees, and for the apprentices—some would be entering the workforce for the first time. The Last Mile only trains individuals who have not been convicted of violence against women, violence against children, or violence against the elderly. This criteria helped build Slack employees' acceptance and understanding of the program, and helped foster a working environment where the apprentices had the best chance possible to succeed.

Slack also invested resources in educating employees through regular office hours and town hall meetings. Slack leadership convened two all-staff meetings around criminal justice, held office hours for employees to voice concerns, and created opportunities for employees to visit San Quentin. Since that first visit in 2016, more than 200 Slack employees have visited San Quentin and The Last

Mile program.

These visits to San Quentin were cited by nearly all employees who attended as the single most important moment in building buy-in for the program.

“After that shared experience, we started to think about what the program could look like, how we would set criteria for eligibility, and what roles the apprentices could play within the company. We thought through how to run background checks, and how to balance the apprenticeship with safety and security commitments we had made to our customers, to ensure the program had every chance at success.”

DAWN SHARIFAN

Head of People Operations

3. Sponsor program participants at Hack Reactor or a similar post-incarceration education program

As part of the Next Chapter application process, The Last Mile graduates were invited to interview through Slack's standard process. The selected individuals were required to attend and complete a rigorous three-month long Hack Reactor coding bootcamp.

Hack Reactor or a similar program is necessary for three reasons:

- Recidivism rates prove how difficult it is to transition into “new lives” outside of prison. Continuing education outside of the prison setting can serve as a good transition.
- The networking that apprentices engage in at the learning institution is instrumental to building confidence and meaningful connections.
- Hack Reactor boosts their skills and provides the necessary introductions to laptop-based internet curricula, as apprentices will not have had internet access.

“Recognize that apprentices have already proven they belong—they've completed and excelled during rigorous training and evaluation. And their coding skills are among some of the cleanest we've seen from entry-level talent.”

DREW McGAHEY

Senior Engineer

4. Establish a support network for your program participants

Establishing points of contact with a variety of mentors—from technical coaching to social support—will guide the apprentices through their own re-entry process. This support network will also stabilize the experiences and build the trust of the apprentices some of whom will be entering their first full-time jobs.

All Slack apprentices had a technical mentor, a work culture mentor, and a career coach, in addition to Slack’s on-site Re-entry Director, Kenyatta Leal, a returned citizen and founding member of The Last Mile program. These mentors and the robust network of people advocating for apprentices ensured that their career growth would continue beyond the program.

“I was super excited about the program—I have a definite interest in anti-recidivism causes and it’s hard to find opportunities outside of my work. The apprentices are easily the hardest working people [at Slack]...these three guys are always going out of their way to help people and grow.”

SHIVA KILARU

Senior Front-End Engineer

5. Understand the responsibilities of someone who was formerly incarcerated

Securing employment is critical, but people re-entering the workforce from prison will likely need assistance to find stable housing, as well as guidance in accessing mental health and trauma-related services, navigating the management of finances, and engaging social media and other communications tools. They might still be on parole, and require flexibility in their schedule to attend parole or other meetings.

During the first year of the Next Chapter program, the support network helped apprentices navigate these challenges of offering advice on how to: handle living in a new city; open up their personal networks; and write recommendation letters to parole officers on the apprentices’ behalf.

Keep in mind that some apprentices might be entering the workforce for the first time. There will be adjustments as everyone adapts to new work settings. Going the extra mile to advocate, build connections, and help establish a trusted network of supporters early on will go a long way in helping the

apprentices and the program to thrive.

“At Slack, we believe that a person’s past should not impact their future. This program isn’t about giving back. It’s about leveling the playing field.”

SHELLA NEBA

Employment Counsel

6. Understand and mitigate the legal risks

Slack leadership entered the pilot program prepared to navigate legal and compliance issues for the apprentices. The most significant hurdle was determining how to provide apprentices with the information necessary to complete work assignments, while maintaining restricted visibility and access to customer data and other proprietary information. The engineering apprenticeship positions in Quality Assurance were chosen because they did not require the apprentices to interact with customer data.

Having a clear idea of the functions you want/need apprentices to be responsible for, knowledge of the skills necessary for apprentices to be successful in their positions, and awareness of managerial capacity will help determine the opportunities for growth within the organization, while also mitigating the program’s legal risks.

“It’s easy to see the barriers first—barriers to hiring, onboarding, data security, and staff security. But when we started to pick it apart, there were very few legal obstacles, with the exception of customer data. There’s still much about the customer experience that can be accessed, and improved, when solved in new ways.”

DAVID SCHELLHASE

General Counsel

7. Cultivate an environment of support and authenticity on the teams the program participants are joining

The apprentices took a risk with Slack, just as Slack took a risk with them. To show their commitment to this process, Slack leadership had to be fully invested in creating real and meaningful experiences for this group of talented and resourceful individuals.

Slack provided opportunities for employees to ask questions about the program and participants within their teams, and to also engage apprentices directly while fostering a welcoming and

non-stigmatizing environment. Slack also fostered important culture and team-building moments, such as the Slackathon—a hackathon specific to Slack employees in which the apprentices won one of the top prizes—that deepened an inclusive, collaborative culture.

“Early on, it wasn’t clear that we’d find any legal, regulatory-compliant way to [hire an apprentice], and it first felt that anything we did would be just a tiny drop in the ocean. But [partnering with The Last Mile provided] another portal of candidates who are underserved. There was a great source of really motivated technical talent who were on their way to becoming great engineers.”

CAL HENDERSON

Slack Co-founder and Chief Technical Officer

MOVING THIS CHAPTER FORWARD

The three Next Chapter apprentices in the first cohort are now full-time Slack employees. Their colleagues and managers remark on their stronger-than-average work ethic. Their unique experiences have helped the company build a robust product, and an even more inclusive team culture.

Slack is committed to this program for the long-term because we know re-entry programs improve outcomes for returning individuals. We also know that comprehensive re-entry programs give tech companies unique opportunities to offer meaningful career opportunities, build their talent pipelines, and reduce recidivism.

We hope you’ll join us in this Next Chapter. For more information on Next Chapter, please reach out to Slack for Good at Slackforgood@slack.com.

“This was not a PR move—Slack made a true and durable commitment to this program. They took real risks, and invested in the growth and well-being of the apprentices in powerful ways.”

TAMESHIA BRIDGES MANSFIELD

Program Officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019.html>
- 2 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>
- 3 Ibid
- 4 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/computer-programming-is-a-trade-lets-act-like-it-1407109947>

“We started slowly but we want to be living proof that people can change.”

BEVERLY PARENTI
Co-Founder, The Last Mile

Next Chapter is a collaboration with Slack, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Last Mile, and FREEAMERICA. For more information, reach out to Slack for Good at slackforgood@slack.com.