

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work In Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Ruben Harris is the CEO and co-founder of Career Karma, an app and web platform that connects career transitioners with coding and tech bootcamps across the country. What makes the platform different is that it also provides these students with peer level support and mentorship. Ruben, thank you so much for being here.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

Thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When we last talked, it was back last summer, after the pandemic had started. We talked about how your platform is different than others. I want you to tell the audience, if you could, a little bit about Career Karma before we go into some more questions.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

Yeah. So Career Karma is the easiest way to find a job training program online. We match workers with job training programs so they can get high paying jobs in tech in about a year. We work with about 450 different bootcamps in our directory, 7,000 trade schools, colleges, and universities. What's very important is for us to preserve trust with our users. So even though our directory has thousands of people leaving reviews and comments and pros and cons about these different training programs, when they want to get matched with the program that we recommend for them, it's very important for us to curate training programs that they can trust that actually have outcomes. The way that we do that is by matching them, not just with the right training program, but with the community. So every single person that downloads the Career Karma app gets matched with a coach that's currently enrolled in the job training program so that they can see and talk to people that currently do this.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

They're able to be put into a peer mentorship group of other people that are like them, like other moms or dads, and that also keeps them motivated during the program and helps them think about what kind of projects they want to build. And then when they get to the job search, we're able to make sure that they are connected to other people that are employed that also have been through similar backgrounds. We host many different events. Community is very core to what we do, and the vision is not to just match people into their first job training program, but to help them go from enrollment to employment and also to whatever new career or new skill that they're looking for in the future and we're that central last source to re-skill and up-skill.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The tech industry has a reputation of being very insular. There's even stereotypes of what a tech coder should look like and be. What are your customers, your app users, what are they like? What kind of people are coming through?

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

We focus most of our efforts on adults, all of our efforts on adults. When you think about the typical students, it's not what it used to be. It's not just a bright eyed eight year old with no responsibilities and things like that. It's adults that tend to be 25 and up. They've got kids. They have families. They might be working a job. They might have a degree from a state school or a community college, but they didn't learn exactly what they want. They're in a job that is not exactly what they love to do. So if I was going to put it in one word, I would say, we're focused mostly on blue collar people. We do have segmentation of different types of personas. I'll give you an example. So the curious explorer is how you would categorize the long tail, someone that completely knows nothing about technology, someone that doesn't know anything about what's going on.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

Then you have the informed explorer, which is someone that knows what career paths exist, like software engineering, design, or data science, but they need help deciding which type of training program is best for them or how to take the next steps to pursue that career path. But then you have the ready applicant that is aware of bootcamps, trade schools, and colleges, and the career path that they want to follow, but they don't know exactly which training program is best for them based off of their financing or their schedule or various other things that they're looking for. That's how we would segment it. But I will say, there's people that are blue collar that, like you said, don't have access to the technology industry and have never been in there before.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So how do you make that first match? Because I think that's probably very important, because you bring up the idea that these are people who may know that they're interested in it, but they don't know which pathway to go.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

When people would download the Career Karma app, like I said, they're matched with a coach. But we have a marketplace that we call Fast Track. And so it was very cool about Fast Track is it gives Career Karma an understanding of someone's goals and their needs. And we also match them to the career guides that are relevant for their goals and their needs, and a filter that allows them to select which training programs are best for them, and our recommendations specifically for that individual. Once they request info and submit the applications to have the initial conversations with certain schools, then we not only match them with a coach, we introduce them to different peer led events. So there's anywhere from 40 plus events happening every single week with other students, either doing a technical workshop or doing a job search workshop or talking about how they got a job in tech, things like that to show them that it's possible on a day-to-day basis.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

While people are getting ready to prepare, to pass the technical exams for these training programs, we have something called the 21 Day CK Challenge, which is a 21 day process for someone to do something consistently for 21 days to develop a habit, join a squad, and do different things like that. Through this entire process, we're able to not just discover what their goals and needs are, well, one of the needs for many people is actually needing a device or needing a laptop or needing a scholarship, and so they're able to communicate that with us. We're able to get them devices that they need, we're able to get them scholarships so that we can make sure that they really have no excuse to start our program. All they need is willpower.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

And what I mean by excuses is, a career transition is very psychological and people lie to themselves, like, "I don't have time," or, "I don't have money," all kinds of things like this, but they want to do it. So we help people understand that you actually have no barriers, and just because you grew up in this environment doesn't mean that you can't do this. Just because you have this obstacle doesn't mean that you can't do it. Let me show you somebody that did it. That's essentially what we do.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's very important in that part of showing someone that it's possible, giving them mentors, and then these peer groups that are reflective of who they are. I know you've talked about there's dad peer groups, there's, I'm sure, women peer groups and for people of color, which brings us back to that idea that this industry right now, though it's hopefully changing, there aren't a lot of people of color, not a lot of women in it, and what important role does that peer group play then in convincing people just, because they didn't come out of this background, it doesn't mean they can't have a good career in it.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

I think the internet was always designed to be peer to peer, and that's why you see such a huge wave in decentralization. We also see another big buzzword in the tech world talking about community, and community is huge, especially during a quarantine period. I saw a quote by Greg Eisenberg who said, "Community led startups are the new lean startup, where a lean startup, you build software within the company, but these days you want to build the community and then build the software." The next big wave of consumer companies will be community led, and the reason why I say that is because the community that I grew up in was Atlanta, Georgia, and in Atlanta, Georgia, everyone around me was Black and Brown. And not just Black and Brown, from the hood Black and Brown, successful Black and Brown, beautiful Black and Brown, confident Black and Brown, like, "I'm a King. You're a Queen."

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

So when I walked out of the house, I felt good to be me, and then when I left my environment in Atlanta and I saw people dealing with these different struggles, and I'm not saying that we haven't faced racism, I was shocked about how many people are ashamed to be not just Black, but a lot of other things. So I was like, "Man, how do we give people that self-confidence?" And the thing that's in between here, you have to figure out how to control it. And in order to control it, you have to, in the beginning I think, put yourself around other people that have done it before. The media is one of the most powerful things in the world. The reason so many people go into music or sports or movies is because they see it all the time. They see people like them that were able to go from some rough environment or some crazy obstacle and they had a rags to riches story, so that's what they pursue.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

But if we can actually create media programming that isn't super nerdy, or we can share podcasts like this so people know that it's possible to do this career path no matter who you are, and achieve the same outcome, if not better outcomes faster, then you start changing the game. And once you start giving them that media programming, not only can you introduce them to up here, so you can play a pickup game, you could introduce them to a basketball court, which is like a laptop or a smartphone or whatever. The other thing that's interesting about these paths that I mentioned like music, sports, and movies is that, in order to practice, it's not very difficult, and you can practice for free. If you want to be

a football player, you could go to the field and run. If you want to be a basketball player, you could go to a court and practice.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

Now, all of these things take a lot of practice and habit building and people put their blood, sweat, and tears to compete for these roles that have very few slots that are available. When you're around people that are all down and have a mindset that believes that everything is negative, that negative energy is infectious. And I'm not saying that the negativity and the obstacles aren't there, but if you can put people that have a different perspective, no matter what obstacle is in front of them, you're going to start changing the game. And that's why we started with community first of people that have the mindset that there are no obstacles and we will overcome together.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love that message. I love the idea of breaking down that barrier that's internal to yourself while you're still attacking these external barriers as well. And one of those barriers we've discussed before is the laptop. Access to broadband is a big problem in all communities. We always think of it as just as a rural problem. It's an urban problem. I think the majority of the big cities, there's a bigger lack of broadband than in rural communities. But there's also that lack of a laptop, and I know that you ran this program, Re-Skill America, to put laptops into people's hands. How has that come along?

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

We launched this campaign called Re-Skill America around the Juneteenth time period, around the George Floyd situation when everybody was talking about Black Lives Matter and a bunch of other things like that, when everybody was making these big commitments to helping people. And when the pandemic hit, speaking about the people that we serve, over 55 million people filed for unemployment, mostly women and people of color. Not only had we had that George Floyd situation, we've seen a big influx because of Women's History Month, we've seen a big influx because of Black History Month as different people are in need now. What's interesting is that people, not just from Black and Brown backgrounds, but people from the socioeconomic background of 40,000 and under, actually don't have a laptop. The majority don't have a laptop according to Pew Research.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

When these people came to Career Karma with the desire and the willpower and the heart and the passion to pursue one of these careers, which is what you really need, they didn't have access to a device. And what I started noticing in our Q and A forums is these individuals banding together and helping each other out, giving each other laptops, raising GoFundMe's for laptops. A good example is Kesha Lake, who's a mother who tried to go to college for 10 years, and she came to Career Karma. She didn't have a laptop. She had no idea what code was. She joined a squad called FFT. A guy in Atlanta, his name's Nurando, gave her a laptop and she raised the money through a GoFundMe to get a deposit for this bootcamp that she wanted to go to. And long story short, from a January to November time period, she was able to get a job making \$98,500 at Stitch Fix. And she has referred over 20 people to Career Karma since then.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

Another one, her name's Annie Belafleur, she just did a different bootcamp called General Assembly, and also got a job at Stitch Fix and now they've all started referring their spouses to Career Karma. So it's

a really nice, beautiful karmic loop. The reason why I say that is because she would have never been able to do that without the power of a laptop given to her by someone in the community. So after observing all these things, I spoke with one of our investors, her name is Freada Kapor Klein at Kapor Capital. They also have a foundation, the Mitchell Kapor Foundation, and I asked them, "What can I do? I'm not a nonprofit, but I want to figure out a way to leverage my network of over 2000 companies. We're a Y Combinator company. We know all these companies. We're also a reforge company, so we're connected to all of these individuals at these big places. They give away laptops all the time. How can we take all these laptops that get thrown away, essentially they call it e-waste whenever they upgrade their laptops, and give it to people for free so that they have a chance?"

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

We started brainstorming about it and we came up with this idea called Re-Skill America, where their nonprofit will function as our fiscal sponsor. So all the donations go to them, any money goes to them, and we essentially wanted to raise half a million dollars and give away 5,000 laptops. Since we've launched it, we've raised over \$300,000 and we have over 1000 laptops that have been donated. And it's really awesome, because we've been able to hand these out to different individuals. What's super cool about Re-Skill America is it's a triple impact initiative, which means that it's Black Lives Matter support, it's a COVID-19 response, and it's workforce development, all in one donation. Even the people that hosted this podcast helped us with this as well. So shout out to Chris and Titus and Hannah for donating. They gave us a \$50,000 check for Re-Skill America.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

And just so you understand what it is, companies can donate laptops, which is the main focus of the drive, but if they don't have laptops to give, they can give us a check. That check is tax deductible, because it goes directly to the Kapor Foundation. They hold it, and it's only used to purchase laptops from laptop refurbishers like Reviving or Tech Exchange and other places like that. Oh, Human IT and other different laptop refurbishers so people can get devices. Workforce development organizations got wind of it, and they are really excited about it as well. So just so you know, there's over 500 workforce development agencies in America, and one of them is a workforce board in Southwest Washington. What they've done to get involved with this campaign is they've leveraged the [inaudible 00:16:01] money that was given to them from a federal perspective.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

They've bought 50 laptops that they house in America's Job Center in Washington. So if anybody from Washington goes to Career Karma and they need a laptop, they're creating a check-in/check-out system whenever somebody gets enrolled into one of our job training programs and has a support system. So we can give them guidance, they're able to get the laptop directly from their local center, and they handle the device management and they also have a caseworker from the government. So while we're testing this out, once we figure it out, we'll roll it out to the other 12 in Washington and eventually across the nation, and I could see a world where we can just click a need a laptop button, and you can find all the laptops across the nation. So that's where we're at with the campaign so far.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

I had to put a little bit of a pause on it, on the fundraising part of things, because I started fundraising for Career Commissaries A September of last year. I signed the term sheet by October 6, so we raised a \$10 million Series A run, and just announced the Series A in December. We hired our first six people since

then and doing a bunch of stuff. So that's been my main focus with this new capital, but now that people are onboarding and getting familiar with what's going on, we're about to really start getting back into distribution and back to raising the cap that we set out for the Re-Skill America campaign.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you started out this app to make sure that people who were interested in bootcamps would have a place to go to find them, a funnel, as you describe it. And now you're arming people with laptops and you've created a community. How does that make you feel? I mean, you must be pretty damn happy.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

Man, that's an understatement. That's probably the best feeling ever. It's just helping people believe in themselves and do what they love and not just get employed financially, but have a superpower in a trade that they could pass down to the rest of their family and create this really powerful generational impact, I feel wealthy, and I'm not talking about dollars. I don't have to worry about food. I don't have to worry about shelter. I don't have to worry about transportation, because the people got me. It's interesting because bootcamps are just the first step. Bootcamps are a beast head market. It's the first rapid re-skilling market at scale that all other traditional education systems are copying. So now I've got trade schools reaching out to me, I've got colleges reaching out to me, because everybody's dealing with this enrollment management thing and there is no community that's built out for career transitioners. And so we will take over the entire job training program landscape to not just become the number one destination for career advice, but this community of people that got each other's backs. So yeah, it makes me feel very good.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Ruben, thank you so much for joining me this morning.

Rubén Harris, Career Karma CEO and founder:

Thank you. Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Ruben Harris, the co-founder and CEO of Career Karma. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.