

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Climb Hire is a nonprofit that upscales and preps working adults aged 24 to 40 for jobs in tech, no college degree required. Founder and CEO Nitzan Pelman joins me to talk about the program. Nisan, welcome to Work in Progress.

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

Thank you. So glad to be here, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Climb Hire focuses on low-income overlooked adults now making less than \$30,000 a year and you're prepping them for better paying jobs like in IT and other fields. Tell me a little bit how the program works.

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

Five years ago I was an entrepreneur in residence at LinkedIn and when I was there they put a referral button on their platform. And what they learned by doing that was that the vast majority of job seekers get jobs through referrals. And that made me think about where all of my jobs have come from. It was the first time I'd ever really thought about that closely and realized that every job I've ever had has come through a network, a relationship or referral. I've never applied for a job on a jobs board before. And as much as I watched to be distinct in the world, I realized that I was uniquely un-distinct in that almost everybody I knew had gotten jobs this way. And the LinkedIn data was just really representative of so many of me and my peers life experiences. And then I started to think like, okay, well where do networks come from and how do they get built?

Well, a lot of times they come from college. When you spend time in a four-year institution and you live in dorms and you sing in a cappella clubs and you play lacrosse and you write for the newspaper, these are all ways that you get to spend hundreds of hours with peers in a coming of age moment in time. And that's great. But the vast majority of people coming from low income communities don't go to schools like that. They go to community colleges mostly for affordability purposes and so that they can work and take care of family members and be closer to home. And college increasingly is more of a sorting mechanism for wealth, I think more than anything else these days. And so if that's true, then I think what happens to that population is that they finish school and they start applying to jobs cold.

And it's very hard to be noticed when you apply for jobs cold and you don't have relevant experience and no one's vouching for you. And so my hypothesis was that there's all this talent out there and they're your stock shelfers at Target and your cashiers at Trader Joe's, they're your Uber and Lyft drivers. They're people that are gritty and motivated and oftentimes working two, three jobs just to make ends meet. We don't always think of them as the people who have so much potential and could be actually the employees of our companies in corporate America, but many of them have that grit drive motivation and aptitude. And if we could find them, identify that hidden and overlooked talent, we could train them on a very specific skill within a tech ecosystem like Salesforce administration or IT or cybersecurity. But then also we could help them to build social capital and relationships so that they could actually get middle class jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So as you're talking about this, it's very clear that what you're doing at Climb Hire is giving people tech skills, but you're also giving them social skills. So if I am a student or a participant in Climb Hire, talk about the tech skills that they're learning. And I know you have a couple of different pathways on that.

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

I almost think of this as where is the biggest levers of impact and skill building? And obviously having some kind of skill I think is very important, but who you know matters almost as much as what? And that's just been proven out to be true time and time again, both from the LinkedIn data, from Raj Chetty's data, from Mark Granovetter's data from 1973. Just this power of networks and how many people get jobs not through even job postings. Is so powerful. So we think that the technical skills are sort of the way to bring people into the community, but we almost think of it as a Trojan horse. And then once they're there, we help them build their communication skills, their relationship skills and their network. And so the way that we do that is it's about six hours of learning a week and it's all at night on Zoom.

The participants, which are adults, usually in their mid-twenties to late thirties, they will be on Zoom with us for three hours, let's say on a Tuesday and a Thursday night from usually around six to nine PM and half of that time they're learning that technical skill that allows them to break into a new industry and the other half the time they're building relationships and learning the art of how do you ask open-ended questions? How do you use your body language to show that you're an active listener? How do you tell your story in a concise and compelling way in which you show that you've taken initiative and exhibited leadership and so many things that I think are not part of the lexicon or the currency of people that don't come from that white collar environment. And so you not only have to teach people how to have those conversations, but then you have to give them a lot of opportunities to practice.

None of us really tell our stories perfectly and brilliantly the very first time. We have so much practice and so much opportunity to iterate and see what lands for people and see what doesn't. And so we have many opportunities once a month where people come in as middle class professionals working at Salesforce, LinkedIn, Google, anywhere, and they spend time sort of practicing with our climbers and they usually do it in rotation. Every 20 or 30 minutes they get to talk to somebody new. And in the process they're building social capital with them. And if they, as I say, if they fall in love professionally, then you can usually unlock an opportunity or a referral, a weak tie. And we do those events once a month and then also our alumni come back as fellows and they train the next set of climbers that gives them an opportunity to build social capital with people that were once in their shoes and now have broken into a new industry and any job and have their own newfound social capital.

Last thing is we help them really think about their own networks. We had a Climb Hire alum who was working at a bakery giving people their pastries and she really wanted to go into marketing and she went to her boss, the CEO of this bakery, the owner, and said, "I really want to go into marketing and I'm curious if you know anybody that might help me get an internship." And she said, "Funny enough, my husband is looking for a marketing intern right this second." He's in real estate and she adored her as her employee at the bakery and helped her sort of get that next opportunity. And from there, she's just advanced and advanced.

And so I think the biggest thing is that I don't think it's really about bachelor's degrees or non-bachelor's degrees. It's really about experience and the chasm of closing the experience chasm because everybody wants people that have experience. It's just easier to train people or to bring people in that know what they're doing. And so that's the hardest thing is to break into that first job and that's what we're helping them do.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you were helping them breaking into that first job, which is fantastic, but you're also giving them practical skills that they can use and build upon for a career. And I understand that in March there's a next cohort on IT and there's one or the deadline to apply for the next cohorts one in IT is in March and one for paid search marketing is also in March. How long does it take to go through the program that you have in place before you start getting all that extra alums jump in and help you even build a stronger network? How long does it take for training?

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

You are doing those things simultaneously. So from the first day of the program, you're already meeting alums and working with them as fellows and they're helping you to learn the material and they just learned it themselves not long ago. The IT cybersecurity, CompTIA certification is a newer one for us and it's a more involved certification. So that one will be doing three times a week starting in March, and it does go for 24 weeks. And then we have a paid digital marketing one, and that one is 16 weeks and it's twice a week in the evenings. And so throughout that whole time, about half of that time you're doing that technical skill or that professional skill and the other half that time you're doing that relationship building work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You also have a unique model for how someone could pay for this. And the reason I bring this up is that finance can be a barrier to opportunity. You limit the people who join your Climb Hires to people who are making under \$30,000. So how do they pay for that program?

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

Well, we have kind of a braided approach for how we ultimately fund our work. Some of it is subsidized through philanthropy. Some of it comes from the employers who hire the Climb Hire alum when they've graduated. And we have a model where we also call it Pay as You Climb. So what we inherently do not want anyone in the program that is earning above livable wage, it is a program specifically targeted to people that are low income workers and we know that they can't possibly afford to pay. They're already drowning in their own bills and not being able to make ends meet. So we don't expect for them to pay upfront, but once they get a job that does pay them at least \$47,000 in California and above 40 in other places, then they have the opportunity to then pay for the next person to have the same experience.

We call it Pay as You Climb, and it's \$150 a month for four years, so that's \$7,200. It's a highly subsidized program. Even at that \$7,200 mark, it costs us probably around \$10,000 to \$12,000 to serve somebody in our program to recruit them, select them, support them during those six months that they're in the program. And then they get six months of additional services to help them with their job search, with our very talented career development team. And we also have a talent and employer partnerships team, and they're working with employers to help identify opportunities as well. Then after that, you have the whole alumni network and there's a whole team of people that are helping to continue to create cohesiveness amongst the alum. So you get a lot for that \$7,200.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

But it's also great that you're not letting money stand in the way of helping people get that economic mobility, that chance to climb higher, hence the name. What do you ultimately want to see for the people that you're training? These are good jobs that people are going for, an IT specialist, an IT

professional can make a lot more than \$30,000 a year. What ultimately would you like to see? Do you want to see a bigger network of this group of people? I am trying to get a little bit of your motivation personally, what you'd like to see satisfaction wise.

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

One of the big ideas behind this is very much inspired by an Ivy League network. I have so many friends and peers who have gone to Harvard and Yale and other institutions. And when you're graduating from those schools and you want a job at Goldman Sachs or wherever, you'll look up on LinkedIn and see which alumni at Yale went to work at Goldman Sachs. And then you'll write to a number of those people on LinkedIn. All of them will immediately say that they're happy to meet with you because you went to their alma mater and you can have a 30-minute conversation. And the likelihood that they'll refer you to a role if there is one open is very high. That's what the data says will happen. If we have something called homophily, which is a form of connectedness, a form of social overlap, which creates a lot of trust, and we have lots of shortcuts for how we do that.

Like, "Oh, you played lacrosse at Duke, me too." And then all of a sudden you have trust and you don't even know this person. And so we have a lot of shortcuts in our society for how the upper echelon of society really helps one another in a pretty fundamental way, but it doesn't really trickle down to places that are not in that Ivy League network or in sort of that top tier set of institutions. And so my vision was to really create an alumni network of people from low-income communities who were helping each other lift each other up as they climbed. And so Climb Hire is a double entendre. So we spell hire H-I-R-E. But really the idea is that with social capital, you can scale economic mobility and you can help people to gain access to jobs and roles that they might not have been able to get access to beforehand by teaching the value and the ethic and the mindset of once you get a job, your job is to help somebody else in our community get a job.

And we're going to teach you the skills and the mindset around how to do that, and also the ethics and the value system behind that. That's a world that I want to live in. And I guess there were two forms of inspiration for this. One of them was David Brooks, who I think at the beginning of the Trump administration. He's a conservative columnist in the back page of the New York Times, but I think he was really struggling with where can I find hope right now? And he started to go visit a lot of different communities all across the United States. And what he found over and over again were these people who just kind of were like the movers and shakers in these hyper-local neighborhoods. And they were the ones that put together the July 4th barbecues and they did the visiting people when they were sick and they put together the potlucks and they kind of knew everybody and everybody knew them, and they were the connectors and the glue, and they kind of made things happen. And community came together because of them.

And you just saw these people over and over and over again. No one paid them, no one gave them a title, but they were just there doing it. And he gave them a name, he called them Weavers. And I was really inspired by the Weavers, and he really talked about them being the fabric of the United States and just the glue of our country. And I really wanted to be a Weaver myself. And I think I am in some levels. I have a lot of Climb Hire learners and alumni who come to my house and Shabbat on Friday nights, things like that. And we host parties and things like that often. But what I really wanted was to have an exponential and multiplier impact. And so what about if we created Weavers of Weavers? And that's what the fellowship is. It's people who are helping one another because they want to, and we created a way and a mechanism to formalize that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So Nitzan, are there any innovations coming out of your work, something that you want to see happen or you're trying to make happen now?

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

Yes, actually. We've spent the last five years really building out a very rich curriculum and a lot of learnings and insights based on research about how to build social capital and the art of relationship building. And quite honestly, it's not nearly as intuitive as you might think it could be, and if you've been exposed to it your whole life, you just kind of know how to ask people for introductions and things like that. But I think if you're not exposed to it's actually really daunting and really scary both to talk about yourself in compelling and concise ways, but also to make an ask of somebody that you don't know that well, even though we know that the data says that they would be helpful if you made an ask, but making an ask is a big part of it. Through a lot of these insights and learnings over the last five years at this point, we have a really tight curriculum and a really tight way of leveraging relationships to drive impact and economic mobility.

And for a long time, we've just used that for our program. But I actually think we're really ready to share this more broadly with two-year institutions like community colleges, four-year institutions, and imagine what would happen if the alumni affairs team and the career services team were spending much of their time building social capital with students and alum as opposed to just thinking about what job opportunities are out there, what kind of multiplier effect would that look like and how could that take hold? And so a new part of Climb Hire is going to be called Climb Hire Innovation, and it's really about sharing this work with other workforce organizations and other higher ed institutions.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I look forward to checking back in with you to see how that's going. Thank you Nitzan so much for sitting down with me to talk about Climb Hire.

Nitzan Pelman, Climb Hire founder & CEO:

Yeah, thank you, Ramona. It was great to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Nitzan Pelman, the founder and CEO of Climb Hire. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.