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## WORK-BASED LEARNING IN ACTION

# GAP INC. LOOKS *THIS WAY AHEAD* FOR YOUTH INTERNSHIPS

**Work-Based Learning in Action is a series of case studies highlighting effective models of work-based learning. This case study is part of Walmart's work with JFF, [Making Work-Based Learning Work for Retail](#), and covers companies that have implemented valuable work-based learning programs that provide lessons for employers creating or redesigning their own retail work-based learning program.**

This Way Ahead is Gap Inc.'s program to help low-income young people overcome barriers to employment by providing them with paid internships that provide job and employability skills along with intensive coaching. Over time, this work-based learning program has proven to be a smart social and business investment that creates career opportunities as well as a strong talent pipeline for Gap Inc., with high levels of retention and productivity.

## PROGRAM ORIGINS

Gap Inc. has longstanding investments in community-based organizations dedicated to building education and employment opportunities for low-income, middle, and high school youth. Although this grant funding was providing these organizations with adequate financial resources, they faced programmatic challenges. In particular,

## This Way Ahead: Fast Facts

Gap Inc. and its nonprofit partners provide:

- Recruitment of low-income teens and young adults, ages 16 to 24
- Nonprofit-facilitated classroom training with occupational and employability skills
- Instruction, and work-based learning through store tours and employer workshops
- 10-week paid internship at Gap Inc. stores
- A job coach, intern manager, and peer mentor (Big Sib) to support each participant during their internship

the organizations struggled to place youth in paid jobs after training.

In 2007, Gap Inc. responded to this challenge by launching This Way Ahead, a partnership between the company and community-based organizations to provide low-income teens and young adults with employability skills and paid store internships. “Gap Inc. hires thousands of entry-level employees every year, and we should invest in these new team members to help them gain the skills they need to be successful in the workplace,” says Gail Gershon, executive director, Community Leadership at Gap Inc. “Our nonprofit partners told us that the young people they serve have a hard time getting their first jobs, so we saw

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*What’s our strongest resource? We hire young people. We hire thousands of young people every day in our stores. For the most part, we are providing them with their first job.*

*– Gap Inc. Manager*

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an opportunity to leverage those entry-level jobs as a resource to share with the community.”

Gap Inc. also saw the program as a way to become better grantmakers, as they were directly exposed to what it takes to run a good job-training program. In addition, This Way Ahead would position low-income youth to land their first job at a Gap Inc. retail store (including Gap, Old Navy, and Banana Republic stores).

## HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

The program was designed in partnership with Gap Inc. store leadership and with This Way Ahead nonprofit partners. The nonprofit begins with recruitment and classroom training. Participants are then interviewed and placed in Gap, Old Navy, or Banana Republic stores for a 10-week paid internship. During the internship, each participant is supported by a job coach from a nonprofit, their manager at work, and a “Big Sib” or peer in the store who serves as a buddy. This Way Ahead’s partnership model relies on the expertise of nonprofits as intermediaries

to serve and prepare low-income youth while it maximizes the impact of Gap Inc.'s real-world work opportunities and management.

Gap Inc. provides consistent program leadership across locations. A Gap district or store manager serves as the This Way Ahead leader for each city, and he or she is responsible for the program management and nonprofit partnership in that city. This coordination allows for seamless program delivery in which the participants receive services and support from both Gap Inc. and the nonprofit along the way.

The nonprofit partner leads the initial phase of This Way Ahead. It recruits youth ages 16 to 24 not otherwise ready for entry-level employment in retail and selects program participants. Students then participate in training at the nonprofit that focuses on employability skills, including how to prepare a resume, dress for and participate in an interview, and communicate effectively.

At this stage, Gap Inc. begins to expose participants to a career in retail. Store managers offer store tours and workshops about what it is like to work at their stores with insights into store culture, employment skills, and career pathways. These lessons prepare students for the next phase of This Way Ahead, set in the stores themselves.

After completing their classroom training, youth transition to a work-based learning experience. Students apply for internships at select Gap Inc. stores around the city using an online application platform. The paid

## This Way Ahead Supports Core Work-Based Learning Principles

JFF's report [Making Work-Based Learning Work for Retail](#) outlines seven core principles to guide the design of high-quality work-based learning that supports the success of low-income individuals seeking to enter and advance in their careers. This Way Ahead offers many of these design components:

- Supports entry into career track
- Provides meaningful job tasks that build career skills and knowledge
- Identifies target skills and validates gains
- Provides compensation
- Rewards skills development
- Provides comprehensive participant supports

internships last 10 weeks with interns working about 12 hours a week. Interns remain connected to the nonprofit, receiving ongoing support from nonprofit job coaches throughout their internships.

A Gap, Old Navy, or Banana Republic intern manager coordinates each intern's activities. Participating This Way Ahead stores identify a store manager to serve in this role, responsible for day-to-day supervising, coaching, and support of the interns. These intern managers receive

training about the program, including program goals, how to coach and support interns, and how to work with the nonprofit job coaches.

Beyond a supervisor role, intern managers match seasoned staff associates with interns to serve as one-to-one peer mentors or Big Sibs. Every intern is considered for permanent employment at the conclusion of the internship; to date, 75 percent of This Way Ahead interns have received job offers.

## Program Results

More than 3,800 teens and young adults ages 16 to 24 have already participated in This Way Ahead. The program has proven successful in its original mission of corporate social responsibility with the added benefit of providing entry for many youth, developing valuable talent for GAP stores, enhancing the managerial skills of managers and deepening the commitment of all participants to the program and to the company. Participating youth consistently report high levels of satisfaction about gains in confidence, knowledge regarding specific retail skills, and insight into how to find their next job. This is particularly important for participants because

This Way Ahead provides their first on-the-job experiences. Youth can bring the foundational job skills they gain—including job search and application tools, customer service, communication, time management, and teamwork—into the labor market even beyond retail. As Melissa Macri, Gap assistant store manager and This Way Ahead intern manager, describes, “whether they end up going on to pursue higher education, or other jobs, or other fields, most likely they’re going to end up somewhere where they are dealing with and interacting with a whole bunch of different kinds of people. . . . Working in a retail environment lays a foundation for you to be able to do that, wherever you end up.”

As Macri explains, the impact of This Way Ahead is not limited to participants. “It is also great for the company. It’s great when you invest in someone and then they stay on their job.” This has been evident in the job offers, as well as employee retention and advancement for This Way Ahead graduates. This Way Ahead graduates stay with Gap Inc. twice as long as their peers in the same cities and are rated as more engaged in the company than their coworkers who have not gone through the program.

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This Way Ahead also supports a culture of, and commitment to, internal advancement at a company like Gap Inc., where 51 percent of store managers started at the entry level, far outpacing the industry average of 26 percent.

## LESSONS FOR SUCCESS

This Way Ahead currently operates in nine cities in the United States; in Toronto; and in Manchester, Birmingham, and London in England. Across all locations, several common elements stand out as drivers of program success.

### Leadership Buy-In and Commitment

The role leadership takes is a key part of the success for each program. As Gershon explains, “One important thing that makes This Way Ahead so successful is having buy-in and support from leadership. In addition to the financial support, having our leaders show up, and support This Way Ahead is critical.”

This leadership commitment described by Gershon extends beyond supporting This Way Ahead as a strategy for corporate social responsibility. Based on program outcomes, This Way Ahead is now viewed as a talent and recruitment strategy, too.

Serving as an intern manager or Big Sib is seen by the company as a professional development opportunity that can help employees build skills that lead to advancement.

Macri notes “I have no doubt that serving as an intern manager was definitely helpful to me in my professional growth.”

### Mentorship and Coaching

Interns not only learn critical job skills but also receive steady supports to help guide them through the process. In particular, they receive mentorship and coaching from three key supports: nonprofit job coaches, intern managers, and Big Sibs.

“It’s a three-way triangle, with the intern in the middle,” describes Gershon. Each mentor provides a different mix of supports. The mentors are passionate about the work they do, supporting youth to build the skills and confidence necessary to be successful in their first jobs.

Job coaches follow the intern into the workplace from their pre-employment training. This outside support helps the interns to navigate workplace and other challenges to make the internship more successful. The job coaches work with the interns from the beginning, recruiting them into the program, and have extensive experience working with low-income youth to help them navigate barriers such as a lack of transportation, negotiating schedules with store managers, and addressing the awkwardness that can arise in a first-employment experience.

“At the beginning, a lot of them were very shy and not too interactive with the customers. They still had a little bit of cold feet,” says Cynthia Fernandez. She recalls how she helped interns move

beyond this feeling by referencing their classroom activities and reminding them that “people coming into the stores are there because they want to be there, [and the interns’] job was to help them find what [they want] . . . and everything will go smoothly.”

Gap Inc. prepares intern managers for their role through in-person training and written guidance. Intern managers then supervise interns on the job and provide weekly meetings to discuss what is going well and areas for improvement. These meetings are also a place to introduce strategies to learn and improve on the job, and provide insights into career success in the organization. The regular feedback prepares interns to be successful candidates for permanent employment at Gap Inc. As part of this day-to-day role, intern managers are the ones who decide whether or not to hire interns after the program.

Big Sibs, chosen for their maturity and experience as entry-level staff associates, help interns navigate culture, communication, and job responsibilities in a low-stakes confidential and supportive relationship. These staff members—who are more-seasoned store associates and usually closer in age to the interns—are there to answer the questions that can come up for any new employee, like where to take lunch breaks, how to negotiate scheduling with a manager, and how to get information about new products to share with customers.

“Ideally, the Big Sib is a graduate of the program, so they can say, ‘I’ve been there. I know. Here’s what you need to do.’” Big

Sibs provide interns with a second point of contact in the store to so that they are more likely to have a support person working their shift. This is particularly valuable if the intern’s schedule does not overlap with their manager’s. Gershon also highlighted the many informal activities of Big Sibs and interns, such as text messaging and meeting for coffee, that help both the intern feel more connected and increases the Big Sib’s sense of value to the intern’s and organization’s success.

## Community Partnerships

Gap Inc. does not try to run This Way Ahead on its own. The company seeks nonprofits that have a proven track record in youth development and employment training, and who are committed to continual improvement. The aim of the program is to reach youth who face barriers to employment. The nonprofits enable Gap Inc. to find new sources of talent, and they have the expertise to guide these individuals to success through career orientation, job training, and supportive-service delivery. The nonprofits are the program implementation leads for all stages prior to the store internship, and they remain engaged with interns through the completion of the program. This allows the nonprofits to perform to their strengths, while Gap Inc. can focus on its in-store needs.

Gap Inc. does not delegate program operations to these nonprofits, but rather serves as a true partner to enable success. The company works closely with the nonprofits to set clear goals

and expectations for recruiting, placing students into internships, and using data to improve results the following year.

Over time, they have jointly developed a strategic recruiting practice that ensures that those recruited will be a good match for a customer service-heavy retail position. Finally, Gap Inc. supports This Way Ahead by providing the funding to the nonprofits for the training and job coaches. The company also funds the compensation to the interns during their 10-week internships.

## Evaluation for Continuous Living

This Way Ahead continues to evolve and improve, thanks in part to a commitment to data and evaluation. Evaluations of This Way Ahead are conducted by a third-party evaluation firm for continuous learning, sustainability, and scalability. Information is collected from all stakeholders and participants about progress, skills, and confidence gained

throughout the internship. Data on placement into jobs, retention, and promotion from entry-level jobs is then collected by Gap Inc. to measure impacts of This Way Ahead over time.

These evaluations are not just used to measure program impact, but also to change it. Gail Gershon explains: “We are always trying to diagnose and learn from our experience to improve each year. We look for nonprofits that work the same way.” Gershon continues, “In one city, we found there was a higher number of youth that didn’t finish internships than were expected, so we worked with the nonprofit to identify what caused this and how to improve.”

Finally, the data and evaluation have been part of a feedback loop to strengthen This Way Ahead within Gap Inc. Demonstrating effectiveness in recruitment and retention has been a key for securing and maintaining leadership support and commitment to sustain and expand the program.

## MOVING FORWARD WITH WORK-BASED LEARNING

By 2020, Gap Inc. expects that 10,000 young people will participate in the program, putting them on a path toward hiring 5 percent of entry-level store employees from This Way Ahead by 2025. Rather than waiting for talented people to walk through the door, Gap Inc. will use This Way Ahead to recruit youth and invest in them.



The business impact of This Way Ahead is proven and will drive continued growth. As Gershon reflects on the program success, she notes that, “when a program is only philanthropic, it doesn’t stand the test of time and often can’t get to scale. If we can demonstrate that a program is good for the community [and] is also good for business, it will benefit more people, and will be more likely to last.”

While it began as a corporate social responsibility strategy and has become an integral part of the company culture, This Way Ahead’s success is largely due to the combination of work and learning, contextualized and reinforced by managers and guidance on the job. Macri notes that, for her, “the best part of the program is when you get to work with youth who really understand the value of the internship and the career opportunities it creates. They put in the work and they end up just soaring. It’s so wonderful to see.”

## FINAL THOUGHTS

We asked our contacts at Gap Inc. for three pieces of advice that they would share with an employer considering starting a work-based learning program for young people. These were their thoughts:

### > **Secure leadership commitment.**

With commitment from senior leadership, the organization understands that the program is central to the strategic mission. This commitment includes providing resources for the initiative, training for employee

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participants, and recognizing employee participation as professional development that can lead to promotions.

### > **Develop strong partnerships with experienced nonprofits.**

Find partners with nonprofits who have a proven track record of workforce development. The employer doesn’t need to be the experts at supporting those targeted for the work-based learning.

### > **Institute metrics for continuous improvement.**

Putting metrics in place at the start to measure established goals provides the analytics needed to improve the program and make the case to leadership that goals are being met and that the program should be continued.