



SUM STORYTELLING SERIES: CINCINNATI

Nehemiah Manufacturing

Michael Taylor had little hope left at 28 years old. After getting out of prison he applied for nearly 70 jobs, all minimum wage, but struggled to secure anything because of his criminal record. “I was pretty much close to returning to my old lifestyle,” he said.

Idle days of unemployment and short-term, low-paying jobs sapped Taylor’s self-esteem. But when a family member introduced him to a recruiter at Nehemiah Manufacturers, a chemical contract manufacturer in nearby Cincinnati, Ohio, Taylor lunged at the opportunity.

He started off doing any task that came his way—from basic packaging on the production line to cleaning bathrooms. A couple months after he started, Taylor’s supervisor promoted him to a material handler, citing his work ethic. After proving that he could fix a busted machine, Taylor was promoted again to a maintenance position. Now, six years later, Taylor is an operations

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manager at Nehemiah making \$85,000 a year.

Nearly 60 percent of the company's 140 employees are former drug and alcohol addicts, or ex-inmates. This "second chance" hiring model is creating job pathways for hard-to-employ individuals while also filling Nehemiah's workforce needs.

The model is so successful that Nehemiah is now working with about 50 companies across the Cincinnati area to provide them with talent.

"When someone is on their last chance, they're willing to give you that 100% that I don't think many others are willing to give you," says Taylor. He sees that same drive in his colleagues. "Nobody working at Nehemiah wants a free check—everybody here wants to prove themselves."

During surveys for the Urban Manufacturing Alliance's *State of Urban Manufacturing* research, manufacturing firms said they mostly hire people referred by current employees and through services like online job boards. At the same time, these manufacturers reported a struggle to find new hires.

In Cincinnati, for example, 57 percent of

companies with 10 to 100 employees, and 44 percent of companies with less than 10 employees, said that finding qualified employees was a top barrier to growth.

That's why some manufacturers across the country turn to a labor pool that other employers might shun: people with criminal records. By doing so, they're preparing the next workforce while bringing good-paying jobs to individuals who struggle to build wealth. According to a survey by the criminal justice reform group Who Pays?, sixty-seven percent of inmates were [unemployed or underemployed](#) five years after they'd been let out of prison.

[Nehemiah Manufacturing](#) gives



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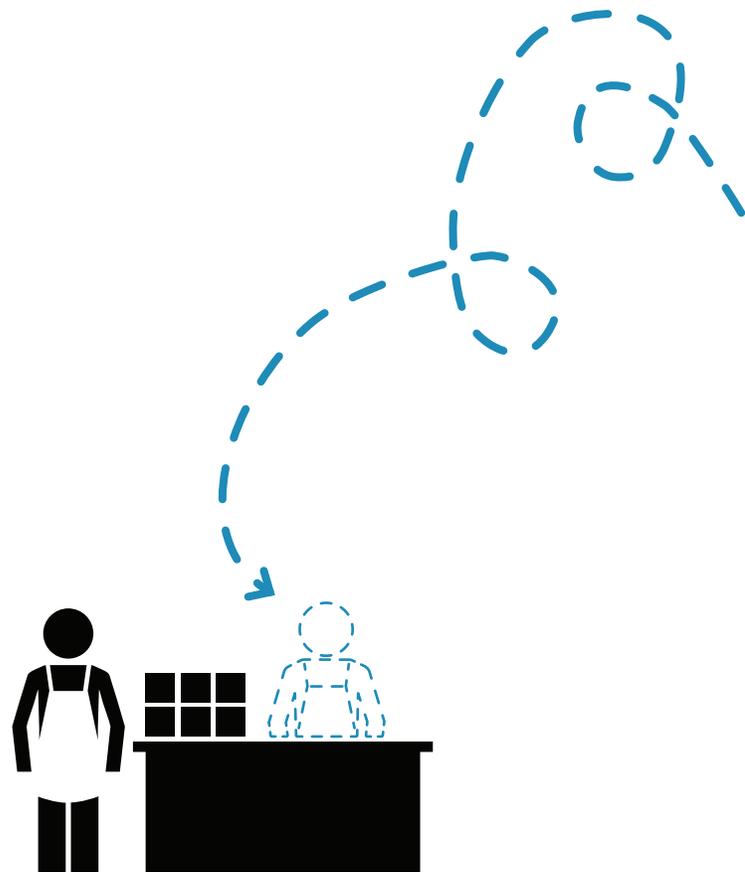
employees the technical and personal skills they need to advance in the workplace. The contract manufacturer offers its employees quality control training, OSHA training, good manufacturing practices (GMP) training, leadership training—even classes on wealth management and computers. These are skills they can take with them to other jobs, giving them greater economic mobility.

Communication skills and showing up on time (i.e. “soft skills”), combined with a good dose of grit, can get you further in the company than having a college degree or even a high school diploma, says Dan Meyer, CEO of Nehemiah. “Our most productive and most loyal employees were those who most needed, wanted, and deserved a second chance.”

The *State of Urban Manufacturing* series found that fabrication jobs still pay consistently higher than other low-skill, low-wage occupations like healthcare support, food service, and retail. Meyer says his employees receive full benefits and start off at \$12 or \$13 an hour—about \$2 more than [the wage needed to meet minimum living standards](#), also known as the “living wage,” in Cincinnati.

His company also employs social

workers to help employees plan a new life outside of jail—even if that means eventually looking for a new job. “It’s about getting them to the right place—getting them to where they want to go,” says Meyer.





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