

SMASHING THE CLASS CEILING



A Guide For Companies



SMASHING THE CLASS CEILING



A GUIDE FOR COMPANIES

How to Support People from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Insights from 19 senior IT Channel leaders sharing the lived experiences, challenges and practical recommendations that your organisation can act on today.

“Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not.”

www.thechannelcommunity.com

Foreword

Yvonne Matzk, Founder of Coachere and Founder & Chair of The Channel Community

The UK IT Channel has been quietly changing lives for decades. Not through grand gestures or corporate programmes, but through the simple act of giving people a chance.

The nineteen leaders featured in Smashing the Class Ceiling came from council estates, single-parent households, and circumstances that could easily have defined their ceilings. Instead, the channel gave them a floor to stand on and a ladder to climb. They went on to become Chief Revenue Officers, People Directors, CTOs, marketing leaders and co-founders. And every single one of them is clear about what made the difference: somebody opened a door.

This guide exists because of what those nineteen people said when we asked them a direct question: what should companies be doing differently to support people from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

Their answers were not theoretical. They were not policy recommendations from a diversity consultant. They were the hard-won wisdom of people who had lived the experience from both sides as the person who needed the door opened, and later as the person in a position to open it for others.

What emerged was a remarkably consistent blueprint. Remove unnecessary barriers, go into schools, build apprenticeships. Offer thoughtfully matched mentoring, create environments where people can be themselves, and hire for attitude and train for everything else. It sounds simple. But the fact that only nine per cent of people working in tech today come from low socioeconomic backgrounds tells us that simple is not the same as easy.

This guide is a starting point. It is not a tick-box exercise, nor is it asking you to lower your standards. It is asking you to raise your ambition, to think differently about where talent comes from and how your organisation can play its part in unlocking it.

The Channel Community exists because we believe the industry can do better. We believe the businesses, leaders, and professionals within the channel have both the power and the responsibility to create the kind of environment that gives every talented person, regardless of background, a genuine shot at success.

If you are reading this, you already care. That matters more than you might think.

Now let's do something with it.

Yvonne Matzk

Founder of Coachere | Founder & Chair, The Channel Community

About This Guide

Across all 19 interviews in Smashing the Class Ceiling, leaders were asked the same question: what support should companies offer to people from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

Their answers were remarkably consistent. They spoke from lived experience; they knew exactly what had held them back and what had helped them break through. They understood which barriers were systemic and which interventions actually work.

This guide consolidates their collective wisdom into actionable recommendations. If your organisation is serious about social mobility, diversity, and unlocking untapped talent, this is your roadmap.

"Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not. Companies must bridge that gap."

1. Rethink Recruitment and Remove Unnecessary Barriers

Stop Filtering Talent by Academic Qualifications

This was the most frequently mentioned recommendation across all nineteen interviews. Too many companies automatically exclude brilliant candidates because they lack degrees or specific certifications.

"Stop filtering talent purely by academics. That is one of the biggest barriers. Too many companies automatically exclude people without degrees. It closes the door on extraordinary potential." — **Mark Ash, Chief Revenue Officer, Konica Minolta**

"Remove unnecessary academic requirements that do not reflect the actual needs of the role. If organisations insist on qualifications for the sake of it, they block huge amounts of potential talent." — **Natalie Hailey, People Services Director, CAE**

"Do not expect degrees for roles that do not need them. The cost of university now makes it impossible for many people. You will lose brilliant talent if your only filter is qualifications." — **Paul Shannon, Channel Leader**

What to Do

- Audit every job description and remove degree requirements unless absolutely essential
- Focus on skills, attitude, and potential rather than credentials
- Hire for attitude and train for aptitude, especially in junior roles
- Look for passion, curiosity, and work ethic over polished CVs

Broaden Your Recruitment Pools

"Broaden recruitment pools. Look beyond the same universities. Recruit for attitude and train for skills." — **Jes Chandi, Senior L&D Consultant, Computacenter**

"Things have changed in the last ten years. Companies are valuing attitude: growth mindset, positivity, work ethic, commercial astuteness, communication. Apprenticeship schemes create great opportunities." — **Richard Ford, Channel Leader**

What to Do

- Recruit from state schools and colleges, not just elite universities
- Partner with organisations in underrepresented communities
- Advertise roles in places that reach diverse audiences
- Look for underdogs who may not interview perfectly but show spark and potential

"Some of the best people are the underdogs. They may not interview perfectly, but you can see the spark."

2. Create Early Pathways and Visibility

Go Into Schools and Show Young People What Is Possible

Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds often do not know the IT channel exists, or that it offers diverse career opportunities well beyond coding.

"Start early. Go into schools, especially in disadvantaged areas, and show young people what the IT industry really looks like. Not everyone wants to be a coder. Show the broadness of the industry." — **Chris Gabriel, Head of Marketing & Innovation, NTT DATA**

"Show up. Go into schools, colleges, youth groups, local communities. Share real stories. Give people a view of what is possible. People cannot aspire to what they cannot see." — **Richard Eglon, CMO, Nebula Global Services**

"Schools in underrepresented areas need exposure to career possibilities. If you have never seen it, how do you know it is even an option?" — **Jody Wharton, Microsoft**

What to Do

- Send employees to career fairs in state schools and disadvantaged areas
- Share real stories from people with diverse backgrounds — not polished press releases
- Explain the wide range of roles available: sales, marketing, HR, finance, operations and more
- Make your organisation visible and accessible to young people who would never otherwise encounter it

Offer Structured Work Experience Programmes

"Work experience programmes give young people real insight into business. At ONI we welcomed students every year. We showed them every part of the business. We hired several into full-time roles." — **Mark Collins, CEO & CTO**

"Create open work experience opportunities. Not just for children of employees but for the wider community. At CAE our programme invites students from local schools based on their aspirations rather than their achievements." — **Natalie Hailey, People Services Director, CAE**

What to Do

- Build structured work experience programmes and open them to local schools
- Involve the entire team in showing students what different roles look like
- Select participants based on aspiration and potential, not just academic achievement
- Ensure work experience is paid wherever possible — unpaid placements widen inequality

3. Build Apprenticeships and Alternative Entry Routes

"Apprenticeships are vital. Not everyone wants to do A-levels or go to university. Apprenticeships offer structured learning from the ground up and create extraordinary talent." — **Mark Collins, CEO & CTO**

"Companies should offer apprenticeships and scholarships. Be intentional about reaching young people who would never hear about the sector otherwise." — **Aggrey Lutta, Co-Founder & Business Coach**

What to Do

- Create apprenticeship programmes that provide structured training and real qualifications
- Build clear career pathways for people who did not take the university route
- Sponsor scholarships for people who want to gain qualifications but cannot afford them
- Partner with government-funded schemes and specialist training providers

"Apprenticeships create extraordinary talent. Invest in them."

4. Provide Mentoring, Coaching, and Networks

People from low socioeconomic backgrounds often lack access to mentors, sponsors, and professional networks that others take for granted. Companies can fill this gap — and the return on that investment is significant.

"Mentoring is crucial. But not just any mentoring. Match people with mentors who understand something of their background. It makes an enormous difference." — **Kevin Donaghy, Channel Consultant**

"Companies should offer mentoring, coaching, and access to people who can accelerate development. Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not." — **Mark Ash, Chief Revenue Officer, Konica Minolta**

"Awareness is the starting point. Companies can genuinely change lives by investing in confidence building, mentoring, practical skills, and clear networks of support." — **Elisha Kirkham, Recruitment Manager, Softcat**

What to Do

- Build formal mentoring and sponsorship programmes with clear structure and goals
- Match mentors thoughtfully based on shared experience or common ground, not just seniority
- Create employee networks where people from similar backgrounds can connect and support each other
- Offer coaching on soft skills, business etiquette, and navigating corporate culture
- Help people build confidence and the general knowledge that aids presence in professional environments

5. Create Environments Where People Can Belong

"Build an environment where people can be themselves respectfully. Belonging is not about bringing every single part of yourself to work without filter. It is about being authentic within the boundaries of what is appropriate." — **Natalie Hailey, People Services Director, CAE**

"At Microsoft, we really encourage people to be their authentic selves. We built the Social Mobility Network to create a supportive space where people with lived experiences and passionate allies can connect." — **Steven Mullaghan, Microsoft**

"Create environments where everyone feels they can belong. Open your doors. Let people in based on capability and potential, not background or biology." — **Dr. Colin Williams, Technology Leader**

What to Do

- Build employee resource groups focused on social mobility, not just traditional diversity categories
- Create safe spaces where people can ask basic questions without fear of judgement
- Actively champion authenticity and discourage pressure to code-switch or conform
- Ensure leadership visibly supports and participates in inclusion efforts

6. Be Aware, Sensitive, and Kind During Recruitment

"Show more awareness, kindness, and sensitivity during interviews. Some candidates will have never been inside a corporate office. The unspoken rules can throw them off. A small mistake might come from lack of exposure, not lack of capability." — **Hayley Knott, Senior Marketing Manager, Natilik**

"If you are a manager trying to encourage people who maybe have not got that background to do better, nurture them. Treat them like the new kid on the block. Treat them with respect." — **Lindsay Betts, Cybersecurity Leader**

What to Do

- Train interviewers to recognise and account for differences in exposure and experience
- Look past accents, unfamiliarity, and missing etiquette to assess potential
- Help create a positive, inclusive first experience for all candidates
- Provide clear guidance on what to expect in interviews and how to prepare

"Look past the accents and the unfamiliarity. Look at the potential."

7. Partner With Organisations That Already Do This Work

"Work with organisations that already specialise in this. The Social Mobility Foundation, the Talent Foundry, and many others have frameworks, training, and outreach programmes. Do not start from scratch when experts already exist." — Toni Kent, Keynote Speaker & former Microsoft

What to Do

- Partner with the Social Mobility Foundation, Talent Foundry, Generation Success, and similar organisations
- Join The Channel Community and support its mentoring and outreach programmes
- Leverage existing expertise and frameworks rather than reinventing the wheel
- Sponsor programmes financially or through employee volunteering time

8. Teach Financial Literacy and Practical Skills

"Teach financial literacy. It is not taught in schools, and it is absolutely essential. Understanding money helps break the cycle." — Jes Chandi, Senior OD Consultant, Computacenter

"Soft skills training. Mentoring. Sponsorship. Helping people understand jargon. Even helping people build general knowledge. All those things help people feel confident in unfamiliar professional environments." — Leah Russell, Head of Alliances, OBT Live

What to Do

- Offer financial literacy training to help people understand money, pensions, benefits, and savings
- Provide soft skills training on communication, networking, and professional etiquette
- Help people decode corporate jargon and unwritten workplace rules
- Offer practical guidance on navigating transport, business dinners, and office culture

A Call to Action

The leaders in this guide have given you a blueprint. They have shared what held them back and what helped them break through and they have told you exactly what companies need to do differently.

The question is: will you act on it?

Social mobility is not about charity, it is about recognising that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not. It is about understanding that your organisation will be stronger, more innovative, and more successful when you unlock the potential of people from all backgrounds.

The IT channel has been a force for good for social mobility over many decades. But only nine per cent of people working in tech today come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. That number should alarm you. And it should motivate you.

You have the power to change that. Start with one action, then another and then another. Go into schools., remove degree requirements, build apprenticeships, offer mentoring and create belonging.

The talent is out there. Waiting. Ready. Willing. All you need to do is open the door.

“Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not. You have the power to change that.”

About The Channel Community

The Channel Community is a supportive network created for anyone working in or aspiring to work in the UK IT channel. Founded by Yvonne Matzk, the community exists to provide connection, support, mentorship, and opportunity to people at every stage of their career journey.

We believe that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not. The Channel Community was built to change that.

"Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not. We exist to change that."

Our Mission

The Channel Community is committed to breaking down barriers and creating pathways into the IT channel for people from all backgrounds, with a particular focus on supporting those from low socioeconomic backgrounds who face systemic disadvantages in accessing opportunities.

We achieve this through mentorship, networking events, career guidance, and by amplifying the voices and stories of people who have succeeded despite starting with fewer resources. Smashing the Class Ceiling is part of that mission.

What We Offer

Mentorship and Channel Buddies

Our Channel Buddy programme connects people entering or navigating the channel with experienced professionals who provide guidance, advice, and support. Many of the contributors to the book, including Kevin Donaghy, Leah Russell, and Aggrey Lutta, volunteer their time as Channel Buddies because they understand the power of having someone who believes in you.

Networking and Events

We host regular events that bring together people from across the channel. These events provide opportunities to meet potential mentors, employers, collaborators, and friends. Networking is one of the most powerful tools for career development, and we make it accessible to everyone.

Career Support and Resources

Whether you are deciding on your first career move, considering a change, or looking to progress, The Channel Community offers guidance, resources, and a safe space to ask questions without judgement.

A Platform for Voices

Through initiatives like the Smashing the Class Ceiling podcast and the book, we amplify the stories of people who have built successful careers despite starting with fewer advantages. These stories inspire, educate, and prove that where you start does not dictate where you finish.

"Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not. We exist to change that."

Who We Are For

The Channel Community is for everyone. Whether you are a student exploring career options, someone looking to break into tech, a professional seeking to progress, or an experienced leader who wants to give back, you are welcome here.

We particularly support:

- People from low socioeconomic backgrounds who lack access to networks and resources
- Career changers who want to explore the IT channel but do not know where to start
- Young people considering their options and looking for role models
- Anyone who has ever felt that they do not belong, or that success is not for people like them

How to Get Involved

Join the Community

Attend events, connect with members, and access resources to support your career journey.

Become a Channel Buddy

If you have experience in the channel and want to support others, volunteer as a mentor. Your guidance can change someone's life.

Partner With Us

If you represent an organisation that shares our values, consider partnering with The Channel Community to support social mobility in tech.

The Channel Community is more than a network. It is a movement.

"We believe in you. And we are here to help."

Find Us

Website: www.thechannelcommunity.com

LinkedIn: The Channel Community

Podcast: Smashing the Class Ceiling

Book: Smashing the Class Ceiling — available on Amazon