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[Microsoft Advertising \(MSA\) volunteers working with the non-profit COOP group](#)

Wednesday, April 25, 2018



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Teaching search while building social capital

We've heard it before: It's not what you know but who you know. That is especially true in today's competitive world where a degree alone is not enough. New grads also need a strong professional network to help them get where they want to go. But what if networks are only admitting people who look like their members? What if—unwittingly or not—they exclude multi-ethnic groups in a cycle that becomes self-perpetuating?

[COOP](#) is a nonprofit working in New York and San Francisco to close that social gap. Nationwide, 51 percent of recent college graduates and 68 percent of black recent grads are unemployed or underemployed, it says. COOP works to reduce that by recruiting diverse, low-income college grads for its 16-week Digital Apprenticeship

Feedback

program that invests in their futures by teaching technical skills while building social ties that can jumpstart their careers in digital marketing and data analytics.

Agency Lead John Tolson is the Microsoft Senior Mentor for the Data Analytics program, working with COOP's motivated and underemployed college grads to teach them technical skills, such as Excel, Power BI, while helping them build social capital that can boost future job prospects. COOP students also learn storytelling as they work with senior mentors to produce student projects in the evenings while working their day jobs.

Learning hustle

Some of the students admit to a lack of confidence, and the apprenticeship is out to change that. "They should never shortchange themselves," John says. "Being in COOP and working their jobs, it's preparing them to work in this industry. *It gives them hustle.*"

John got involved in COOP after Rob Wilk invited him to come to a meeting. "It refueled my passion to make a difference." John insists we have to "make a conscious effort to recruit diversity. When we don't, we recruit from referrals of the people we already have."

Breaking into the tech industry without connections is hard. "But once you're in, it opens up so many things for people," John says. "The amount of money they make can be 20 to 40 percent more than their last job."

COOP open house

Along with his work in COOP's Digital Apprenticeship program, in April John was part of an MSA team hosting 96 COOP students in New York for a full-day open house that went on into the evening. Students heard from ACs, AEs, insights managers, managers, VPs, and others who spoke about their work, how they broke in to the industry, and challenges they faced. LinkedIn was there to show them how to "Rock your Profile." Then it was time break into groups for informal sit-down interviews with table captains.

Take COOP to Work @ MSFT

The students were unaware, but those informal interviews would lead to an invitation to Take COOP to Work @ MSFT for 15 of them. That event will happen on April 26 in the New York offices. We'll publish stories and photos from the day in a follow-up story.

"We can teach search, but we can't teach hustle and initiative. And these people have them in spades," John says, excitement evident in his voice.

COOP San Francisco

The MSA team in San Francisco held its second COOP event in April, a Microsoft career panel to discuss the journeys that lead them to Microsoft. Panelists Athena Chang, Jen Chiu, Braden Davis, Ben Mars, and Behzad Naghshinepour shared their challenges of finding a job after moving to the US, a day-in-the life view into their work at Microsoft, and the MSA culture.

After the event, COOP students said they loved the candor and "tell it like it is" style of the team. As with the New York event, students emailed their thanks and posted on LinkedIn. A sampling from the SF event.

- "You guys were such a fun and candid panel and it was truly inspiring hearing about your journey to get to where you are today—something to look forward to as a recent grad :)."

- "I got a sense of the exciting work culture you and your co-workers share. I respect how you took opportunities in different countries and cities."

What's next

The current crop of COOP students is set to wrap up their journey in May, and we'll post more on what they're up to and where they're headed next.

COOP is only in New York and San Francisco now, but there are similar organizations that need you. As Rob urged in the [recent Standup](#), find an organization near you and get involved.

Get involved with [COOP](#), [Thurgood Marshall](#), [Out in Tech](#), [NAMIC](#), [Human Rights Campaign](#).

Full story and pictures may be found at https://microsoft.sharepoint.com/teams/MSA/SitePages/2018_04_18_COOP_Tolson.aspx

by [Wendy Huston](#) at 2:40 PM in [People](#), [Internal](#), [Diversity & Inclusion](#), [Events](#)

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