

Collaboration and Iteration: Keys to Justworks' Social Impact Success

Justworks

From strong internal partnerships to leaving space for flexibility, Justworks' Mariana Palacios shares her top advice for effective, sustainable social impact programming.

Company: Justworks
Industry: Technology

Pledge 1% Member Since: 2021
Pledge 1% Builder Since: 2021

[Justworks](#) is a technology company that levels the playing field for all small businesses. Through its software and as a partner, Justworks helps entrepreneurs take care of their teams, streamline their operations, and navigate the complex aspects of managing a workforce with confidence. Their social impact arm, Justworks.org, extends this vision by breaking down barriers to entrepreneurship, especially for historically underrecognized founders.

To formalize their commitment to social impact and sustainability, in 2021 Justworks joined Pledge 1% as a Builder, becoming part of the collaborative network of more than 50 companies leading the Pledge 1% corporate social impact movement as partners, advisors, and financial supporters.

As Justworks launched their impact program, Pledge 1% provided a way for them to connect with a network of mission-driven companies and be forward-thinking in their philanthropy efforts, says Justworks Social Impact & Sustainability Program Manager Mariana Palacios.

When reflecting on the past few years of Justworks' social impact programming, Palacios believes cross-functional collaboration and openness to iteration were two keys to their success.



Don't Work in a Vacuum

“Our most impactful programs and partnerships have been strengthened through collaboration with various functions and areas of the business, allowing us to develop initiatives with a strategic perspective,” Palacios says.

One example is how she worked closely with the marketing team on the development and launch of their grant programs, Justworks.org and the [Spring Forward Fund](#). This may not be an obvious partnership to some, but it's been a game changer for Palacios. Because impact is part of Justworks' DNA, it's part of every team's remit.

“When we say we're leveling the playing field for *all*, for instance, what do we mean by *all*?” Palacios explains. “The marketing team has been a key partner in ensuring our grant programs fit into the cohesive and strategic picture of Justworks.”



Photo credit: Sam Popp

For the third iteration of the Spring Forward Fund, which is a grant program available to all of Justworks' nonprofit customers, Palacios wanted to dive deeper into their mission. In collaboration with the marketing team, she determined a more specific theme for proposals (“breaking barriers for under-resourced or underserved communities”) that helped Justworks better understand potential impact and helped applicants better gauge what the company was looking for.

Employee Input

Justworks is intentional about having a diverse group of people help select their grantees. This is another way collaboration comes into play for Palacios.

With regard to their Justworks.org grants, they invited employees to review applications and vote for the five finalists. Essentially, their employees chose their inaugural cohort of grantees. The Spring Forward Fund was no different: Justworks invited employees who were active in a career-development program to help select the semi-finalists. These employees came from different levels of the company, different departments, and different backgrounds, and they all showed enthusiasm and interest in being more involved.

“We wanted to hear all of their voices,” Palacios says. “It was a more equitable way of making decisions. Just because I'm the social impact expert, or the one directly involved in the program, I shouldn't be choosing [our grantees] in a vacuum, or only with one team.”

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Expanding cross-functionally in this way allowed Palacios to gain additional perspectives, including vital viewpoints from people who were part of or connected to the communities the grants were seeking to help.



Iterate to Optimize

Justworks.org prioritizes iteration as a cornerstone of its strategy, according to Palacios. “When launching initiatives like our Justworks.org grant cycle, we deliberately focus on learning from each grantee to validate what would make the most impactful program. This iterative process allows us to continuously refine and enhance our impact over time.”

Her team asks questions of their grantees to ensure Justworks.org’s efforts are aligned with their genuine needs. For example, in the first year of their Justworks.org grant program, Palacios met with grantees monthly and, in addition to checking on programming and fund implementation, she asked what they needed, what were their biggest pain points.

“I wanted to know how Justworks could go beyond the dollars,” she says. “We’re in a position where we can support these organizations more, and be seen as a partner, not just a funder.”

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One thing she discovered was that connectedness was a big benefit for the grantees. Justworks had arranged a two-day convening with all the grantees, and from this convening’s feedback and Palacios’ monthly calls, it turned out that spending time together was one of the most valuable experiences for the grantees. So they adjusted to provide more frequent [online] touchpoints for grantees to interact.

To make sure the gatherings touched on topics that were useful for grantees, Justworks sent out surveys to ask participants what was top of mind.

Another “a-ha” moment was when they received feedback to bring grantees’ teams into the gatherings. Organizations loved the idea that, for instance, their development manager could be present in the conversations and ask questions directly, rather than gleaning information secondhand from the program manager. Opening the door in this way helped grantees collaborate better and progress faster.

“Flexibility is key,” Palacios says. “I think about it like we’re creating the structure of a house, but understanding that furniture is going to move around, or you may want to refurbish here and there, change out that old couch. Ours is a structured program, but a flexible one. This ensures that the way we’re engaging with our grantees is better every year.”

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Closing Advice

When asked what recommendations she would give to someone building their social impact practice, Palacios summed everything up:

“Start with clarity. Define your social impact mission clearly, understanding the change you aim to create and how it aligns with your organization's overall mission. Begin with small, tailored programs.

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While ambition is crucial, it's equally important to be realistic about the scaling process inherent in social impact initiatives. Focus on excellence in strategy, execution, and measurement [rather than the scale or size of an initiative]. By demonstrating impactful results through well-executed programs, you'll pave the way for future scaling opportunities, possibly even attracting additional resources along the way.

Remember, impactful change often starts with deliberate, well-executed actions.”

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The Magic in Meeting

Since Justworks started arranging more frequent meetings for their grantees, Palacios has been inspired by what often transpires—particularly the peer mentoring. Justworks provides a close-knit space built on trust (with only three to five grantees per cycle), so participants are generally comfortable having honest conversations about their challenges and successes.

“It’s all about building trust and creating an environment where we feel we’re here to solve the problems that we all face together,” Palacios says. “And so we can share our secret sauces in some way, understanding that it’s a collaborative effort.” (Palacios says it reminds her of the Pledge 1% community in that regard.)

Impact measurement is one example. Some grantees are advanced in this realm, while others have been rethinking their processes. Rather than staying too high-level and conceptual in discussions, grantees are comfortable digging into the real day-to-day tactics to help each other.

“It was a learning moment for me, how awesome it would be to lean into the power of each of the grantees,” Palacios says. “They can share, so others can learn more. That’s where I think the value is for a lot of them.”

