

# COLLABOR8 CONVERSATIONS

## Transcript -

Sue Mason, Co-Founder and Executive Dir. of What's Next  
Washington and Founder of Susan Mason Consulting

*Formerly Incarcerated Talent and Fair Chance Hiring*

**Dani Carbary:** Hello, and welcome everyone to Collabor8 Conversations. Collabor8 Conversations is an event series for Collabor8 Employer Collective. For our members and for our community: we are so happy to collaborate with you all. Some of you might be new to Collabor8. We are a DEI community of employers representing different industries, different sizes, and company types who come together to learn and share best practices in order to create a sense of belonging and true inclusion in the workplace. We like to look at the entire employee experience and view all eight stages of that experience as opportunities to infuse DEI into your practices. So before we start today, we would like to thank our partners who generously support our work. We'd like to specifically recognize Artemis Connection, Urban Renaissance Group and KCLS (King County Library System) and to say

thank you to them and the many organizations who invest in making their workplaces better for all of their employees. If you have questions about Collabor8 or would like to learn more about how to join, reach out to Tara or I.... and on that note, here's Tara!

**Tara Buchan:** Hello. Thank you so much for joining us today. As Dani mentioned, our passion lies firmly in making the workplace work for everyone with the ultimate goal of inclusion and a true sense of belonging. Last year our acquaintance and all around talent and human Jordan Babineaux, kindly shared with Dani and I some of the workplace inclusion work that he had done with an organization named What's Next Washington. I'd like to share three items from What's Next Washington's mission statement, because once Dani and I read them, we knew we wanted to learn more. (1) Every person has a right to a life of dignity and the right to full participation in society. (2) Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution. (3) Collaboration with stakeholders leads to innovation. What's Next Washington is a nonprofit centered on inclusion for formerly incarcerated individuals. We are lucky enough today to have their co-founder and executive director, Sue Mason. Sue, thank you so much for being here today. And before we learn more about what you do specifically, we'd love to learn and hear what you're willing to share about the origin story of your organization.

**Susan Mason:** First of all, let me say thank you so much for inviting me. I appreciate it. Jordan is a good one. He's just a good one. And so when he made the introduction, I was like absolutely! So thanks for having me on and a little bit about the origin story. I founded What's Next Washington with Roz Solomon, who is my board president, and Roz is a former corporate attorney and an administrative law judge. She heard employment law cases, so she's on that side of the law. And I'm

formerly incarcerated. I was released from federal prison in 2003 and that's been 20 years. (Little celebration, 20 years)! But that's not unusual to have been 20 years out of prison. What's also not unusual is to have had the barriers that I faced. So I was hammered by that conviction. And to this day, I can still be denied opportunities. There are whole sectors that I can't work in: energy, finance, health care. I can't get life insurance. So there's just a lot of barriers that happen along the way. Post-release, I just kept getting denied housing and employment and opportunities. That and education, different colleges and universities, things that I wanted to pursue, but couldn't pass the background check even years and years later. So 12 years post-release, I was looking for work and I had two job rescisions. I had actually been offered the job. So basically, I was otherwise qualified and it was contingent on a background check and they pulled the background check and for the one opportunity the rescision was because I wasn't going to be able to get the occupational licenses that I would need for that job. It was in a regulated sector and then for the second one after they rescinded it, we both cried- me and the HR lady. We were very sad that she had to rescind that offer and for the second role that I was offered, it was simply because this woman could not get over the fact that I had been to prison, right? And so she just said to me, "I just can't take the chance." I had been out for 12 years. 12 years. Do you want 13? 14? Because here I am sitting at 20. And so that happened in 2015 and I was like, "I'm out. Time out! What is going on? When does my sentence end?" I like to say that I wasn't sentenced to a lifetime of unemployment, yet here I was No. after No. after No after No. And I thought, what's it like for other people? I need to figure out this. Is this happening to me or is it happening to everybody? I'm a white woman

with a skill set and an ability to advocate for myself. So what's it like for people without those privileges? And so I found out, through some research, that this is happening to millions of people. So, in 2015, when I started this journey, there were 70 million people in this nation who had an arrest or conviction record. Fast forward eight years, and it's 79 million people that have an arrest or conviction record, and so I started to get involved in this issue. And by 2017, I did a lot of advocacy work and political organizing around it and I thought my niche is employment. My niche is workforce organization. I had met Roz Solomon, and we were kind of like the gruesome twosome and we're like, let's just start our own thing. So we did, and we've been working on workforce. So, where I believe that there's lots of great organizations out there that train people without skills and help people without skills develop them so that they can become employable, but there are millions of people with conviction histories that are career ready and career capable that are turned down routinely. And so, what we did was we set out to help private sector partners learn how to operationalize their commitments to fair chance hiring.

**Dani Carbary:** Tara and I feel incredibly lucky that we get to talk to you today. When we learned about your organization and then when we got to meet you, we felt so drawn to how you approach this work. Tara, and I work in the very same way. When we got into our first kind of foray into equity work was in pay equity. And when we got into that work, a lot of people were teaching women how to speak up and how to ask for raises and how to kind of change who they were so that they could get paid equally. And while we think all of those training opportunities are amazing and leadership development programs are amazing we love to look at DEI work through the employment lens. What can an employer

do to put these amazing humans into the roles that they deserve, and to make them feel like they belong in their organization? So, we were incredibly drawn to the work that you're doing. You do many great things at What's Next Washington but for the purposes of this discussion, we'd love to highlight your program PIWP, which is Partnering for an Inclusive Workforce Project. Can you share more about that program?

**Susan Mason:** Roz and I knew a couple of things : One is that there were directives from everybody at this time, when we started out in 2017; governors, and mayors and county executives, and the President and everybody was saying, “you need to hire this population.” The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had sent out some guidances. Everybody is saying, “hire this population” and yet there was a 27% unemployment rate for this population. Some people might not know that during Great Recession, the unemployment rate for people with conviction history, especially formerly incarcerated talent, was 60%, so after the Great Recession by 2015-2017, it was twenty seven percent and it stayed steady there. I would love to find out what it is post pandemic. I'd say it's probably a little higher. And so we've got people saying you need to hire and then we've got this massive unemployment rate in comparison to the national average which was under 4%, And so we wanted to find out from employers: Why aren't you hiring this population? So we brought them in and we did convenings with employers in multiple sectors. We did general convenings with multiple employers. We did a hospitality convening. We did two tech convenings. Yeah, so we brought them in and we had over 200 employers in these different convenings and we said, Why aren't you hiring? I knew- but I wanted them to tell me. And it was what

I suspected, and what my experience was and that experience was: I'm either constrained by regulatory and occupational barriers, like healthcare, energy, finance. Or I'm terrified. I need to maintain safety and productivity. What will my other employees think? What if they commit crimes on the job? And so we thought, they're not going to just do it out of the kindness of their hearts. Otherwise, they would do it, because most people are aware of the problem. And what I know is that when you're talking about recruiting, hiring and retention, you need tools. You need training and you need tools. And so we set out to develop and design the Partnering for an Inclusive Workforce Project, and that is a set of tools, strategies and a roadmap if they are so inclined for public and private sector employers they could implement to figure out where they're at. It's very DEI right? Where are you currently at, what's missing, what do you need? And how can we help support you with an actual set of tools that can get you to where you're going?

**Tara Buchan:** I appreciate hearing that. It's not just about the conversation, but how do you actually put that into action? I think that oftentimes, that's a huge hurdle for a lot of organizations. Once they get past the point of acknowledging, "we want to make this change." How do I do it? So, I think having those tools is essential. You've talked a lot about the stigma that formerly incarcerated individuals carry and the bias that absolutely extends into the workplace, because we know bias against formerly incarcerated talent is systemic; and we're sure that it's hard for a lot of organizations to overcome and individuals to overcome. How do you work with employers on overcoming that fear and bias?

**Susan Mason:** So really consulting is where it's at. I can tell you to hire all day long. I can give you all the stats about recidivism and how

employment is directly related to success. And the stat that 73 million of the 79 million people with a conviction history have no further criminal legal system involvement. It means that they've moved on with their lives, all of that's there. And yet I come in, I interview, you choose me, then you run a background check and you see what's on there. It's not pretty. It's old. But it's not pretty, And so people tend to lose their minds a little bit, and so they're like that one woman, "I just can't take the chance." It turns out she could have. It turns out, absolutely. She could have and should have.

But how do I get them from "My God you committed forgery?" to "I'm a viable candidate." And what we do is we teach them about markers of stability. We help them understand that, there's enough data out there to show that people are not committing crimes on the job, right? When people succeed or fail on the job it's for the same reasons and at the same rates as our peers, it's not because we're in there crime-ing it up, right, in your workplace, right? We might have the same barriers that anybody else does: daycare maybe? Maybe we got another job? Maybe we do have an unaddressed addiction problem. That's going on with your other employees too! And really, we're just like everybody else, and so, it really does have a lot to do with just that consulting piece. Getting in there, working with them, helping them, finding those markers of stability themselves, training their staff, so that they can be equipped to do this, right? And then using tools that we developed and that other organizations have developed, that can help them overcome the fear of seeing something. Like, listen, my forgery: I had a bit of a drug problem and I was high as a kite out of my mind writing a check that wasn't mine, in a grocery store that had closed 20 minutes ago. I'm not a mastermind people! I'm not a mastermind criminal in the

slightest. But that's scary, forgery. And so, how does an HR recruiter or talent acquisition specialist know how to say "Yes" to that. It's just easier to say "No." It's so much easier to say, no. But I can't change that forgery. There's no way for me to ladder out of it. I say this to people all the time. If I have a financial setback in my life, if I do all the right things and work really, really hard, I can get back on my feet financially, I can become credit worthy again, why can't I become employment worthy again? I mean, I've been turned down for housing. When I had a stellar 100% rental payment history, with the job to be able to support the rent. And I've still been turned down. When do I get to ladder out of this? I can't change the forgery. It's gonna be there in black and white forever. So, maybe it's you that needs to realize that one moment in time cannot possibly impact the next 20, 40, 60 years of my life. And listen, if we were all judged by the worst thing that we did. Nobody would be working.

Nobody.

**Dani Carbary:** So very true. You've brought up, you referenced the next question I wanted to touch on: how recruiters and talent acquisition individuals they're taught with recruiting and hiring individuals- We can't get into all of the amazing things you share in PIWP- but we'd love to learn a few ways that you speak with organizations specifically recruiters and talent acquisition specialists, to remove barriers to recruiting and hiring.

**Susan Mason:** So we've worked with organizations and use different strategies, it depends on the company, right? So, for instance we were working with an organization called Green Canopy NODE, They have offices in Portland and in Seattle and they are very committed to a DEI



strategy. And part of that DEI strategy was fair chance hiring, right? And so they had merged with an organization, Green Canopy and NODE were two different orgs and they merged together, and NODE had already been doing this type of hiring and had been semi-successful, but had had some bad experiences. And we're like, How do we overcome this? There were some folks that they hired that just simply weren't ready for employment. They were really unstable. They were released homeless. They didn't have any family support, they were really struggling, they didn't have a driver's license, it was a mess- and it wasn't on the person. How are they supposed to do all these things that we all take for granted? Showing up for work, having the money to put gas in your car, have a car, or even get on the bus. So they were struggling with this and they wanted to understand how. And so what we did was we assessed what their needs were. And so they made the decision to do this and we created a nice strategy for them, they told their other employees, they had 60 total employees and some of them were upset. Like, "You're gonna what?!" I have to work around who?!" And so we knew they needed a bias training. We had known this for ages before that we were going to need to develop a bias training because this happens when an organization says "We're going to start fair hiring." And people are like "What about my purse?" "What if I'm working next to a rapist?" I mean I hear this stuff all the time, and so we scoured the earth, actually we didn't scour the earth. I looked around a lot for a bias training that was just on formerly incarcerated talent and Fair Chance hiring but couldn't find one. So I wrote one, and we piloted it. I should say we Beta tested it with Green Canopy NODE and we were able to deliver this bias training to all of their employees. And so the attitude before and the attitude after exponentially were different once

we began to understand the data, once they got to meet some folks. We had a panel of people that had been to prison and either were recently, or a long time ago released, and just shared their experiences about what that was like and trying to access employment, how really all they wanted was a job, and trying to navigate those spaces with a conviction. And that was phenomenal. So bias training is one of the tools we use. We suggest for companies to engage with a contextualized background check company, there's one that we recommend. So, my personal favorite tool because I wrote it is called the Get FIT Guide Hiring Manual and it is a soup to nuts manual for recruiters and other folks to recruit, hire and retain formerly incarcerated talent, while maintaining safety and productivity. And that thing breaks it all down. The mysteries of probation and parole, insurance and negligent hiring. What to put in your recruiting announcements - what not to put. What to say in job categorizations and job descriptions. Do you actually need a background check for somebody who's been working at your company for six years to go into management, because that might keep your employee from, maybe they started out and didn't need the background check because they were lower level. You want them to move into management, they found out you're gonna pull a background check, you don't know that they have a background and they won't apply. So there's just this whole demystification manual. Even interview tips. I mean it's pretty comprehensive. So it depends on the employer, it depends on what their goals are and their needs are, but we have a lot of tools that can help them with this problem.

**Tara Buchan:** Sue it doesn't surprise me at all that one of the things that you touched on was the storytelling. I just think,...

**Susan Mason:** Yeah.

**Tara Buchan:** at least in our experience it's so much easier to understand and have empathy when you hear someone's story and you hear their background and, I think also just acknowledging that the fears that people might have about one individual, they can have it about any individual, all of those could be relatable and in every single type of person. So I think acknowledging that...

**Susan Mason:** Yeah.

**Tara Buchan:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

**Susan Mason:** Like general counsel in an organization, security, or risk management teams, right? I'm like everybody you hire is a crapshoot. Everybody. It's true because you're so excited about this person you hired you think they're gonna be your star performer and they come in and they just don't do well right? And that's a person without a conviction history. So I just say it all the time, I cannot give you a hundred percent on anybody that it's the right hire.

**Tara Buchan:** Exactly. And I know you touched on this a little bit, and it sounds like some of the tools that you provide are extensive and wonderful and we know that onboarding and then, beyond onboarding, our organization, Collabor8 really focuses on every single point of someone's experience at an organization. So all 8 stages, just all of it can all obviously be incredibly impactful as to whether or not that individual feels like that sense of belonging. Can you share a little bit about what you have either seen before or that you hope to see in an organization that is really good at onboarding and retaining formerly

incarcerated talent. And what it was about them that made them good at that?

**Susan Mason:** Here's some free advice for every company for every consultant. They really need to consider that including formerly incarcerated people in your anti-harassment policy is very important. That it is not okay to hire somebody with a background, and your HR and risk management team knows it, and that's fine, you've already done the background check - but say somebody that they're working with in their section Googles them and finds maybe they did something prolific. Maybe they made the news 15 years ago or whatever. And then proceeds to tell everybody. To my mind that's harassment. Right. And so being clear. So for instance, with Green Canopy NODE again, one of the things that we had them, we suggested and they took our suggestion was that in their employee handbook they made it very clear to all their employees that they are a fair chance employer and that it is not anybody else's business what anybody did before they got there. That all talent is vetted, and that everybody that works there is vetted, and that everybody deserves a safe place where they are free from harassment for anything. Whether they are a person of color, whether they are LGBTQ, whether they are formerly incarcerated, or any other barriers that may face, a health barrier or disability barrier; that harassment will not be tolerated. And so that's a little free advice for everybody. Adding that to your anti harassment section of your employee manual and then letting your employees know that there are sanctions for that, for crossing that boundary will really go a long way to helping formerly incarcerated talent feel safe. And they can just live their lives because listen, they might have to tell you the director, or risk management folks, but they don't have to tell the employees. So I'm a

victim of domestic violence, and it is nobody's business. So if somebody found that out and was sharing that about me, I'd be very upset. And so I'm out about being formerly incarcerated because I'm trying to solve these issues. But I wasn't before. I don't want to be formerly incarcerated for life and most people just want to go to work. They don't want to be the formerly incarcerated person at work, the person who went to prison or got convicted of something- nobody wants to be that person. So I just highly suggest that companies consider that and the potential lawsuits that could happen without having it.

**Dani Carbary:** Thank you for giving that advice because it's a tactical tool that people can put into place, because I really do believe that if there are folks listening or watching this conversation and they are really infusing DEI into their organizations, I think that when hiring folks that were formerly incarcerated you can put a DEI lens on that and you can absolutely see how to make them feel included and belong, and feelings of belonging, but there are some tactical and pieces of advice that Sue has shared that you do need to think about and that are a little bit different. So we appreciate you sharing that for sure. And I do know, I would guarantee that there are employers listening that are thinking about this differently now, because we're having this conversation. As Tara mentioned earlier, and as you stated in your first answer, telling stories can go a long way. And I know that there are employers that are hoping to look into this further. So my question to you to kind of close our conversation and then get everyone thinking about, really taking action is: if there is an employer thinking about this now, what are one or two things you'd want them to start thinking about or what would you want them to know?

**Susan Mason:** There's a few things, one is that What's Next Washington is being absorbed into a national nonprofit called Mission Launch, and that I'm walking away from What's Next Washington and opening up my own consulting business because of this very problem. And I'm here to help organizations address this niche part of DEI, right? So I'm happy to help them if they reach out to me. But I think that ultimately it's just important to consider this piece, given that we have over criminalized and over incarcerated black and native people in this country... and then the next in line would be anyone that's considered a brown person. Anybody that's considered lgbtq- and women. So women are the fastest growing population of incarcerated people, especially black women and native women over the last 20 years than any other group. And so these are all the people that we want as we seek diverse talent, and yet they may come with a conviction history and so if you don't have this piece down, if you don't have it embedded in your practices, your tools are there to screen out people with backgrounds. They are not there to screen people in. And so you are invariably going to screen out diverse talent. One in three black men will go to jail or prison in their life. So one in three black men that walked through your door that apply for a job, with your set of tools, Mr or Mrs. Employer, they're gonna be screened out. So addressing how to maintain safety and productivity, understanding the population, having a strategy, a roadmap and a set of tools to help you overcome this so that you're not screening out that talent that's out for 12 years and clearly was otherwise qualified and tired and then rescinded over fear, over regulatory and occupational licensing barriers, We have a solutions for that, too, by the way. We don't just believe in accepting No's anymore. So we believe that there are strategies and tools, we develop them...

and that's all I got. I hope I answered that. I felt like I fell down in the middle of that. I was like, did I lose track of the question?

**Dani Carbary:** No, you absolutely did not, and I asked for one or two and you gave me 10, so I really appreciate the value-add there. Thank you so much, Susan. We're really hopeful that those listening and learning about formerly incarcerated individuals and talent have been able to give more thought to overcoming bias and improving their inclusive practices. There is a high quality talent pool that can broaden their diversity equity and inclusivity goals for sure.

**Susan Mason:** Yep.

**Dani Carbary:** For our members, Thank you for your contribution to making the workplace better. Sue, thank you for your time and your knowledge-share, we really appreciate you. If you are watching and you're not yet a member of Collabor8, reach out to Tara or I. But one last "Thanks" to Sue. Thanks for being here.

**Susan Mason:** You're Awesome. Thanks guys.