



CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

How Purple Team's Novel Approach to Internship is Strengthening the Cybersecurity Talent Landscape in Jamaica and Globally

The pandemic exacerbated an already troubling reality globally: The cybersecurity challenges for employers have exponentially increased in the last two years, with some 82% of CIOs sharing in 2022 that their organisations are vulnerable to cyberattacks. In Latin America and the Caribbean, cyberattacks have continued to increase, uncovering deep regional vulnerabilities that form part of a broader global digital risk. A rising interest in cybersecurity, as both a protective mechanism for businesses, and as a growth area for upskilling and improved digital capabilities, is taking hold in the region.

Miguel Porrúa of Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and Belisario Contreras of the Organization of American States (OAS) write in the 2020 report, *Cybersecurity: Risk, Progress and the Way Forward in Latin America and the Caribbean*, that “[LAC] users searching for cybersecurity tended to search for training opportunities and courses in the field. In other words, more people in LAC are aware of cybersecurity and are seeking ways to improve their knowledge.”

The report further emphasises that global cybercrime damages are projected to be on par with the GDP of the world's third-largest economy, standing at around \$6 trillion. Cybersecurity is identified as one of the biggest risks in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. CompTIA's own research shows that, in 2020, 80% of individuals felt the state of cybersecurity was improving, yet one year later, just 69% felt the same. Pandemic-related uncertainty, supply chain issues and ransomware attacks on critical infrastructure are all contributing factors to the newfound pessimism.

This data highlights one important sentiment: There is a need for a globally cohesive approach to cybersecurity, with an increasing role to play for regional actors and multinational corporations in creating and delivering solutions.

Kingston-based multinational consulting firm Purple Team is one such organisation. They realised not only the scale of the problem, but also the size of the opportunity at hand to bring more young Jamaicans into the fold of global employment in cybersecurity. The sector was estimated to grow at a five-year compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.5%, and was predicted to hit \$170.4bn in 2022 alone.

Against this backdrop, training Jamaica's most driven and talented youth to become the region's foremost cybersecurity experts became the central mission of Purple Team; a company dedicated to solving complex IT challenges for its own clients.



Tackling Cultural Norms and the Education-to-Workforce Status Quo

Ultimately, Purple Team, through an innovative approach to recruiting, skilling and certifying IT talent, has become a regional success story. Successful graduates of its burgeoning internship program earn nine industry-recognised IT certifications and unlock the ability to work for global clients on high-profile professional cybersecurity and IT projects.

Delivering on the Purple Team mission was initially a matter of not just finding the right sources of talent, but also tackling cultural norms around cybersecurity head-on.

“Many people here think that if you have a firewall or an antivirus program, that you’re cyber protected,” shares Dwayne Battick, head of portfolio development and innovation at Purple Team. “That’s not the case at all.”

“We have to provide the best support for our partners, though, so we need to have the absolute best team of people. This is what makes us disruptors in the space,” he said. Another challenge the Purple Team faced was a deep-seated cultural norm that espouses that only people with college degrees are truly workforce-ready.

“[In Jamaica] you go to high school, and the way to make good for yourself is to go to university,” explained Caprece McCleary-Outar, talent development manager at Purple Team.

“I didn’t have a choice but to go to university. Parents here insist on it. Within our historical context it makes sense, because you’re taking a gamble with an internship...or at least it feels that way to parents,” she said.

However, founder Mario Sparkes and his team sensed that in cybersecurity, this norm may serve as a barrier to IT team preparedness. In their experience, university graduates weren’t necessarily coming to jobs with the skills needed to work in cybersecurity.

“One of the first challenges is that when you hire engineers who have completed university, you still have to train them. Lots of IT firms find that their college graduates are not prepared,” McCleary-Outar explained.

Purple Team, then, chose to work directly with local high schools and education providers to recruit students from an early age who show an interest and aptitude for cybersecurity.

“We spent so much time as a team to choose the right kids,” shared Battick. “Not just brains, but the personality has to be right, the drive has to be at the right level and there has to be a lot of emotional intelligence.”

Regardless of a person’s eventual path (which may or may not include getting a college degree) hands-on work experience is a pivotal part of becoming both employable and employed. Yet, it is hard to come by in classrooms. Internships, then, are worth their weight in gold.

“You’ll never see this anywhere else in the region. Our group’s talent plus the certifications they earn...it’s really different,” said Sparkes.



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- **Leonard Wadewitz**
Senior Director of Business Development, CompTIA

Where Rigorous Training Meets Mentorship and Industry-recognised Certifications

The Purple Team internship lasts a full year. The program begins with a series of trainings and certifications, each lasting six weeks. Interns also complete several weeks' worth of hands-on projects and work-based learning that happens in the Purple Team security operations centre (SOC). Incorporating CompTIA certifications into their cybersecurity training program felt like both a natural – and a vital – thing to do.

“Having CompTIA affiliated with our program is incredibly important,” explained Battick. “From an employer perspective, there is a demand for both experience and specific certifications. Our interns recognise that these certifications are required by employers and that makes them approach it in a more serious way.”

Purple Team has also adopted a “whatever it takes” approach to ensuring the success of its interns. The company set a goal of having a 100% program completion rate and provides deep mentorship alongside formal learning to make it happen.

Interns are expected to earn nine certifications to complete the program; an exceptionally challenging expectation that is rarely seen in any IT training program. CompTIA certifications comprise seven of those nine.

“For an IT professional to have one CompTIA certification is not uncommon, nor is it as ubiquitous as we would like. However, to find a group of IT professionals with as many as six CompTIA certifications is like stumbling on a herd of unicorns. It’s unheard of. Purple Team raised the bar on training and certifying IT tech talent,” said Leonard Wadewitz, CompTIA’s senior director of business development for Latin America.

“It’s exceptional that kids are passing them the first time,” shared Battick. “The program is very well thought through.”

Emerging Leaders and Results That Speak for Themselves

Thanks to their high-quality internship program, Purple Team can deliver verifiably top-notch cybersecurity support and consultation to its clients globally. Their solutions are used by Fortune 500 companies, and by several government agencies in North America.

“It’s incomparable,” shared Sparkes. “We have bright, curious people who want to work in IT and who truly want to solve problems.”

“What’s exciting to us? We have a student who is the lead on one of our key solutions,” McCleary-Outar said. “He was bored in the high school classroom but he’s now delivering presentations to clients and leading on these important projects. Leaders are emerging.”

“Our partners are starting to compete in terms of who wants to be the main partner of our company because of the value of our interns,” Battick said.

“In fact, a client was here asking if they could have one of my people, and I told them ‘No!’,” he laughs.

Looking to the future, the company aims to continue to build its reputation as a global cybersecurity hub of excellence, with CompTIA certifications at the core of its model.

“We are not just looking to have two or three cohorts and then it stops,” Sparkes said. “We want to build out a large and experienced team of cyber analysts and at the core of that is CompTIA certifications.”

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- **Mario Sparkes**
CEO, Purple Team

