

IFC – WEF Essay Competition

Get to work: Inclusive markets for labor

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This is the founding team of Qordoba, a year-old digital content creation company that is headquartered, well, everywhere. We write and translate just about anything into Arabic and English using our online platform and a distributed network of translators and editors. Our clients range from the world's largest multinationals to news agencies and software startups. This is a team that I lead, but the company is in fact comprised of more than five hundred leaders. These leaders are our content creators - young people across the Middle East who are taking charge of their lives and using our platform to create jobs for themselves.

When we first started Qordoba, these leaders, who grow by the dozens every week, were mere numbers to me. Our fancy algorithms ranked each translator, copywriter or editor based on a set of questions and a test of their abilities as well as on-going assessments of their work. Here was translator #54, with a quality rank of 83, with a high degree of specialty in the Legal domain. But it was not too long before we knew just about each of them by name, and it *shocked* me when I realized that more than 60% of our content creators were born between 1980 and 1990.

I was shocked, because our content creators are *responsible*. They are doing hundreds of hours of high quality work with a company they have never heard of (Qordoba!), run by people they had never met (me!), doing work for clients they didn't know. A translator could be working from an Internet cafe in Tripoli, Lebanon; their editor could be a stay-at-home mom and journalist in Cairo, Egypt; their client could be in Boston, USA. The technical support guru answering their questions was

in Aleppo, and the person wiring them their monthly earnings was in Damascus. Even in our early days when we did not have a physical address for Qordoba anywhere, our content creators - our leaders - answered emails at 2am.

Who are these people? I should have guessed their age bracket even before delving into our database.

These people are my generation. They possess the flexibility, collaborative mindset and resourcefulness that will be required to create the hundreds of millions of jobs my generation will need in the next decade. This generation's priorities will be employment, and their issues will be lack of government or formal support to create jobs for them. In the developing world, the lack of support is the result of weak institutions and educational systems.

That's why companies like Qordoba will be so important for solving the problem of youth unemployment. I like to think of ourselves as building a platform that allows young, ambitious, educated leader to earn a great living by plugging them into a *global* marketplace for talent. Your local economy is not providing opportunities for you? Let's bypass the official systems altogether and play some institutional arbitrage by really globalizing young talent. Let's connect you to global clients who need your skills *wherever* you may be.

The elements that have allowed Qordoba to globalize talent - and we are just at the beginning - are actually quite simple. Our most successful university-educated content creators possess three things:

1. Access to work space and at least a few hours of Internet a day
2. English language skills for navigating the Internet

3. Ability to communicate and collaborate with virtual teams

They don't need to have English language proficiency, or 24 hour access to high speed broadband, or an office. They have the basic skills and access to infrastructure that they need to succeed on Qordoba's platform. What we need to globalize talent is the ability to create efficient, transparent markets of talent seekers and job seekers, and for us, creating this market has boiled down to the three essential elements above.

The solution for youth unemployment is not all-encompassing, and it is not a single solution. There are *solutions* for youth unemployment. The solution I would propose is around creating the conditions in the developing world for increasing *web-based and freelance self-employment*. Helping young people create their own jobs is not just about venture capital and incubators - it is more basic than that. We need to teach young people how they can use Internet access, basic English language skills, and the ability to be responsible, collaborative and creative members of teams to create their own employment opportunities. They need to learn to offer their skill set, whatever it may be, to the highest or most interesting bidder internationally.

Here are some very practical suggestions for how we can make the globalization of talent a reality:

1. Access to work space and Internet connectivity

Shared workspaces for creative / knowledge / freelance workers are relatively new in the United States. They are relatively unheard of outside of the US. Imagine shared workspaces in every world capitol for youth who are motivated to find their own work. They have a desk to go to every day and "colleagues" around them who also turn on their laptops and are transported to an online workplace.

Entry is via an application process for those who are already working remotely and need a productive, professional environment in which to build their careers. This is *not* an unemployment center. This is an office!

Funding for these offices does not need to be pro-bono. An organization like the IFC could partner with private companies who manage serviced offices or shared workspaces in developed markets like San Francisco and regional telecommunications providers to adapt the concept to cities in the developing world. The business model could involve a small monthly desk fee after the first 3 months, as well as telecom services, food and beverages, and computer equipment.

2. Some English language skills for navigating the Internet

Being fluent in English, the global language of business, is a huge advantage to a young person seeking a job, online or elsewhere. But as the unemployment rates in North America and Europe attest, it is by no means a guarantee of a job. For those young people who grow up with no English language skills whatsoever, the sad reality is that they are at a severe disadvantage when it comes to finding a job outside of their domestic labor market, because the Internet is, sadly, largely in English.

A realization, however, has sunk in over the past few months. Facebook is the new Sesame Street. What do I mean? When we moved from Lebanon to Canada in the early 1990s, I learned English from Sesame Street. I was 6 years old. The funny thing is, my Lebanese relatives in their 30s and 40s who emigrated to Canada were doing the same thing! Simple English, repeated frequently, in a very socially aware context. Nope, not Sesame Street - Facebook! Now, I frequently see people online whom I interact with for Qordoba or in a personal context switching from Arabic or Turkish or Urdu Facebook to English - and increasingly, their online activity is done in English as well.

Translating that to work means teaching English as a Second Language in a much more Internet and technology-centric way. We need ESL education that is focus on technology terms, the lexicon of the Internet, and the language of new technologies. Once someone learns the basics, Google Translate can go a long way to getting someone through more difficult texts. For communicating with team members, we at Qordoba and others are developing instant chat translation technology. It will very soon be widespread and extremely cheap to speak with anyone, anywhere in your own language. But to get there - to be able to navigate your way through that open door - you need the basics in English.

So what can we do? An international organization that cares about open education resources, like OER Commons, can develop a 6 month “ESL for the Net” module that is supplemented by screencasts (how-to videos taking a user through steps on a website, for example) and online vocabulary and live chat exercises. The open source nature of this curriculum means that it can be curated by students of English themselves, as they add and modify the most helpful content. It is then up to the open source community to translate the curriculum into various languages.

Partners in the development of this training should be private companies - multinationals, business process outsourcers, startups like ourselves -- who have a vested interest in increasing the pool of educated people from which we can recruit new employees. This should be a non-profit endeavour, and access to this language training should be costless.

3. Ability to communicate and collaborate with virtual teams

This is the least tangible of the skills that need to be developed but, as is usually the case, the

most important. At Qordoba, a team of 5 working on a website for a client could very well be in five different countries. Their ability to collaborate in real-time is essential to the quality of the final product. The impact of culture and education on the collaborative mindset is immense, but the practical solution I can envision here involves providers of the technology that our teams use to frequently collaborate: Google Chat, Skype, Assembla, Asana, vTiger....it is a veritable alphabet soup of programs and tools that we use to stay on the same page and deliver seamless service to our clients. (Most of these tools are based on online, and it is a feature of the new type of businesses that we represent that desktop software is a concept of the past. This is fantastic news for remote or freelance employees, because it means they can take their work wherever they go and their employer will not have security concerns regarding what is stored on their computers.)

An online portal that describes these various tools, centralizes their how-to guides and tutorials, and maintains a crowd-sourced best practices guide would be a fantastic resource. Once all the resources are in one place, using the crowd to translate the content is a much easier endeavour.

The tools is just one part of having a collaborative mindset – the others involving social culture and education are of course harder to solve, and it is our responsibility as companies benefiting from this labor pool to develop *corporate* cultures which underline the value of collaboration for success.

1.2 billion young people enter the labor market over the coming decade, and only 300 million jobs await them. Well, only 300 million jobs await them *if* we don't help them figure out how to create their own jobs. Not everyone who will need a job has the skills and the capital required to found a startup. However, many will have the skills they need to *contribute* to a startup somewhere in the world – we just need to figure out a better way to match supply and demand. The simple solution I would propose is around creating the conditions in the developing world for increasing *web-based and freelance self-employment*. Let's teach young people about how they can use Internet access, basic English language skills, and the ability to be responsible, collaborative and creative online to create

their own employment opportunities. Work from anywhere, for anyone, at anytime. We need to help them get there.