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USING SOCIAL ENTERPRISE TO RESTART INTERRUPTED CAREERS OF REFUGEE PROFESSIONALS



**SHEILA HEARD
ON COMBINING
CAREER GUIDANCE
AND SOCIAL
ENTERPRISE
RECRUITMENT**

In 2010, after the financial crash, I was made redundant and found myself at a crossroads with a real-life opportunity-threat. There was an **opportunity** to craft some innovations into a social enterprise IAG and recruitment service; **the threat** was whether or not it would work.

I finished my DipCG at UEL in 1998 and specialised in providing IAG services, based at two London universities, for refugee professionals: accountants, architects, doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers. Even a crocodile farmer!

IAG alone as support

Most of the services we provided were client-facing: 1-1 interviews, group sessions, APEL portfolio building, advocacy with professional bodies and UK NARIC comparison of overseas qualifications. The clients liked the service and discovered more about the UK labour market and how to identify their transferable skills but all that rarely led to relevant employment, either short term contracts or permanent posts. The barriers between employers and clients were too many. Too many barriers and too few interviews.

As a careers service, we wondered how to address the barriers. That was the dilemma. Almost by chance, we obtained some funding to pilot a work experience project: what we were offering was work experience to break down barriers between employers and refugee professionals.

It worked much better than even we had hoped. Following intensive IAG preparation and advocacy with mostly large employers, the six-month voluntary placements enabled about 50% of the 25 professionals to gain UK experience and be retained on permanent or at least 6-2 month contracts. They were mostly accountants, architects and engineers. It required careful project management to broker, set up and co-manage placements effectively, but we made it work.

Happy employers started to point out that we were providing a free recruitment service. In fact, much more than a free recruitment service. Ironically, some of them even hired our work experience clients through their own preferred recruitment agency at the end of the placement. That agency did little work and were paid a fee for hiring a candidate that they may well have rejected had the employer themselves not introduced the candidate.

An idea began to grow

A social enterprise recruitment service, underpinned

by impartial IAG, enabling good, inclusive employers to choose such a recruitment service as part of their inclusive talent attraction strategy and providing refugee professional candidates with a recruitment service that proactively included them in the recruitment market. **Win-win:** jobs for candidates, crucial income generation for the social enterprise and great hires for the employers.

Transitions London CIC

We (i.e. the Board of Directors and the Advisory Panel) launched Transitions in 2010. Since then our corporate clients have been hiring refugee engineers, architects and business services candidates. Above are some of the inclusive employers who have used Transitions social enterprise clients.



The model is:

- **6 month paid Returner Placement (i.e. Internship) £1,200 fee**
Then
- **Optional retention as experienced hire candidate 15% fee.**

“We gained a first-class civil engineer employee as a result of Transitions. The internship and the intern were above our expectations.” Dawn Barker, Head of HR, Crossrail

The challenges:

- UK refugee unemployment stands at somewhere between 18% and 70%. The UK average unemployment rate, pre-Covid-19, was in the region of 4%.
- Refugee professionals' under-employment is a major issue
- Refugees form an unrecognised, marginalised, UK talent pool
- They are almost invisible in the mainstream engineering market.

The successes:

- January 2011–December 2019: 244 candidates
- 2016–2019 60% (72 of 119) new candidates restarted professional careers (i.e. Transitions placement/experienced hire)
- c 60% retention from Transitions Returner Placements.

“Transitions provides a credible source of engineers with the skills and experience to contribute to meeting the sector’s needs.” Royal Academy of Engineering, Bola Fatimilehin, diversity team.

What about permission to work?

People with Refugee Status have permission to work in the UK in any profession at all skill levels. www.gov.uk/government/publications/right-to-work-checks-employers-guide Page 22:

“Anyone who is granted permission to remain in the UK as a refugee or who is granted humanitarian protection has unrestricted access to the labour market. A refugee may demonstrate their work entitlement through their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP).”

Refugees also have a National Insurance number. Some asylum seekers are also allowed to work. Their BRP card indicates that permission.

Challenges of this model

It isn't easy! The model requires both recruitment and IAG competencies in the service. Too much 'recruitment' in the mix and some candidates get left behind, too much IAG and employers won't engage. Both groups of stakeholders need a lot of attention.

Being a refugee isn't a protected characteristic – few employers are aware of this talent pool or of the barriers that exist in the jobs market for them. It's hard work engaging employers.

Many recruiters and hiring managers assume that people with refugee status in the UK are not allowed to work (incorrect) or do not have enough transferable professional skills and training to transition into the UK jobs market.

Into the future

2020 and beyond will bring a new non-EU-member feel to the UK. Perhaps it will bring more willingness by UK employers to actively include the hidden talent pools that exist in the UK, including refugee professionals, women returners and ex-military personnel. Transitions, although a small social enterprise has shown larger companies the way forward.

<https://transitions-london.co.uk/>

Sheila will be running a two-hour expert online training session, highlighting best practice in providing careers support for refugees at all skill levels, on Wednesday 16 September. This session will focus on finding work for refugees which is relevant to their skills and experience. For more information on the programme, learning outcomes and to book a place see www.thecdi.net/Expert-Training-Online

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ARUP CANDIDATE CASE STUDY

JOB TITLE:
ELECTRICAL
DESIGN ENGINEER
COMPANY: ARUP,
PERMANENT
CONTRACT
FOLLOWING

Raha (name changed) is from Iraq. She has an overseas degree and Masters in Electrical Engineering and had seven years of engineering consultancy experience in Iraq before being forced by political instability to flee to safety.

She found it difficult to find work in her related field and had been working as a dental receptionist for three years before she heard about Transitions through a friend. Lack of UK job market knowledge, no professional network and no UK experience were the biggest barriers she faced. Conscious and unconscious bias also hindered her job applications.

Transitions brokered a three-month paid structured internship with ARUP as an electrical design engineer. Transitions also provided her with a range of quality 1-1 and group professional development and careers services, including a peer coach (another Middle-Eastern female engineer, now working for Virgin Media group).

She learned about the UK professional job market and how to engage effectively with it, including making use of her professional body (the IET). Her supervisor described how she 'blossomed' during the placement and proved herself to be a valuable, overseas-experienced, multilingual asset to their work. **She succeeded in gaining a permanent design engineer job with ARUP following the placement.**

“I was impressed and surprised with myself! I would never have had the confidence without Transitions' encouragement and belief in my capabilities.”

Sheila Heard is the
Director of Transitions
London CIC