

Meet Techfugees, the non-profit creating opportunities for refugees in digital tech

Maddyness caught up with Raj Burman, CEO of Techfugees, to find out how the organisation is driving a tech for good programme by providing opportunities for displaced people in digital tech

“Refugees are incredibly investable as human individuals,” Raj Burman tells me.

He is the CEO of Techfugees, the non-profit organisation creating opportunities for refugees and forcibly displaced people in digital tech.

“They’re investable because as they go through a crisis – working through their journey essentially – they are incredibly innovative because necessity is the mother of all invention,” said Raj.

According to the UN’s Refugee Agency – UNHCR – there are over 84M displaced people in the world today. Techfugees is working to create new opportunities for this growing pool of people.

The nonprofit does this by teaming up with leaders in the digital tech sector, such as Google, to equip displaced people with digital skills.

The organisation has recently partnered with US-headquartered software company Chili Piper to launch a new *"Citizens of our Planet"* scheme. The programme – which came about in response to the need for urgent resettlement of Afghan refugees – includes \$1M to hire refugees and support their integration into a new society while they earn a sustainable income.

"We are seeing some interesting paradigm shifts with corporations and commercial organisations who see the real opportunity in working with organisations like us," said Raj. "Hopefully this piece of news will be a catalytic movement."

The Covid crisis has created new opportunities in digital tech

Raj said the pandemic has brought new opportunities to connect commercial organisations to an untapped skills base of refugees who are "hungry to upskill and reskill their digital skills to meet a shortfall."

He added: "The old rules of doing business have gone out the window because to survive in the post-pandemic world, you have to come up with new rules of engagement."

The non-profit recently launched an international *digital corridor programme* between Canada and Lebanon backed by US-based financial company Western Union to connect marginalised people to new career opportunities.

"Canada has got a shortfall of digital talent and Lebanon has got a lot of digital talent," explained Raj. "We're upskilling refugees in Lebanon in terms of improving their competencies, motivations and skills base. But more importantly, we're creating a corridor that allows migration settlement to be matched with digital startups in Canada."

A localised community of volunteers

The organisation launched in 2015 following a call to action on Facebook from Tech Crunch's Editor-at large Mike Butcher, which later went viral in almost 50 countries. With localised groups of volunteers around the world, Techfugees can connect displaced people to new opportunities in digital tech wherever they are in the world.

The organisation has also partnered with Google to distribute *100 digital scholarships*, allowing refugees to become "job ready." Meanwhile in Kenya and Uganda, volunteers are working with Belfast-headquartered BuffaloGrid to

provide digital connectivity hubs for refugees to access educational content based on their needs. The scheme aims to uplift 1.2M people in the next three years.

“We’re looking at what kind of content we can bring for children who have been unable to go to school,” said Raj. “Or we’re thinking; can we bring financial literacy skills for women, gender-based violence content, Covid content? Things that resonate with people.”

“Our remit is what we can do in a collective way to make sure we leave nobody behind.”

“The narrative needs to change”

But despite seeing more action from commercial organisations who are reaching out to untapped talent, Raj said that this does not go far enough.

Currently, 1% of humanity is displaced, mostly due to conflict. But this number is set to swell with the effects of climate change, with recent data projecting 1.2B people will be forcibly displaced by 2050.

“We live in a climate-stricken world, but we are digitally connected,” said Raj. “The perception that refugees are not connected is so outdated.”

To understand the potential of this surging number of displaced people, Raj said there needs to be a significant shift in how refugees are perceived today. This means corporates and commercial organisations need to recognise not only the “value of collaborative work,” but also the potential of this untapped skills base of displaced people.

Underpinning this, Raj said there needs to be a “cultural change to get people to understand the positive side and wealth of people, that they’re actively contributing to society rather than being a burden.”

As an entrepreneur with experience in digital tech, social enterprise and sustainable development, and coming from a family of refugees, Raj said the narrative he has been advocating for is the enormous base of refugee talent that “should not be underestimated.”

“These individuals are moving from camps, overcoming hurdles, going through international borders and making sure their families are safe,” he said. “They have a world view, and that world view is ingrained in their solution. They have incredible tenacity and perseverance, and that’s exactly the sort of ingredients you need to make a difference.”

Raj Burman is the CEO of *Techfugees*.

Article by ABBY WALLACE