



# Making a difference

Refugee successes in the world of work



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Julia Onslow-Cole  
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This publication is a reminder of the valuable contribution that refugees have made to the life of this country and highlights the sheer determination that is required to overcome adversity in all its forms.

The law recognises the complexity facing people whose lives have been disrupted by conflict or who are in fear of persecution. And the government has a clear responsibility for providing protection for refugees under the 1951 UN Convention.

In the last few years we have seen radical changes to immigration and asylum law, but the case for integrating refugees remains as strong as ever. Refugees have permission to work in the UK and employers should understand this.

I hope that these inspiring stories will be an encouragement to refugees and to employers alike.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia Onslow-Cole". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# Foreword



**Zafir Behlic**

*Director, Eazymultimedia*

*Co-Director, Transparency Research Partners*

In Bosnia, Zafir was a journalist.

He fled Bosnia in 1992 and, after spending several months in Croatia and Switzerland, arrived in the UK in 1993.

His experience as a refugee affected his career choices and is reflected in the series of jobs he has had over the past fifteen years. Most of his work has been in the refugee sector, ranging from advice work and community development to management and policy. In 2004 he decided to combine his interest in journalism and migration and set up a design and consultancy company specifically focused on refugee issues.

In this foreword, I would like to share a few hopes with you.

When I left Bosnia I had one hope – that there was a place where I could be safe, be myself and fulfil my potential. Although there were many moments on this ‘refugee journey’ of mine when I was convinced that such a place didn’t really exist, the hope never left me. It stayed alive through hard work, through being positive, through the support of some wonderful people in this country and through a touch of luck. Today, that same hope makes me remember only good things from that journey.

All caring families, progressive countries and successful companies, celebrate the achievements of the people who make them what they are. My second hope is that you will join us in celebrating the achievements of everyone like the people featured on these pages, refugees and employers alike. Celebrate us refugees who, despite starting from way behind, are today senior managers, secretaries, doctors, nurses, cleaners, teachers, volunteers, auditors, journalists and entrepreneurs. Equally, celebrate the achievements of employers who saw an asset in people like us and helped some of us to fulfil our potential. Such individuals are the driving force behind happy families, healthy societies and prosperous businesses. I hope that these personal accounts of refugees who ‘made it’ and employers who helped them will inspire you and help you discover more about the skills and benefits refugees could bring to your organisations and the UK as a whole.

I hope too that employers will recognise the enormous drive, commitment, flexibility and loyalty of the people who are ready to take on not only what seems difficult but also what seems impossible. If you are making decisions on refugee policy or if you provide support to refugees, I hope that the hints on how we coped and overcame all the odds will be an important addition to your knowledge of what really works in practice and where the priorities should be.

For all other refugees, some of whom may feel that they are facing the impossible, I hope our stories strengthen your hope and show that, at the end of the day, we ourselves hold the key to our own success and happiness. I am very pleased to be involved in the publication of this book, and would like to dedicate it to all those who have agreed to share their stories.

Over the years refugees have made extraordinary contributions both to the countries that have given them asylum and, in some cases, to the wider world.

Refugees with high profile contributions in the UK include: the 17th century Jews expelled from Portugal who brought us fish and chips; Sir Montague Burton who founded the Burton clothing empire; the journalist Yasmin Alibhai Brown; the novelist Josef Conrad; Lord Alf Dubs who became an MP and life peer; Sigmund Freud; Lew Grade, giant of television; Alec Issigonis of Mini and Morris Minor fame; Paul Hamlyn the multimillionaire publisher and philanthropist; Michael Marks, the founder of Marks & Spencer; Karl Marx; Daniel Marot, the designer of Hampton Court Palace; the dancer Rudolf Nureyev; Professor Wole Soyinka, playwright and Nobel Laureate; Sir Georg Solti, conductor. And of course Albert Einstein, who wryly summed up a common attitude to refugees:

'If my theory of relativity is proven correct, Germany will claim me as a German and France will declare that I am a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am a German and Germany will declare that I am a Jew.'

Many refugees make their contributions a little further from the public gaze, and this book begins with stories from two of them.

# Making a difference



*A successful career assuming senior responsibility in the mainstream.*

**Habte Hagos** went from having no funding for his studies to managing £800 million.

‘I have been fortunate,’ says Habte, looking back at the nearly three decades since he became a refugee, unable to return to Eritrea. Now director of finance at the Training and Development Agency (TDA), responsible for a budget of £800 million, his determination and persistence have clearly played a big role in his story.

Habte arrived in Britain in 1978 to study accountancy at Glasgow University. A year before his finals, realising that war in Eritrea meant he could not safely return home, he applied for asylum. As a result he lost his degree funding. Luckily, at that time support was available for refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea and he was able to finish his studies.

Habte found his first job with the Workers’ Education Association (WEA) through the Job Centre. Although he had some overseas work experience, he decided to take a job at a lower level than his qualifications warranted to make up for his lack of UK experience. WEA was a supportive employer, and when the finance officer took early retirement Habte took over his job.

## **Moving on**

After eight years it was time to widen his experience. He joined the London School of Economics as an accountant, moved on to Birkbeck College as director of finance, and joined the TDA in 2001. He is part of the agency’s senior management team and represents it on the Government Hundred Group of Finance Directors which formulates accounting practices for the public sector. He is proud that the TDA leads non-departmental public bodies in its record for resource management.

Habte has forged a successful career and assumed senior responsibility in the UK mainstream. His colleagues are mostly unaware of his refugee background and he is now a British citizen. Habte takes pride in his Eritrean heritage and is active in the Eritrean and wider community.

What advice has he to offer others trying to make it in what is now a tougher job market? ‘Networking is important. Refugees may hold back for fear of being treated differently but you have to work out how to manage this. You need to keep pushing, knocking on the door. Life is what you make it.’

# Taking business talents to the voluntary sector



*Ram applied for public positions, proved himself and was offered further opportunities.*

## **Ram Gidoomal** changed direction after a business trip exposed him to extreme poverty.

Ram came to England in 1967 when his family was expelled from Kenya following independence. His father, who had run a business in Kenya, set up a corner shop, and Ram helped out there while at school, then while studying physics at Imperial College.

After a postgraduate degree in management he got a job as a financial analyst at an international bank in the City. Ram found the experience of the corporate world useful but he felt he was hitting a glass ceiling, and when his wife's uncle invited him to join his business trading with Africa, he left. While Ram was with the company business exploded to £200 million turnover with 7,000 employees world-wide and he became the group chief executive officer.

### **A different course**

In 1987 Ram went on a business trip to Mumbai. Seeing so many young children in extreme poverty had a profound impact, and on his return Ram decided that his life should take a different course – he wanted to use his business skills in the service of others.

Over the last two decades Ram has made a remarkable contribution to the voluntary sector. Amongst many achievements, he set up the charity Christmas Cracker which mobilised 50,000 teenagers to raise over £5 million for the developing world; launched Boost Bond, a scheme to support deprived communities into employment and housing; worked with GMTV's breakfast show to raise money to build a hospital in Maharashtra; and wrote books to highlight the refugee experience of living in two cultures, including *Sari and Chips*.

Ram has made a conscious effort to work beyond his community and participate in public life. He applied for public positions, proved himself and was offered further opportunities to contribute his abilities. Ram was appointed CBE in 1998 for services to race relations, and in 2000 and 2004 he stood for election as mayor of London.

What made the difference? Ram has no doubt that it was finding friends in mainstream British society who 'took me under their wing'. He remembers each one with gratitude. His advice to refugees is to build and use social networks.

**M**any refugees arrive with years of experience behind them but find it very difficult to move into work where they can contribute their wealth of expertise. For those in professions that, for the sake of public protection, the UK regulates – medicine, engineering, teaching and accountancy amongst others – it is even harder for refugees to start their working lives again. They are not allowed to work as professionals until they have either had their qualifications recognised, or have requalified in the UK.

At least 30 per cent of refugees have professional skills.

The process of requalifying is long and expensive, and involves refugees in both studying and working at levels they left behind years previously. Professional regulatory bodies demand certificates and training transcripts which refugees have often not been able to bring with them when they flee. Professional qualifications from some countries are not recognised at all and, even when they are, professionals such as doctors and nurses have to undertake months of supervised practice. Although some professionals decide it is easier to move into other areas of work, many are passionate about their vocation, and spend years requalifying.

The identity and status of many people, refugees or not, are tied to their profession. Those who have had to flee their countries have lost their home, culture, language, friends and often family. Losing identity and status are additional challenges that refugees have to overcome, but very many find the resilience and determination to do just that.

# Engineering a new life



*Competence, professionalism and management expertise in addressing unforeseen problems.*

**Dr. Julius Kenyi** struggled to have his professional qualifications recognised but his skills were eventually acknowledged in a national award.

Dr. Julius Kenyi, a Southern Sudanese civil engineer, first arrived in the UK in 1993 from Ukraine where he had studied for ten years. He sought refuge in the UK after he was not able to return to Southern Sudan, his place of birth. Like many others he found that his qualifications, in his case gained in the Ukraine, were not recognised by the Engineering Council, who asked him to sit an exam in order to qualify.

But Julius had been introduced to a well known professor in structural mechanics, who was then head of civil engineering at Southampton University. Julius's research method for his PhD had some relation to Professor Roy Butterfield's field of research. Professor Butterfield contacted the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) to explain Julius's qualifications. Meanwhile Julius attended every meeting of ICE's local branch. His persistence finally paid off when the Institution accepted him as a graduate member. Shortly afterwards the Engineering Council recognised Julius's qualifications as meeting the

UK standard. This paved the way for others with similar qualifications to have these recognised in the UK.

## **Finalist**

Julius's first professional job in the UK, a site engineer with the construction company Dean and Dyball came in 1996. Nine years later he joined Trant Construction, his current employer. Clearly, his employers were aware of his abilities, but after fourteen years in the UK, he also received more public recognition when, in 2007, he was a finalist in the Chartered Institute of Building's Construction Manager of the Year Awards. He came third out of 98 finalists in the restoration category for his work on a building that once housed Concorde. The citation records his 'competence, professionalism and management expertise in addressing unforeseen problems that arose'.

To what does he owe his success in the UK labour market? Julius says that settling in a smaller city like Southampton, where he is the only person from Southern Sudan, forced him early on to make British friends and integrate into the local community. This in turn helped him progress within the workplace.

# Requalifying as a surgeon



*The only difference between difficult and impossible is that impossible takes longer.*

## **Sanja Besarovic had a long journey from being a consultant in Bosnia to being a consultant in the UK.**

Sanja was born and brought up in Bosnia. She studied medicine at the University of Sarajevo, specialising first in general and war surgery then in paediatric surgery. Sanja was working as a consultant paediatric surgeon in Sarajevo when the war broke out in 1992. After twenty months she had to flee.

Sanja claimed asylum in February 1994. Three months later, unusually early for a refugee doctor, she was able to start a two-year clinical attachment with Great Ormond Street Hospital. During this time she was studying for PLAB, the demanding medical and language examinations that overseas doctors have to take in order to be able to practise in the UK.

### **Demoralising**

Sanja says that the main barriers she faced were learning English, having to make regular visits to the Home Office to follow up her asylum application, and getting registered with the General Medical Council. 'Non-recognition of credentials is demoralising', says Sanja, but she was confident about her experience and abilities

and believes that she was helped by being knowledgeable and persistent. 'The only difference between difficult and impossible is that impossible takes longer.'

In August 1994 she was granted leave to remain for four years.

Her clinical attachment and success in the PLAB exams meant that in 1996 Sanja was able to get work as a Senior House Officer. In 1998, she was granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK and then went on to be a visiting clinical fellow at the Royal Bristol Children's Hospital.

She spent the next few years working at hospitals around the UK. The Royal College of Surgeons assessed her qualifications and recommended her inclusion on the General Medical Council's Specialist Register. In 2001 she attained Fellowship of Royal College of Surgeons and in the same year became a British citizen. She is now working as a consultant paediatric surgeon in Hull.

Her recommendations to newcomers are that they should not be afraid of starting out from the beginning, and that they should be confident in their own knowledge. 'At the same time, always be ready to learn new things, and treasure the friends that you make during your integration journey – their moral support is invaluable.'

# Teaching – a noble job



*One problem was finding schools that would take refugee teachers.*

## Joab Omondi's passion is motivating children.

Joab came to the UK from Kenya in 1997 after being expelled from university for political activities. He took a master's degree at King's College London then, because he was still waiting for a decision on his asylum claim, faced fees at the Institute of Education of up to £8,000 to complete his postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) which would qualify him to teach in the UK. Fortunately the Prisoners of Conscience Appeal Fund was able to meet his fees.

Joab feels he had an advantage in already having a strong command of English – he did not have to start by learning the language, a barrier for most refugee teachers. His main problems were not knowing where he could get advice about routes into teaching, and finding schools that would take refugee teachers. He faced numerous set-backs and couldn't find a teaching job in London but, 'success comes', he says, 'if one is determined and has the will to achieve.' He left London and went to Essex.

Joab now teaches geography at a secondary school in Halstead, Essex. He is grateful to the school for giving him the opportunity to use his skills working with young people in a subject he loves teaching.

## Challenges

Joab says his determination to be a teacher started in his childhood. He enjoys the interactive nature of the work and the instant feedback he gets; he loves motivating children to achieve and seeing them progress. When he started teaching few students were taking geography but now, five years later, he has 85 students, with 64 per cent achieving A–C grades at GCSE. 'Teaching is a noble job,' he says, 'though not without its challenges.'

Joab feels he has integrated well into UK society, but thinks the government could do more to help refugee teachers overcome the obstacles they face. 'Refugee teachers, particularly those who have succeeded in getting classroom jobs, can be important role models in their community.'

**W**hen refugees are asked about the barriers they face getting into work, learning English almost always comes at the top of the list. Even for those who have studied in English, getting to grips with the everyday spoken language is a challenge. Apart from those whose English is fluent, most refugees see it as a priority to enrol in language classes. In some parts of the country these are free and fairly easily available; elsewhere there is limited provision and long waiting lists. Government thinking in 2008 is that overseas students and employers should increasingly take responsibility for funding English language provision.

The complexity of British society is bewildering for a newcomer, and refugees find it difficult to get accurate and relevant advice. On arrival they have to get to grips with immigration, housing, financial and health issues, but questions about education and work soon follow. It is not easy to know where to go for advice on whether and how to get qualifications recognised, which courses to take for the sort of work they are interested in, and the best ways to seek and apply for jobs.

Even so, most refugees are very keen to work and be independent and, regardless of their experience and qualifications, will at first look for jobs that need only limited English. Once they become more fluent and feel able to offer their skills, refugees are very frustrated to discover that many employers disregard qualifications and experience from overseas. As a result, it takes them longer than necessary to return to the job market, and employers miss out on some dedicated and hard-working employees.

# Learning a different sort of English



*Talking at conferences was not easy at the beginning, but over time it became easier.*

**Said Ahmadi** could read and write some English before he came to the UK, then discovered that talking is a whole new skill.

Said was the director of a training centre in Iran and an IT consultant.

‘When I first came to this country I was just able to read technical English. As most of the resources I needed for my work were in English I had learnt enough to read them. It was difficult at the beginning because I was faced with over a hundred new words per page, but as my understanding got better I began looking up just two or three words per page. I had to write about technical issues and contribute to discussion forums on the internet with colleagues from all over the world. This helped me improve my writing but I had no opportunity to practise spoken English. This was my situation till the day that I entered the UK.

## **Talking to people in charge**

‘On my arrival I instantly felt the gap in communication. Talking face to face with someone is completely different from emails. When writing you can take your time and

check your words but when speaking you have to answer people without delay. I began volunteering with a group that helps people with English and I started visiting public places like museums and talking to people in charge, asking them about the museum and practising my English.

‘When I gained permission to work I started looking for volunteering opportunities in my field of work. I began working as a volunteer for a technical consultancy company, which gave me the opportunity to speak English, including over the phone.

‘I was also attending events both in the refugee sector and in my technical field and this helped me meet new people and improve my English. It also led me to volunteering as a member of a group of refugee professionals advising on programmes and policies for refugee professionals in the UK. Representing the advisory group at conferences was not easy at the beginning, but over time it became easier. I believe everybody who wants to improve their English needs to put themselves in situations which they are forced to speak so they do not feel scared of making mistakes.

‘I have now started my own web development company here.’

# How do you get advice about where to get advice?



*It would be better to have an overall picture and to have all the facts from day one.*

## **Emily Stembile Mawoneka** was in the UK for months before she found out about how to start requalifying.

Emily Stembile Mawoneka has a diploma in nursing from Zimbabwe University's Institute of Nursing. After qualifying she worked in a major referral hospital in Harare for four years. She fled Zimbabwe in 1998.

The long wait for a decision from the Home Office was a strain and hindered her restarting her nursing career. 'Everything is new, it takes time to adjust,' she says. 'Problems take much longer to solve and you become stressed.' Getting advice was difficult and she did not know who to ask about how to re-establish her career. 'I'd been in the UK for months before a friend told me about the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, the organisation that evaluates overseas nursing qualifications). It would be better to have an overall picture and to have all the facts from day one.'

### **Documents she could not provide**

She waited until she felt confident about the UK nursing system before she tried to register with the NMC. However, they required many documents and

references that she could not provide, including an academic reference from the Harare Institute of Nursing and a reference from her former employer. She was also required to do a six-month placement with a UK hospital before she could obtain registration. 'I found the procedures and systems very frustrating because it takes a long time and I wasn't kept informed. It is also very frustrating, when applying for a job, to be told that I need experience of working in the UK, but not having the opportunity to gain experience.'

It is almost impossible for refugees to get references or certificates from a country they have fled, and after successive attempts to get her references, Emily decided in 2002 it was easier to start a three-year degree course in nursing. Although it was hard going back to study, and the financial costs were difficult, it was worthwhile. Emily obtained her NMC registration and now works in a nursing home.

Emily advises those not knowledgeable about the UK system to approach institutions of their profession for information, and to contact other organisations who can offer advice and support.

**T**here are various things refugees can do to improve their chances of getting a job. Volunteering provides experience of the UK workplace, offers the opportunity to get a reference, and helps with learning the vocabulary used in that field.

In some parts of the UK there are schemes to match refugees with mentors. Both mentors and mentees often appreciate the relationship greatly. As well as offering friendship, a mentor gives support in explaining how things work in the UK, can help with job application forms and provide encouragement before interviews. Mentors can also provide access to networks of support. Networking is widely encouraged in the UK as a way to achieve, and it is especially hard for refugees to access networks, but making contact with relevant organisations and people can make all the difference. The Time Together project, for example, has clearly demonstrated the practical support that mentoring can give to refugees who are wanting to make a new start in the world of work in the UK.

As well as practical interventions, refugees' attitudes have a big impact on getting work. Many refugees come from countries that value hard work, learning and independence more highly than is the case in the UK. Leaving your home, travelling somewhere unknown, discovering how a different culture works and learning the language all demand flexibility, persistence and a positive attitude – characteristics that are extremely valuable to an employer. They also provide a solid basis for starting a business and offering employment to others, as many refugees do.

The stories that follow demonstrate these attributes.

# Volunteering for experience



*I had to learn to talk about the things I can do, which is very difficult if you come from a culture where modesty is a strength.*

## Dardane Hadri's volunteer work led to paid opportunities.

Dardane has a degree in fine art from Prishtina University and a postgraduate qualification in the history of art from Zagreb. In Kosovo she was a freelance artist with a gallery selling silk paintings and ceramics.

'My father was a historian who fought for the history of Albanians. As a family we suffered a lot because of it; we were interrogated regularly by the police. I was an activist for Kosovan independence and was persecuted. In 1995 the police were looking for me. I had a young daughter and we were scared for our lives, so I fled.'

Dardane had been to the UK before to learn English so it was the obvious place to come for asylum. 'When I fled I left everything behind. Starting again from the bottom meant that suddenly I was nobody and life was very stressful.'

During the 1999 bombing in Kosovo, other refugees were brought to the UK, so she started volunteering as an interpreter and as a link between families and schools.

## The art of rebuilding a life

'I was granted refugee status in 2000 and that was when I decided to rebuild my life. It's hard to think about your career when you are a refugee. Refugees need a lot of support, guidance and confidence. Language is very important – I had an advantage being fluent in English. There were lots of cultural barriers to cross. I had to learn to talk about the things I can do, which is difficult if you come from a culture where modesty is a strength. I also had to learn to write application forms. I applied for hundreds of jobs but although I got positive feedback, I was never offered a job.'

Dardane finally found a way to earn her living using her skills – as a classroom assistant doing art workshops to help disadvantaged children. To get promotion she had to demonstrate level 2 in English and maths. 'I translated all my diplomas and certificates from home but none of them were recognised so I had to take level 2 maths and English exams.'

## Mentoring pays off



*Mohammed's mentor encouraged and supported him when he was applying for jobs and he got the first job that he applied for.*

### **Mohammed Ameri found mentoring helped with improving his English and increasing his confidence.**

Mohammed is a refugee from Iran. In his home country, he worked for his father's transport company and as a part time actor.

In 2002 he had to flee Iran and sought asylum in the UK. When he first arrived he did not speak English so he went to college to learn. In 2003 he gained refugee status but for a while he could not work for medical reasons, so he focussed on his English. In 2006 the Clear project, which provides advice and support for refugees in Southampton, told Mohammed about the Time Together mentoring scheme. Mohammed was keen to be matched with a mentor because he felt that he'd suffered from culture shock when he first arrived, and he wanted someone to help him adapt to life in England and show him around. Also, he wanted a friend and someone to talk to. He was paired with Lloyd Gray (right, in picture above, with Mohammed), a teaching assistant.

### **Chatting about everything**

Mohammed describes Lloyd as 'a good guy, open, warm, friendly, accepting and helpful all the time'. Lloyd helped him fill in forms, prepare his CV, apply for a student loan and for jobs. He supported Mohammed and was always available when he needed him. They met every two weeks or so to spend time together, going to football matches, eating at restaurants or watching television. They chatted about everything, from British culture to history, politics and sport. The mentoring has really helped Mohammed improve his English language and increase his confidence. He says that Lloyd encouraged and supported him when he was applying for jobs and this has really paid off, as Mohammed got the first job that he applied for.

Mohammed has been working at Southampton docks since January 2007. He likes the job because it is not too stressful and he gets to drive nice cars! He reduced his hours from full time to part time so he could start studying again, and in September 2007 he began a course in Software Engineering which he hopes to complete by 2009.

# Making the right contacts



*A chain of contacts which led to the House of Commons.*

## With encouragement along the way **Faduma Farah** is now meeting people at the top.

In 1994 the civil war in Somalia forced Faduma to flee across the border to Kenya. She lived there for eight years. In 2002 she left Kenya to seek asylum in the UK, which she was granted in 2003.

At first she struggled to find work because she had no UK experience nor references. She got involved in the Somali community and, through her networks, met Rona from Refugees into Jobs. By encouraging her to apply for a course in advocacy, Rona started a chain of contacts which has led Faduma to the House of Commons. 'I hold Rona in a high place in my heart. She has helped me achieve my dreams.'

### **Opening a new world**

The advocacy course led to Faduma starting a short course on human rights. There Meriem, from Time Together, introduced her to their mentoring scheme. When Faduma met her mentor, Michael, she didn't feel confident about herself as none of her job applications had been successful. Michael helped her with job

applications and encouraged her to apply for a diploma in development studies at Birkbeck University.

Faduma excelled at her diploma. Her tutors 'opened a whole new world for me, one where I felt I could achieve my hopes and ambitions'. Her confidence grew. After her second job interview she was taken on as an outreach worker for Time Together.

In 2007 Faduma won a fellowship from the Rayne Foundation, which aims to build bridges between refugees and the UK mainstream. Faduma has begun an internship with Karen Buck, MP (pictured above left, with Faduma and Sarah Brown), and is getting experience of working in her office and attending weekly surgeries with constituents. The Rayne Foundation has given Faduma an extraordinary opportunity that will help her become more integrated into society. 'I am a refugee woman from Shepherd's Bush,' she says, 'how would I ever get a placement with Karen Buck?' It is particularly hard as a refugee, she says, to find a job and live a decent life like the Londoners she is surrounded by. Faduma would like to be fully accepted as a citizen and to contribute to society in the UK but one day, when it is safe, she hopes to return to Somalia and help develop her country.



## The flexibility to switch career

*Beforehand, he could not have even thought that he would work in an office.*

### **Ako Mirani had run his own business but was prepared to change direction when he saw a good opportunity.**

Ako was a Kurdish refugee from South Kurdistan (Iraq). Kurdistan, not recognised internationally, also covers land which is governed by Turkey, Iran and Syria. For very many years Kurdish people have been persecuted by the authorities. Ako was forced to abandon his studies. He then started up his own business, but when he had to escape in 1999 he also had to leave that behind.

Once Ako got a positive decision on his asylum claim, he made numerous applications for jobs. Finally he secured employment with Nando's restaurant where he worked for three years. He then worked with Pizza Hut for two years, until he was made redundant at the end of 2006.

### **Speaking my language**

Jobcentre Plus referred Ako to the Trellis Project. 'The advantage was that the employment adviser was a refugee from my country and spoke my language.' The adviser suggested to Ako what he could do and where to go to enhance his job search. Ako was encouraged to take up

activities such as interpreting, volunteering, mentoring and studying.

Ako started to volunteer for the Kurdish Association in Birmingham. He joined the Time Together mentoring project and was matched to a mentor. Ako says that this boosted his confidence and he was encouraged in May 2007 to apply for a job advertised by a housing association. He got the job, and is now working as a housing case worker.

'I am proud of what I have achieved since I have been with Trellis,' says Ako, 'I am in full-time employment now.' He says that before he was referred to Trellis, he could not have even thought that he would work in an office. 'The windows of opportunities for refugees can be opened,' he says, 'but not knowing how, when and where to start is the problem.'

Ako believes language skills, training and volunteering gave him the experience he needed to gain employment; these are the opportunities new refugees should take up in order to achieve success in the UK.

## Never giving up

*Media jobs eluded me  
and for six months  
I kept signing on at  
the Job Centre.*

### **Pearl Thevanayagam had to abandon her career in journalism in Sri Lanka but has been following leads ever since.**

When Pearl fled Sri Lanka in 2001 she left behind a successful career on English language newspapers where she had been a staff reporter, a news editor, Colombo correspondent for *The Times of India* and had written for the *Wall Street Journal*.

'I covered cabinet briefings, interviewed ministers and visited rebel-held areas to interview government troops and rebel leaders. Despite censorship I wrote a regular column on human rights, but it was my articles about the ethnic conflict that antagonised the government.'

She received death threats and was arrested.

'Having arrived in the UK with journalism qualifications from the USA and Sri Lanka, and over a decade of experience, I started off with washed-behind-the-ears enthusiasm to find work in journalism. But soon the unpalatable truth hit me. I had no experience in the UK nor did I have the magical 'National Council for the Training of Journalists' certificate.

'Media jobs eluded me and for six months I kept signing on at the Job Centre. Finally I joined a firm of

immigration solicitors where I could use my journalism skills interviewing asylum seekers and preparing their statements of evidence to the Home Office. Although I was keen on this work, after ten months I was made redundant when the firm down-sized.'

### **No vacancies**

'After many interviews, and exhausted from completing application forms, I was disillusioned. There were simply no vacancies for someone with my 'limited' experience. For goodness sake, how am I to gain experience of employment unless someone employs me?'

But Pearl has a journalist's tenacity for seeking out opportunities. Since 2003 she has had work experience at *The Guardian* and the BBC and has published on media censorship in Sri Lanka. She undertook Home Office-commissioned research on *Reporting asylum: the UK press and the effectiveness of PCC guidelines* and has supported other persecuted journalists facing deportation from the UK. In October 2007 she was one of the organisers for the Press Freedom Forum on Sri Lanka at the House of Commons to highlight the increasing threats, murders and abductions of media workers.

The commitment that led to her coming to the UK remains as strong as ever.

## Staying positive



*We both felt very tired but our life was better than in Kosovo where I would have been shot.*

### **Xhemal Rekaj** faced many setbacks in applying for work but he kept hoping.

'I am very happy. Every day I work as a cleaner at Oriel College in Oxford. The students are always polite and say thank you and the other people in the College are very friendly.

'I grew up in Kosovo. For seven years I was a shepherd. Then I guarded a shop at night. For three years I did national service and after that I worked on a farm. But then the war started. Because we were Albanian Kosovans we were attacked. My house was set on fire three times. We had to escape or we would have been killed.

'We travelled on a lorry and came to the UK in 2000. It felt good at first, being in a country where most of the people were friendly. But it was hard because I was not allowed to work. For four years I helped my wife look after our children. Every day I went to college to learn English. My wife got pregnant and we had another child.

'We both felt very tired but our life was better than in Kosovo where I would have been shot.

### **No references**

'In 2004 I was given refugee status which meant we could all stay and I could get a job. I was so happy. Refugee Resource taught me about finding a job. I learned how to fill in forms, how to use the computer and how to go to interviews. I tried for fifteen jobs but I had no references so I was not successful. Without a job I felt I was no good but I kept learning English every day, I kept collecting my children from school every day and I kept hoping. I applied for a job at Oriel College. I had an interview and I got the job.

'I want to stay at Oriel College forever. My eldest son is doing his GCSEs. He speaks good English. I want him to stay at school. Then maybe he will work with computers or in a shop. Maybe he will work in a college. But I don't think he will be a cleaner.'

# Recycling opportunities



*That crucial chance that can make all the difference.*

**Peter Paduh arrived alone in the UK, but his entrepreneurial skills mean he is now able to help others.**

Peter Paduh had to flee war-stricken Bosnia at the height of the war and travelled on his own to the UK. He was 15-years old.

When he arrived in the UK he had a few pounds and spoke only a few words of English. He was placed in a children's home then with a foster family. Although his first impression of the UK was mostly good, he felt displaced and it took time to get used to life in a new country. But he progressed and studied for a computer science degree. An internship at Microsoft then helped Peter into work in the IT industry. His dream was to start his own business but at first he found it difficult to get information.

In 2003, after taking advice from Business Link and the Manufacturing Advisory Service, he launched Maxitech to provide recycling services for firms with redundant computers. Maxitech now offers an IT work placement scheme for refugees. Peter says that because he at first faced difficulties in finding opportunities in a new country, he decided 'to give refugees that crucial chance

that can make all the difference'. He is expanding the programme from just under 100 to 200 individuals. 'The community in London helped me a lot after I founded Maxitech,' Peter says, 'and it is great to be in a position to give something back now.'

## **Extraordinary things**

Peter has won several awards for his work. In 2005 he was named Young Business Person of the Year by the London Chamber of Commerce and ITV, and in 2006 Maxitech was a regional winner in the 2006 Edge Employer Awards. These recognise 'everyday firms doing extraordinary things to develop a new generation of skilled workers' by providing practical learning opportunities for young people. Maxitech also runs the computers for older people initiative in collaboration with Age Concern London.

Peter believes having to overcome difficulties as a refugee has contributed to his business success. He has three recommendations to those newly arrived in the UK: first, don't undervalue your own potential; second, get training; and third, explore the help and assistance that is available.

**A**s the stories in the previous section demonstrate, refugees, despite all that they have gone through, want to rebuild their lives, and bring their determination, resilience and commitment into the workplace.

Efforts to find work can be frustrated by employers who do not understand the unconventional qualifications and experience refugees present. Some refugees face negative reactions from employers because they have gaps in their CV from the time it takes to navigate the UK asylum process or speak with a different accent. Many employers do not understand the documentation issued by the Home Office to refugees as permission to work, and are unclear about whether they can legally employ a refugee or not. As a result, almost all refugees start in work at levels well below their capacity and experience.

However there are an increasing number of employers who recognise and appreciate the qualities that refugees can offer their business. They recognise that increasing recruitment flexibility will let them benefit from a more diverse workforce, and integrate a range of experience and skills that may be beyond those born in Britain.

It is not all plain sailing. There are cultural and language differences, and refugees do need to learn about the UK workplace before they can contribute all their skills. They also need to build up their confidence in an unfamiliar environment. Even though the ways of doing things in the UK may well be the same as those they are used to, refugees are not always certain that they are, so they may appear more tentative and unsure than they need to be.

A positive attitude from employers towards refugees makes all the difference, and benefits both, as the following stories show.



**Ian Ashman**  
Principal  
Hackney Community College

*‘As a college in Hackney we feel that seeking to recruit people from refugee backgrounds has two advantages. Firstly it can help us to ensure that our workforce is more reflective of the ethnic and cultural mix of our students – it gives students positive role models and can better promote achievement. Secondly it can contribute to reducing unemployment amongst local communities, something which all public bodies should be thinking about.’*



# Making placements work for the trainee

*The work placement opened the door into employment.*

## **Galina Bejan** used her work placement to develop skills, improve her confidence and show that she was capable.

Galina is a refugee from Moldova who came to the UK and claimed asylum in 2000. Before fleeing her country, Galina was a student.

In the UK Galina approached the Refugee Council and was matched with a mentor who helped her find a work placement. Through her mentor Galina was introduced to OLMEC who run the Solid Foundations programme, offering work experience, training and support in three-to six-month, unpaid, structured work placements. OLMEC acts in a similar way to an employment agency, providing employers with candidates for work experience (paid or unpaid) or apprenticeships.

The Solid Foundations programme arranged a placement for Galina with Devonshires Solicitors. She started her six months there as a legal administrative assistant. Although unpaid, Galina says that the placement provided her with an opportunity to develop her skills, gain UK experience, and improve her self confidence immensely.

## **Desire for success**

Galina says that the major barriers into employment faced by most refugees are the language, getting training and having UK work experience, and she had found it very difficult to get work. But the placement with Devonshires Solicitors ‘opened the door into employment’ for her because she worked hard in order to prove herself and to show that she was capable of doing the job. She believes that her determination and desire to achieve success were the driving force.

In order to enhance her chances of gaining employment, Galina enrolled in 2004 at Lewisham College on the legal text production and the legal secretarial courses which she successfully completed in 2005.

As a result of her hard work, Galina has been taken on as a full-time paid junior legal secretary by Devonshires Solicitors.

Galina believes that there are wide opportunities for refugees in the UK as long as they have a dream and they are prepared to work hard in order to achieve it. ‘Giving up should never be an option, because there is help if you look around and put enough effort into it.’



# Making placements work for the employer

*Creating greater diversity in the workplace at a time when employers need to respond to a more diverse customer base.*

## Devonshires solicitors offer work placements to refugees as part of corporate social responsibility.

Many refugees have skills and enthusiasm, and often years of experience from their home countries, that private sector businesses could use. Through the OLMEC Solid Foundations programme, Devonshires Solicitors offers refugees six-month work placements. This is part of their scheme for corporate social responsibility, business practices intended to have a positive impact on society.

### The opportunity to develop

Allan Hudson, the senior partner at Devonshires, says, 'It can be difficult for refugees to break into the UK job market, but working with us offers the opportunity to develop and gain UK experience which may help them secure permanent employment.'

So far Devonshires have given placements to refugees from Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Mauritius and Moldova (see opposite). One found full time employment as a lawyer at another firm of solicitors, and another plans to train as a solicitor. Devonshires continues to recruit refugees for placements since they see benefits for both the employer and refugees.

The scheme

- develops experience, skills and confidence to equip refugees better for the UK job market,
- raises awareness amongst employers of the barriers refugees face,
- creates diversity in the workplace at a time when employers need to respond to a more diverse customer base,
- taps into a workforce with a committed work ethic – refugees tend to be reliable, mature and want to demonstrate their abilities to do the job well,
- fills skill shortages – most refugees are multi-lingual, for example, so can offer valuable skills to employers with a diverse client base.

'If you do it, do it properly,' Allan advises employers who might want to take part in such a scheme. For a placement to be successful both the employer and the trainee must make considerable efforts; 'the individual on the placement will need extensive training and support.'

When it works, individuals can transform their lives by going on to full-time employment. 'It impresses clients, it's good for staff morale, it's good for recruitment and', Allan adds, 'seeing individuals reach their full potential is a reward in itself.'

# Agency with an eye for talent



*It has been extremely good for business. We have seen a very good return on the investment.*

## **Sue Hill Recruitment** worked with the London Borough of Camden to train refugees for library work.

Sue Hill Recruitment (SHR) is an employment agency specialising in library and information staff who work in public, business and commercial libraries and also in academia. The agency has 80 to 100 temporary workers employed on contract each week.

SHR worked with London Borough of Camden Libraries' Development Officer on Camden's project for refugee work placements in libraries. Camden Libraries have won two awards for this work, including the organisational change award in the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals Diversity Awards 2007.

### **Permanent roles**

The scheme involved taking refugees trained by the Council as library service assistants onto the SHR temporary workers register. Some of these staff were placed in temporary contracts in Camden libraries and

subsequently in other public libraries. More recently, some have applied for and been offered permanent roles in public libraries.

SHR has also worked with refugees and asylum seekers who had library, records or archives qualifications or experience before coming to the UK. In 2007 one of these workers won a People's Award in Derbyshire for work he did in an NHS library. Another spent over two years working then gained a permanent role in the academic sector.

SHR staff say they have found working with refugees and asylum seekers extremely gratifying and rewarding. 'It has given another dimension to the work done by the team. The SHR temporary work force is diverse, and working with refugees and asylum seekers has added to that diversity. Additionally it has been extremely good for business. We have seen a very good return on the investment of our time and effort.'

Sue Hill Recruitment would encourage other employers to look carefully at the rich vein of talent, expertise, desire to work and will to succeed of those who have come to the UK through difficult circumstances.



## ... and talent with an eye for an opportunity

*Best library assistant of the year.*

### **Mohammed Issie Hassan spotted a leaflet about the Camden scheme in a library.**

Mohammed was born in Mogadishu in Somalia. As a student in Somalia, Mohammed also worked in a family-run snack bar. After he finished higher education he taught basic maths and literature in elementary school but when the civil war erupted he was forced to leave Somalia. He came to the UK as a refugee in 2001.

Mohammed says that in the UK his first thoughts were to learn English and get a job. Learning English was easy but finding a job proved to be quite difficult.

He eventually got his first job at a factory in Kentish Town, and has fond memories of the time he spent working there. He is grateful that the factory gave him an opportunity to gain valuable UK work experience, 'the one thing that every UK employer asks'. Unfortunately the factory closed and he, like the other workers, was made redundant.

### **One interview after another**

He then embarked on submitting a series of job application forms, followed by one unsuccessful interview after another. Determined to succeed, Mohammed says that he kept a smiling face and kept his mind occupied by saying 'tomorrow will be my day'.

It was during his jobsearch that Mohammed came across a leaflet at the Kentish Town library, about Camden Council's refugee work placement in libraries scheme. He contacted the library and was interviewed days later by the project coordinator.

Mohammed was sent on three months' work placement at the Swiss Cottage library, before applying for a library assistant position through Sue Hill Recruitment agency. In 2006 he was pleased to win the award for the best library assistant of the year.

Mohammed believes that determination, hard work and confidence in his abilities are the factors that helped him to overcome barriers and secure a job. His advice to newcomers is that they should always remain optimistic.

# Counting on success



*Gaining work at an established accountancy firm has enabled me to take giant steps towards becoming an accountant.*

**Natalia Korzhenevskaya** had to succeed at several interviews to gain the chance to pursue her dream.

Natalia Korzhenevskaya comes from Ukraine. She was studying accountancy and working part time as a waitress, but in 2003 was forced to flee her country and seek asylum.

It took two years for the UK government to decide whether to accept her asylum claim, and during this time she was not allowed to work. Natalia decided to improve her communication skills so went to Southwark College to study English and also took a university access course, equivalent to A levels.

When her refugee status was granted in 2005 and she was allowed to work, the Refugee Council helped her to find an eight-month placement at Dresdner Bank. She worked there part time as an administrative assistant at the same time as continuing her studies. Then in September 2006 her access course gave her entry to South Bank University to study business studies and IT.

## Opportunities

The Refugee Council continued to give Natalia information and support, and in July 2007 put her in touch with the accountancy firm Crouch Chapman, who were wanting to train new employees. After a series of interviews they took her on in November 2007 as a junior auditor. 'When I started there one of the accountants familiarised me with all the work and studying opportunities. I think I was the happiest person in the whole world,' Natalia says.

'Each day at work is more enjoyable than the previous one. I am learning more and more. In addition I adore socialising with my colleagues who are friendly and supportive.' Alongside her work at the firm Natalia is studying chartered accountancy and plans to qualify in 2010. 'Crouch Chapman is also paying for my studies and the books which is very generous and extremely helpful.' Natalia believes her work at Crouch Chapman will help her to achieve her dream of becoming a successful accountant.



## Tapping into a new resource

*Self-motivation and resilience are the key to success.*

### **Crouch Chapman found a new way to recruit committed staff.**

Crouch Chapman accountancy practice in London specialises in providing audit, accountancy and taxation services to owner-managed businesses, growing limited companies and to charities. The firm also has an insolvency arm to help businesses and individuals tackle financial problems as efficiently as possible.

The working environment enables everyone to learn and develop their skills as well as providing a high level of support to the clients. The firm usually employs two new trainee accountants per year, supporting them to gain the ACA professional qualification over three years.

However, Nick Heath, one of the seven partners, says that recently Crouch Chapman, as a relatively small player in the recruitment market, has found it difficult to attract suitable candidates for these vacancies. 'We realised that there must be a pool of people we could access through alternative sources who would have a commitment to work hard to gain a professional qualification.' With the support of Employability Forum, Crouch Chapman widened its advertising to include refugee jobseekers with an accountancy background who are registered with the Refugee Council.

### **Quick and efficient**

'We were surprised at the numbers who attended our introductory talk and informal question and answer session. The candidates were fully engaged and demonstrated their interest and commitment. With the support of the Refugee Council we then organised formal interviews and prepared a final shortlist of candidates. The process was quick and efficient and involved minimal administration time for us, a key point for a firm of our size. We selected a candidate with the ability and character to fit into a new work environment where self motivation and resilience are the key to success. We hope our trainee will meet the aspirations we have for her.'

Nick Heath believes that other small to medium sized firms could benefit from a co-ordinated employment service to match available talent with job vacancies. 'Employability Forum and the Refugee Council provided an inexpensive gateway. Without the introduction we would not have been able to tap into this resource.'

# Integration is a two-way process

**Alma Nako found the protection in the UK that she was denied in her home country and is giving something back to say thank you.**

Alma Nako comes from Albania where she was a primary school teacher and her husband was a police officer. The transition from communism to democracy led to conflict and corruption within the police force and, for their personal security, Alma and her husband fled their home and sought asylum in March 2001.

On arrival they were held in Oakington detention centre for a week before moving to Birmingham. Once there they both began volunteering at the Midlands Refugee Council. Alma worked in welfare and education while her husband volunteered in the housing department. Initially her work was basic administration as her English was not very strong. However, as her language skills developed she was given more responsibilities.

Alma says that the UK system is completely different from the procedures she understood well in communist Albania and it was difficult to get to grips with how the labour market worked. But volunteering helped her both to improve her English and to understand the UK workplace better.

Since March 2006 Alma has worked as a project coordinator for Time Together in Birmingham. She recruits and matches mentors and mentees, arranges training, organises support groups and social events, and raises awareness of the project and the wider refugee

context. Her husband has worked in various positions within Birmingham City Council and now works as a housing officer for Sandwell Council.

## **Working together**

As well as their full time jobs, both Alma and her husband continue to volunteer. Alma is on the panel for youth offender services in Birmingham and her husband has been a volunteer special constable for West Midlands police since 2002. Alma says that because she did not get the protection she needed in her home country, but has found security here in the UK, she wants to say thank you, and give something back.

Experience has shown her that integration is a two way process – the community and refugees need to work together. As a refugee she knows that she is judged negatively. She says that you cannot blame people for their perceptions, but you can gain immense satisfaction by proving them wrong.

Alma feels that she is lucky to have been given the chance to work and prove herself as an employee. Others have not been so lucky. She says that there are perceptions, driven by the mainstream media, that refugees are incapable and lacking in skills. ‘When you arrive in the UK you are no-one. You are forced to work your way up and prove yourself. It can be extremely demotivating.’ Alma hopes that in the future employers will give more opportunities to refugees so they can have the chance to demonstrate how hardworking and successful they can be.

*When you arrive in the UK you are no-one. You are forced to work your way up and prove yourself.*

# Resources

These are some of the organisations that can provide advice for refugees or for employers:

## STATUTORY ORGANISATIONS

[www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

[www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk)

[www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk)

[www.loreca.org.uk](http://www.loreca.org.uk)

[www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)

[www.naric.org.uk](http://www.naric.org.uk)

## VOLUNTARY SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

[www.academic-refugees.org](http://www.academic-refugees.org)

[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

[www.bridgesprogramme.org.uk](http://www.bridgesprogramme.org.uk)

[www.employabilityforum.co.uk](http://www.employabilityforum.co.uk)

[www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu)

[www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

[www.refugee-action.org.uk](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk)

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

[www.refugeewomen.org.uk](http://www.refugeewomen.org.uk)

[www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk)

[www.timetogether.org.uk](http://www.timetogether.org.uk)

[www.twist.org.uk](http://www.twist.org.uk)

[www.welshrefugeecouncil.org](http://www.welshrefugeecouncil.org)



## The Employability Forum

The Employability Forum was established by the City Parochial Foundation to act as the collective, independent voice of the voluntary sector in addressing the barriers and developing effective strategies for integrating refugees into the world of work in the UK.

We aim to promote the development of public policy to reflect the real needs of refugees, build an effective partnership between employers, the voluntary sector and government, and encourage wider understanding among employers of the skills that refugees bring to the UK. The focus of our work since our beginnings in 2000 has been on refugee professionals, and we have also addressed the needs of migrant workers more generally.

For more information about Employability and our work, please visit our website [www.employabilityforum.co.uk](http://www.employabilityforum.co.uk)

