



Empowering Refugees Through Digital Work: A Practical Guide to Facilitating Livelihood Opportunities

November 2024



Summary of the Practical Handbook

This handbook provides a concise and actionable overview of the landscape of digital livelihoods for refugees. It serves as a knowledge resource for practitioners, policymakers, and organizations interested in facilitating refugee participation in the digital economy. Drawing on insights from a comprehensive research report, it distills the essential information into practical guidance while highlighting key pathways, barriers, and tailored approaches.

What the Handbook Covers

- **Introduction to the Digital Work Landscape:** Provides an overview of the growing demand for digital skills and how digital work can serve as a tool for refugee integration.
- **Key Digital Work Pipelines:**
 1. Digital Freelancing: Flexible project-based opportunities.
 2. Remote Employment: Structured, full-time roles.
 3. Digital Entrepreneurship: Building businesses through e-commerce and innovation.
 4. Content Creation: Income generation through social media platforms.
- **Foundational Needs for Digital Work Success:** Discusses enabling conditions like infrastructure and documentation and employability factors like skills and experience.
- **Country-Specific Insights:** Tailored approaches from countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Colombia, emphasizing context-sensitive strategies.
- **Examples and Case Studies:** Real-world examples, such as Upwork's Opportunity Unlimited Initiative, Na'amal Agency, and Wowzi, illustrating practical challenges and solutions.

How the Content is Presented

- Clear summaries of pipelines and foundational needs.
- Practical insights into existing challenges and successful practices.
- Real-world examples and case studies to demonstrate the implementation of digital livelihoods.

Purpose

This handbook aims to equip readers with the information needed to understand and address the complexities of digital livelihoods for refugees. While it provides a practical starting point, those seeking detailed analysis and expanded insights can refer to the full research report.

Acknowledgement

This report was made possible through the generous support of the Conrad Hilton Foundation, whose commitment to empowering refugees and advancing innovative solutions in digital work has been invaluable. We are deeply grateful for their investment in this important work and their dedication to creating inclusive opportunities for refugees globally.

The report was authored by Dr Shuting Xia and Lorraine Charles, with critical research assistance provided by Andhira Kara and Youmna Elrasheed Mohammed. Their hard work and dedication have been instrumental in shaping this report.

We are particularly grateful to our reviewers, Dr Andreas Hackl and Elena Sapelyuk, for their insightful feedback and guidance. Their expertise has significantly enhanced the depth and clarity of this report.

Special thanks also go to the Jobtech for Refugees Community of Practice (J4R CoP) Research Committee, whose valuable feedback and collaborative spirit have been integral to this process. We extend our appreciation to Michelle Hassan, Daniel Higgins, Alaa Malabawi, Carly Olenick, and Elena Sapelyuk for their thoughtful contributions.

This report reflects the collective efforts of the J4R CoP, co-convened by Na'amal and Jobtech Alliance. The J4R CoP is a global community that fosters collaboration, learning, and the sharing of best practices among ecosystem members. By advocating for better programming and policies, conducting research, and sharing insights, the community is working to improve work opportunities for refugees in the jobtech space.

We hope this report serves as a valuable resource for the community and contributes to building a more inclusive and impactful ecosystem for refugees.

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1. Context and Overview of Digital Employment for Refugees



The global shift toward digital work, accelerated by COVID-19, has expanded opportunities for remote employment, increasing demand for digital skills across industries and creating new pathways for economic participation. For refugees, who often face employment barriers due to legal, geographic, and socioeconomic constraints, digital platforms offer flexible access to global job markets. As demand grows for skills ranging from data entry to programming, many refugees with a certain level of digital skills can potentially acquire these competencies in a short time frame, enhancing their economic prospects. This trend has drawn interest from governments, NGOs, and private sector organizations, who see digital work as a promising approach to fostering resilience and economic inclusion among refugee populations.

Digital Work as an Integration Tool

Digital employment offers promising opportunities for refugee integration by providing location-independent job options, which can be crucial for those facing restrictive work environments. This flexibility may help refugees navigate barriers such as work permits



and language requirements, allowing them to pursue income generation and work toward economic stability without full reliance on local job markets. Through digital work, refugees have the potential to contribute to host economies, fostering resilience and possibly supporting longer-term integration at both individual and community levels.

For digital employment initiatives to effectively support refugee integration, a clear grasp of available employment opportunities is essential. Understanding the roles, skill requirements, and potential barriers refugees face allows stakeholders to create targeted programs that equip refugees with marketable skills and open sustainable pathways to economic empowerment. This handbook presents an understanding of the digital employment landscape, assessing the diverse avenues through which refugees can engage in digital work.

Key Digital Work Pipelines

Four primary pipelines for digital work have emerged as viable options for refugees:

1. **Digital Freelancing:** Refugees take on short to medium-term or project-based work in fields like design and digital marketing. While freelancing offers flexibility and autonomy, it demands strong self-promotion skills, consistent internet access, and a competitive edge to secure jobs.
2. **Remote Employment:** Full-time remote roles offer a more structured alternative to freelancing, often including regular income and benefits. These roles may require more specialized skills and stable internet access, but they provide a more predictable work environment for refugees who can meet the necessary skill requirements.
3. **Digital Entrepreneurship:** For refugees interested in creating their own businesses, digital entrepreneurship provides an opportunity to establish online enterprises, sell products, or offer services. While this pipeline offers substantial autonomy and potential for growth, it requires foundational business knowledge, startup capital, and access to digital marketplaces.
4. **Content Creation through Social Media Platforms:** Social media and content platforms allow refugees to share unique perspectives and connect with audiences globally. This pathway, while accessible, requires creativity, digital literacy, and consistency. Content creation has lower barriers to entry but may be less stable as a primary income source.

Each of these pipelines has distinct requirements, advantages, and challenges, which practitioners can address through targeted training, resource access, and support systems to help refugees maximize their potential in digital work.

2. Laying the Groundwork for Digital Jobs



Before advancing any initiative to support digital livelihoods for refugees, it is crucial to evaluate the foundational elements necessary for success. Refugees need two essential components to effectively engage in digital income generation: enabling conditions and employability factors, as shown in Figure 1. These elements serve as a checklist to assess readiness and identify areas for targeted support, ensuring that refugees have the necessary resources and skills to thrive in digital employment.

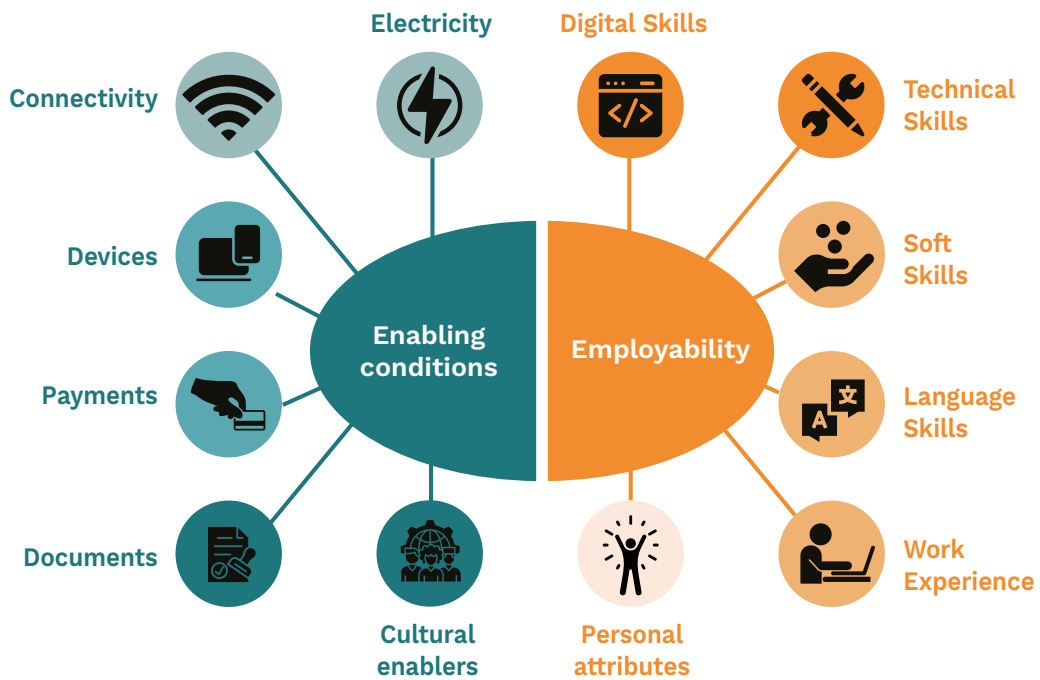


Figure 1. Enabling conditions and employability factors for digital livelihoods

Enabling conditions encompass the external factors and resources essential for refugee participation in digital work. Employability, conversely, focuses on the individual refugee's skills and attributes necessary to secure and maintain employment in the competitive digital job market.



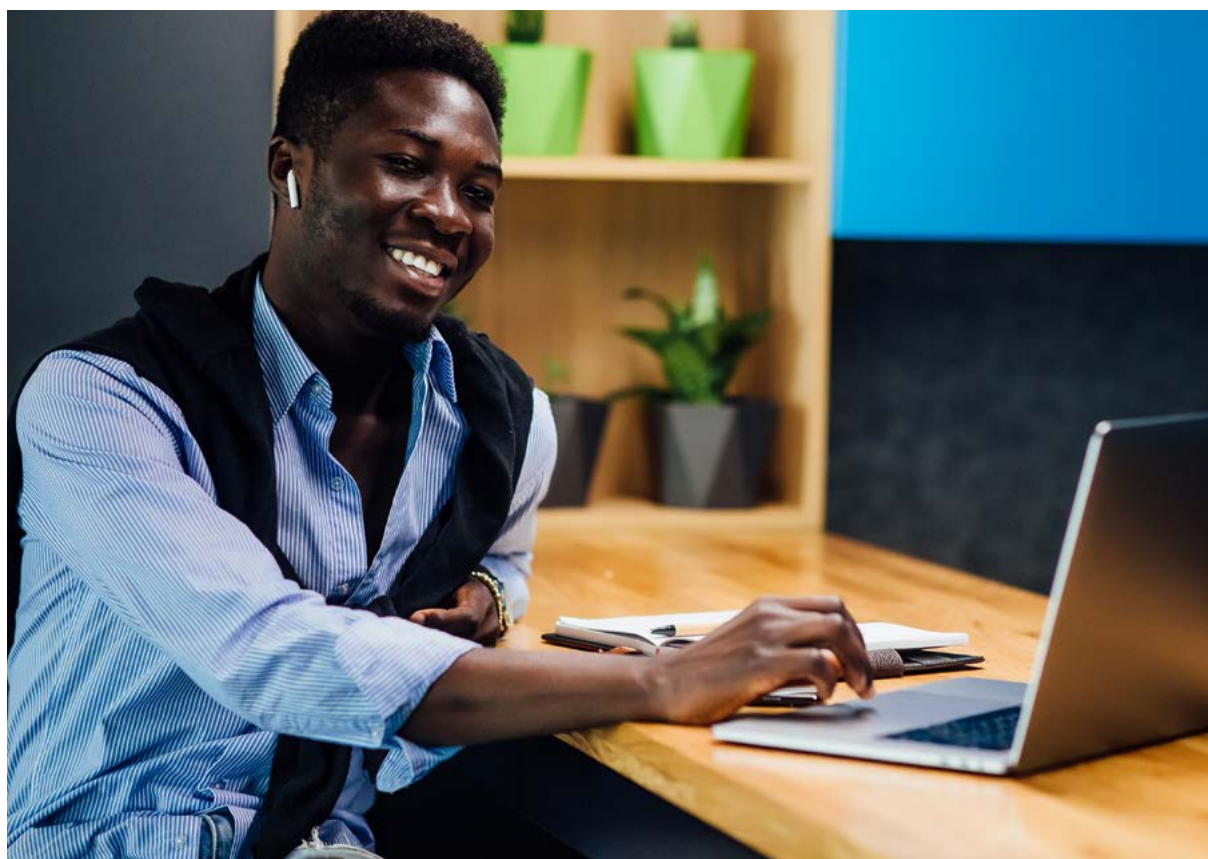
These key elements are outlined in detail in Table 1, providing a structured overview of elements essential for supporting refugee participation in digital livelihoods.

Table 1. Elements that are essential for refugees to engage in digital work

Key aspects	Components	Description
 Enabling conditions	Electricity	Reliable and consistent access to electricity.
	Connectivity	Meaningful internet connectivity, including reliable, stable, and affordable access to the internet.
	Devices	Computers, laptops, tablets or mobile phones with necessary functionality.
	Payments	Secure means of receiving (international) payments.
	Documents	Documents required to access digital work practically, such as IDs, Taxation number, etc. These reflect the rights, policy requirements, and regulatory conditions governing refugee workers.
	Cultural enablers	Validation from immediate social circles, including families and friends, and the broader community; An inclusive work environment.
 Employability	Digital skills	The abilities and knowledge required to use digital technologies effectively for various purposes.
	Technical skills	Specific, measurable abilities required to perform job functions, acquired through education, training, or experience.
	Soft skills	Non-technical abilities that enable effective interaction, adaptation, and management of work and relationships.
	Language skills	English language proficiency is often crucial for refugees to effectively communicate, collaborate, and work in global digital workplaces.
	Work experience	Prior relevant experience demonstrates skills and adaptability for refugees seeking digital work.
	Personal attributes	Such as motivation, adaptability, resilience, and a strong work ethic.

While different digital employment pipelines require varying enabling conditions and employability factors, which call for tailored support to address the specific challenges refugees face, some basic foundational needs are universal, such as access to electricity, reliable connectivity, and personal devices. There are ongoing efforts to address these foundational needs, with several initiatives providing practical support to refugees in these areas, include:

- **Digital Hubs:** Organizations like Learning Lions provide refugees with computers and reliable internet in shared hubs, while the Dadaab Collective offers mentoring and co-working spaces for accessing platforms like Upwork. However, hubs face challenges such as limited availability, inconsistent internet, and the added costs of travel for refugees.
- **Personal Devices and Connectivity:**
 1. **Device Provision:** Partnerships like Na'amal and GiveInternet secure laptops and data bundles for refugees, ensuring they have personal devices for secure participation.
 2. **Purchase Programs:** NGOs collaborate with initiatives like Shortlist, which enables refugees to buy laptops in interest-free installments.
 3. **Enhanced Connectivity:** Organizations like Jangala provide internet amplification devices, such as GetBox for homes and BigBox for training centers, improving access in low-connectivity areas.



3. Key Digital Employment Pipelines: Pathways, Opportunities And Barriers



3.1 Digital Freelancing

Digital freelancing allows refugees to independently provide services across industries like web development, graphic design, and data annotation, offering flexibility and autonomy. However, it also presents challenges, including income insecurity and unpaid efforts to secure projects. There are three primary ways refugees engage in digital freelancing: through online labour platforms, project-based freelancing agencies, and informal networks or referrals.



3.1.1 Online Labour Platforms



Pathways

Online labour platforms provide diverse opportunities for refugees, ranging from global platforms like Upwork and Freelancer to regional and country-specific platforms such as Gebeya and Afriblocks in Africa, and Elharefa and Ureed in the MENA region. These platforms cater to various services requiring a wide spectrum of skills in multiple languages, enabling refugees to engage in industries aligned with their expertise.



Challenges

However, refugees face diverse challenges in both enabling conditions and employability when accessing online labour platforms. For enabling conditions, many struggle with required documentation, such as IDs, tax numbers, and payment methods, though circumstances vary widely. Employability barriers include gaps in competitive skills, platform navigation, and portfolio building, which can limit success amidst high competition. These challenges differ significantly based on individual circumstances, highlighting the need for tailored solutions.

Platforms' supporting practices:

1. Some digital labour platforms have introduced special support initiatives to help refugees overcome barriers to accessing freelancing opportunities. Examples include Upwork, a global freelancing marketplace connecting professionals with clients across industries, and Appen, a leader in providing AI training data through microwork opportunities like data annotation.

Case Studies

upwork

Upwork: Opportunity Unlimited Initiative

Upwork launched this initiative to support displaced professionals by addressing key barriers to freelancing success:



Enabling Conditions:

- **Simplified Registration:** Accepts refugee IDs through a special registration link, bypassing tax number requirements in certain regions.
- **Improved Accessibility:** Works with country-specific programs to ease documentation challenges for refugees.
- **Initial Financial Resource Support:** Provides 50 free “connects,” virtual tokens used to apply for jobs or boost visibility to clients, reducing initial financial barriers for refugees.



Employability Support:

- **Training and Guidance:** Offers tutorials on platform navigation, profile optimization, and client communication.
- **Technical Skill Partnerships:** Collaborates with Jasper and Coursera to provide training in high-demand skills like SQL.

Appen

Appen: Refugee Support Initiatives

Appen focuses on creating pathways for refugees to access digital microwork opportunities through partnerships and tailored programs:



Enabling Conditions:

- **Flexible Payment Solutions:** Partners with Payoneer to accept refugee IDs and explores alternative payment methods like cryptocurrencies.
- **NGO Collaborations:** Works with organizations like Konexio and Na'amal to resolve onboarding and payment challenges.



Employability Support:

- **Onboarding Assistance:** Provides mentorship, webinars, and troubleshooting support for refugees navigating the platform.

2. There are specialised digital labour platforms specifically designed to support refugee freelancers and connect them with businesses interested in leveraging refugee talent. For example, BoundlessSkills.com, launched by Gebeya in partnership with UNHCR in 2023, facilitates businesses in discovering and hiring refugee talent in Ethiopia and plans to expand to Kenya. These platforms focus on redistributing work opportunities to refugees, negotiating fees and conditions on their behalf, and providing tailored services such as verification and skill matching.

Case study



Boundless Skills by Gebeya

Boundless Skills stands out as a dedicated talent marketplace tailored to the needs of refugees. As of mid-2024, the platform has onboarded over 650 refugees, surpassing UNHCR's targets, but faces challenges in attracting enterprises willing to hire refugee talent as part of CSR initiatives.

Key features and practices include:

- **Refugee-Centric Features:** Identifies refugee camps or countries and integrates refugee ID numbers for verification.
- **Skills Testing and Upskilling:** Onboards refugees with skills testing and delivers upskilling programs in technical and soft skills through partnerships with training providers.
- **Payment Solutions:** Plans to use local wallet systems for payments, navigating country-specific employment regulations through manual vetting.



Advantages

- Provide tailored support, including opportunity redistribution and skill matching.
- Build trust with employers through verification and mediation.
- Increase awareness of refugee talent in the broader job market.



Disadvantages

- **Scalability:** Regional focus limits global impact, with reliance on external funding threatening sustainability.
- **Job Stability:** Inconsistent opportunities may undermine income security for refugees.
- **Market Segregation:** Specialised platforms risk isolating refugee workers from broader, more competitive markets, potentially stunting professional growth.



3.1.2 Project-Based Freelancing Agencies

Project-based freelancing agencies connect refugees with remote work opportunities by acting as intermediaries between refugee freelancers and clients. These agencies may take various forms, including NGOs, social enterprises, or companies, and typically operate by sourcing projects, managing client relationships, and providing essential support to refugee workers. Examples include NaTakallam, Na’amal Agency, an initiative of Na’amal, Dadaab Collective, Desert Freelancing Agency, Zawadie and Humans in the Loop.

Features of Project-Based Freelancing Agencies

- **Intermediary Role:** Agencies source projects and assign tasks to vetted refugee freelancers, often working in teams supported by a technical lead.
- **Active Support:** Unlike traditional platforms, agencies offer comprehensive support throughout the freelancing process, including access to technology, internet, training, and ongoing guidance.
- **Portfolio Development:** By securing contracts on behalf of refugees, agencies help them build a portfolio, overcoming the common “no experience, no job” dilemma.
- **Payment Management:** Agencies handle payments from clients and use flexible methods to distribute earnings to refugees, bypassing issues with international banking systems.

Barriers Addressed

1. **Enabling Conditions:**

- **Technology and Connectivity:** Some agencies partner with organizations to provide refugees with access to co-working hubs and personal devices.
- **Payment Systems:** They navigate payment barriers by using less formal channels or advocating for refugee-friendly banking policies.

2. **Employability:**

- **Skill Gaps:** Some agencies offer training in technical and soft skills tailored to remote work.
- **Client Hesitations:** Through vetting and quality assurance, agencies build trust with clients and mitigate biases against hiring refugee talent.
- **Professional Interaction:** Guidance on client engagement prepares refugees for professional settings.

Case study

Na'amal Agency

Launched in January 2024, Na'amal Agency helps refugees access remote employment by addressing the gap between skills and opportunities. Refugees join the agency's talent pool after completing comprehensive six-month to one-year training programs, focusing on technical skills like web development and digital marketing, as well as essential soft skills for remote work. These programs are run in collaboration with partners such as the Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT).

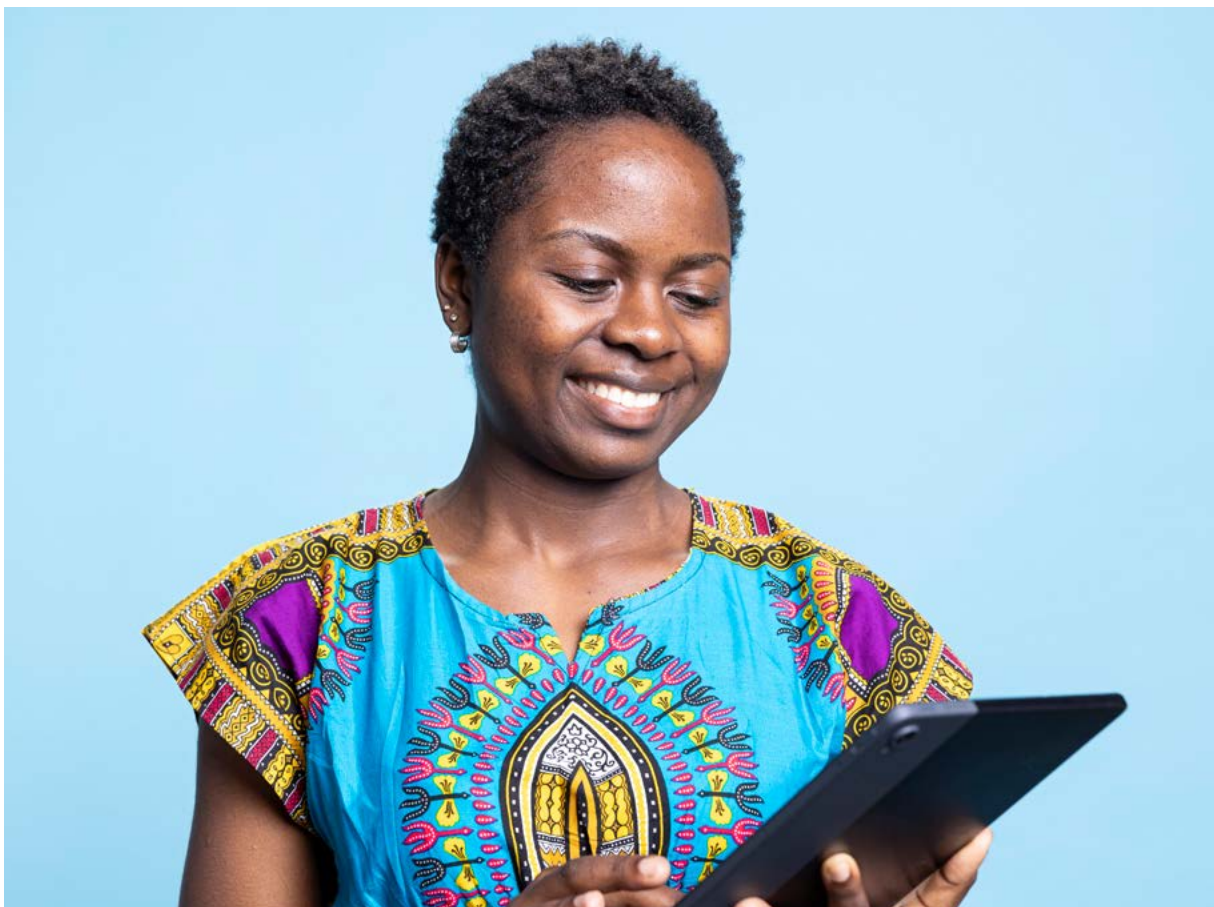
The agency collaborates with EqualReach to connect refugees with global technical projects, ensuring quality assurance and fair working conditions. By mid-2024, Na'amal paid over \$20,000 to 26 refugee freelancers, demonstrating its tangible impact. It has also maintained a balanced gender ratio within its talent pool.

To address skill gaps and improve client engagement, Na'amal provides additional resources and mentorship during project execution. The goal of the Agency is for Refugees to stay with the agency for about a year, gaining experience and building portfolios before transitioning to independent employment, creating a sustainable cycle of growth and opportunity.

Advantages of the Agency Model

1. **Risk Mitigation for Clients:** Agencies handle project management, quality control, and administrative tasks, making it easier and de-risking the process for businesses to work with refugee talent.
2. **Quality Assurance:** Experienced tech leads ensure high-quality outputs, enabling refugees to gain experience while meeting client expectations.
3. **Skill Development:** Refugees benefit from on-the-job training, mentorship, and real-world experience, enhancing their employability over time.
4. **Portfolio Building:** Real client work helps refugees establish a professional portfolio critical for future opportunities.
5. **Scalability and Sustainability:** With a business-oriented approach, agencies can expand and reduce reliance on grants, creating a replicable model for sustainable impact.

This model bridges gaps in infrastructure, skills, and market access, providing a supportive ecosystem that facilitates refugee participation in the digital economy while addressing practical challenges and fostering long-term economic integration.





3.1.3 Networks

Many refugees engage in digital freelancing through informal networks, relying on personal connections, community relationships, and referrals to secure projects. These networks play a critical role in helping refugees navigate the gig economy, particularly when formal channels are inaccessible due to barriers like lack of documentation or platform requirements.

How Informal Networks Function

- **Subcontracting Work:** Established freelancers often share excess work with less experienced peers, offering opportunities for collaboration or full subcontracting. This arrangement helps new freelancers build skills and generate income.
- **(Informal) Digital Job Boards:** Platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook serve as informal job boards where established freelancers post projects, enabling others in their community to access opportunities.
- **Payment Methods:** Payments are typically made via cash or digital wallets, depending on local context and negotiated terms.

This system works best for refugees who have:

- Access to reliable electricity and internet.
- A personal laptop or other appropriate devices for remote work.

For refugees struggling to meet formal platform requirements—such as documentation, a portfolio, or platform credits (e.g., “connects” on Upwork)—these networks serve as an entry point into the digital freelancing ecosystem.

Advantages

- **Skill Development:** Informal arrangements allow less experienced freelancers to learn from established peers and gain exposure to freelancing work.
- **Low Entry Barriers:** Informal networks offer refugees a chance to bypass formal barriers like documentation or portfolio requirements.
- **Stepping Stone:** This approach helps refugees build confidence and experience, paving the way for formal freelancing opportunities.

Challenges

- **Income Instability:** Informal networks often lack the reliability of formal platforms, with no guarantees of regular work or payment security.
- **Risk of Exploitation:** Without formal contracts, workers face risks such as non-payment or unfair treatment.
- **Limited Sustainability:** The informal nature of these networks makes it difficult to establish long-term, stable freelancing careers.



Emerging Professional Platforms

Refugees are increasingly turning to professional platforms like LinkedIn to expand their networks and access formal job opportunities. By building professional profiles, refugees can showcase their skills, connect with industry professionals, and apply directly for jobs, leveraging LinkedIn’s features to overcome traditional employment barriers.



3.2 Full-time remote employment

Remote employment, where individuals work for organizations from a distance, offers refugees a pathway to stable income and professional growth. This employment model has gained momentum since the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated global shifts toward remote work. Countries hosting large refugee populations, such as Türkiye, have started adapting their labor laws to accommodate remote work, broadening access for refugees with work permits.

For employers, remote work offers cost savings, access to a wider talent pool, and the ability to extend coverage hours across time zones. Refugees, in turn, benefit from flexibility, stability, and opportunities to overcome geographic and legal employment barriers, making remote work particularly appealing for those in camps, remote settlements, or with caregiving responsibilities.

Advantages of Remote Work for Refugees

- **Stable Income:** Unlike freelancing, remote jobs often provide predictable earnings, social protection, and decent working conditions.
- **Flexibility:** Remote roles allow refugees to balance family responsibilities and overcome commuting challenges.
- **Opportunity for Professional Development:** Remote employment fosters long-term relationships with employers and skill-building, aligning with ILO's concept of decent work.

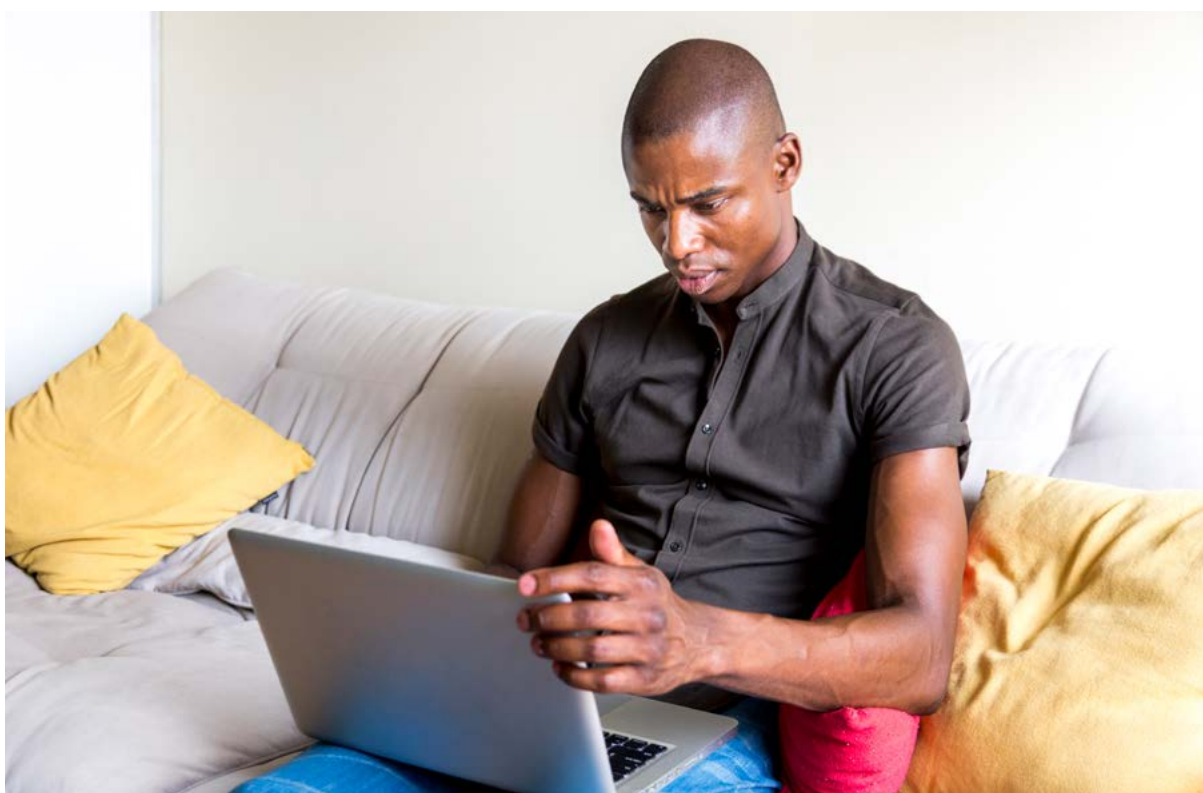
Challenges in Remote Employment

- **Access Barriers:** Refugees often face practical hurdles, including limited rights to work, insufficient internet access, lack of necessary technology, and language barriers.
- **Employer Location Constraints:** Many roles require employees to reside in the same country as their employer, restricting opportunities for cross-border hires.
- **Competition:** Remote job markets are competitive, with employers often favoring senior professionals with prior work experience.

Employers' Perspectives on Hiring Refugees Remotely

Research highlights both interest and hesitations among employers considering refugee hires:

- **Motivations:** Employers value refugees' work ethic, unique skills, and the diversity they bring, viewing their inclusion as a strategic business advantage.
- **Barriers:** Challenges include identifying qualified candidates, navigating refugee-specific recruitment logistics, and concerns around compliance, payment systems, and data security.



Trends and Opportunities

Despite a decline in remote job postings in 2024, demand for these roles remains high, highlighting the need for innovative hiring practices. Employers, including startups and larger organizations, increasingly rely on freelance or project-based talent, which could serve as an entry point for refugees lacking extensive work experience. Initiatives by organizations like Jusoor have shown promise in addressing logistical barriers by acting as matchmakers between refugees and employers, streamlining hiring processes and providing quality assurance.

Remote employment holds significant potential for refugees, but realizing its benefits requires addressing access barriers, supporting employer readiness, and creating frameworks that facilitate cross-border hiring. These efforts can build a more inclusive and diverse remote work environment while empowering refugees to participate meaningfully in the global economy.



Pathways to Remote Employment

Remote employment provides refugees with opportunities for stable, formal work, but access often depends on overcoming legal and logistical barriers. Two primary pathways have emerged: direct hiring and hiring through partnerships.

1. Direct Hiring

Refugees apply directly to companies via job boards, networking platforms like LinkedIn, or employer websites. This pathway allows independence but comes with challenges:

- **Legal Barriers:** Many remote roles require work permits or location-specific eligibility, limiting opportunities for refugees without proper documentation.
- **Application Hurdles:** Refugees often face difficulties due to location restrictions, lack of recognition for informal education, or insufficient preparation for interviews. Discrimination and infrastructure challenges, such as unreliable internet or lack of devices, further complicate the process.

2. Hiring Through Partnerships

Organizations that support refugee employment, such as Refugee Talent, bridge the gap between refugee talent and employers. Key practices include:

- **Training and Preparation:** Providing soft and technical skills training, interview coaching, and professional development.
- **Placement and Support:** Facilitating candidate-employer introductions, handling recruitment logistics, and offering ongoing support.
- **Examples:**
 - **Refugee Talent:** Operating in Canada, Offers pre-screened, prepared candidates to employers, alleviating hiring concerns.
 - **Jusoor:** Trains Syrian youth through its Tech Talent Pipeline program, addressing global shortages in software engineering roles.

Hiring Practices for Refugee Remote Workers

Employers adopt innovative strategies to manage legal and logistical challenges when hiring refugees:

1. Employer of Record (EOR) Model:

- Companies partner with EORs to handle payroll, taxes, and compliance with local labor laws, simplifying international hiring.
- Example: Remote, is a global Employer of Record and HR platform that has developed a dedicated program called Remote for Refugees, which connects skilled refugee talent with employers through a streamlined EOR process.

2. Independent Contractor Agreements:

- Refugees are hired as contractors or consultants, bypassing some complexities of full-time employment.
- Example: Concat employs refugee contractors in Lebanon, focusing on flexibility in the tech sector.

3. Innovative Payment Solutions:

- Employers use platforms like Wise or fintech services like Kutana Pay and Payoneer for international payments.
- Cryptocurrency has been explored but remains impractical due to limited cash-out options for refugees.

4. Infrastructure Support:

- Financial assistance for internet access and provision of essential hardware like laptops address infrastructure barriers.



3.3 Digital Entrepreneurship

Digital entrepreneurship involves creating business opportunities using ICT tools like the internet, mobile technology, and digital platforms. For refugees, it offers a pathway to economic independence and social integration by enabling them to sell products, provide digital services, or manage digital ventures. Unlike freelancing, digital entrepreneurship emphasizes owning and managing businesses, offering potential for scalability and community employment.

Pathways to Digital Entrepreneurship

1. **E-Commerce Platforms:** Refugees sell products through online marketplaces like Etsy or create their own digital storefronts using platforms like Shopify. Specialized initiatives like UNHCR's MADE51 support refugee artisans by connecting them to global markets.
2. **Social Media-Based Businesses:** Informal entrepreneurship on platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook allows refugees to market and sell products directly to customers. This low-cost option is particularly popular in camps and underserved areas.
3. **Advanced Ventures:** Some refugees establish startups or innovate with digital products, managing complex operations with global reach, exemplifying the higher-end of digital entrepreneurship.

Advantages for Refugees

- **Accessibility:** Digital platforms enable refugees to bypass some geographical and legal barriers to traditional employment.
- **Flexibility:** Online businesses can be operated from camps or rural areas, catering to those with caregiving responsibilities.
- **Scalability:** Entrepreneurs can start small and expand operations over time.

Challenges

- **Legal and Financial Barriers:** Restrictions on business ownership and limited access to capital hinder growth.
- **Infrastructure:** Poor connectivity, lack of devices, and high shipping costs pose logistical difficulties.
- **Market Integration:** Refugees often struggle to expand beyond local or informal markets due to limited skills and resources.

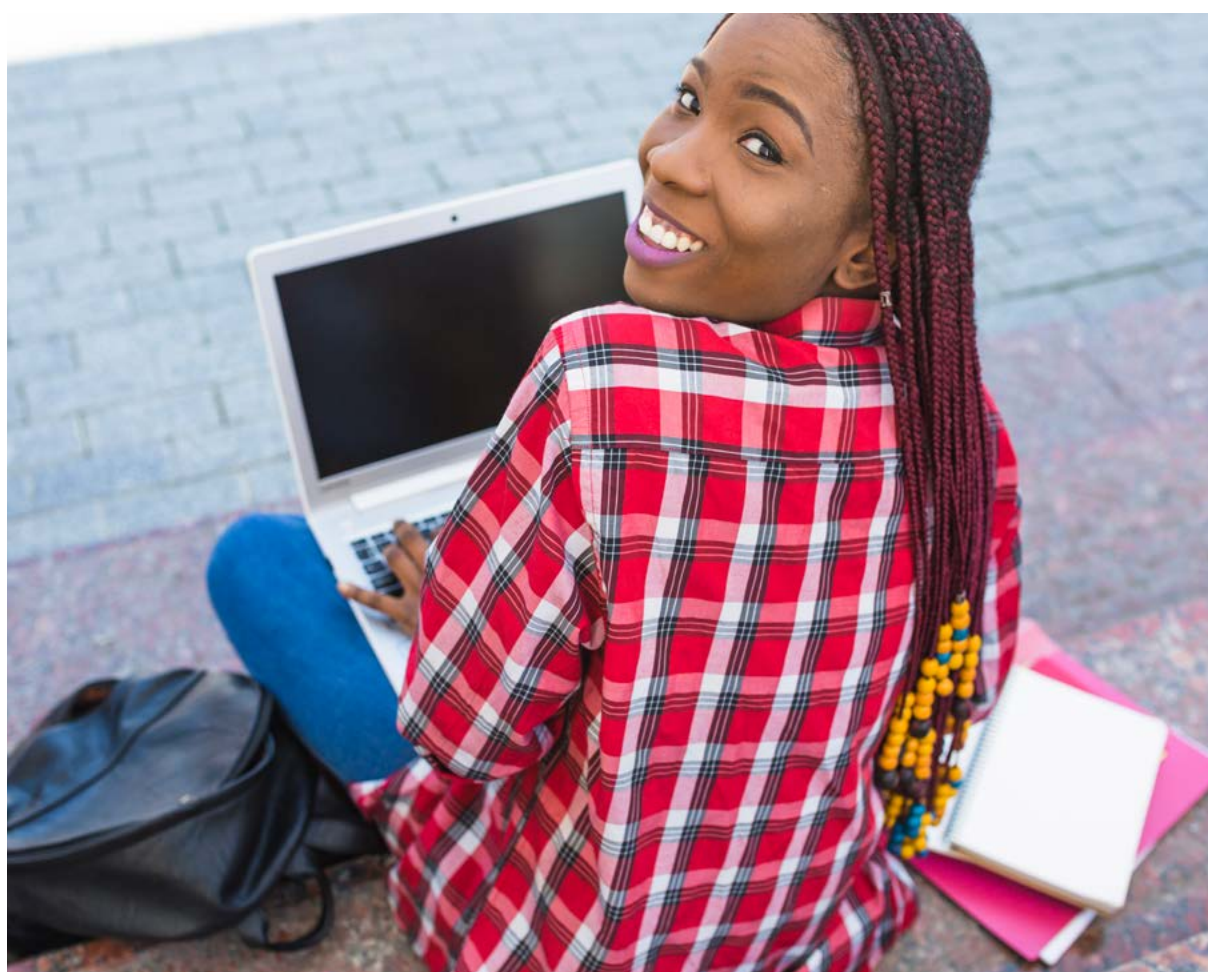
Support for Refugee Digital Entrepreneurs

Programs supporting refugee entrepreneurship address enabling conditions (e.g., providing internet access and devices) and employability factors (e.g., training and mentorship):

- **Basic Initiatives:** Provide digital literacy training and tools for starting informal businesses through social media.
- **Comprehensive Programs:** Include advanced technical training, mentorship, and access to global markets. For instance, TERN (The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network) in the UK supports refugees with incubation and acceleration services.

Examples of Practices

- **IconnectKenya (ICOKE):** This e-commerce initiative helps refugee artisans in Kenya sell products globally through platforms like IconnectKenya (ICOKE) and provides social media training to enhance digital marketing.
- **Brazilian E-Commerce Training:** A UNHCR-led program empowers displaced Indigenous artisans with skills to sell handcrafted items online, integrating storytelling and cultural heritage into their marketing strategies.



3.4 Content Creation through Social Media Platforms

Refugees increasingly turn to content creation on social media as a source of income, leveraging platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook to share experiences, skills, and cultural knowledge. This digital work enables refugees to reach global audiences and monetize their content through advertising, sponsorships, affiliate marketing, live streaming, and subscription-based platforms like Patreon.

Opportunities in Content Creation

1. Revenue Streams:

- Platform programs like YouTube AdSense generate income based on views and engagement.
- Sponsored content and affiliate marketing offer additional revenue through brand collaborations.
- Live streaming and subscription services provide direct audience support.

2. Skill Development:

- Engaging in content creation builds valuable digital and communication skills, enhancing employability.
- Platforms allow refugees to diversify income sources and explore creative and flexible work options.

3. Cultural Impact:

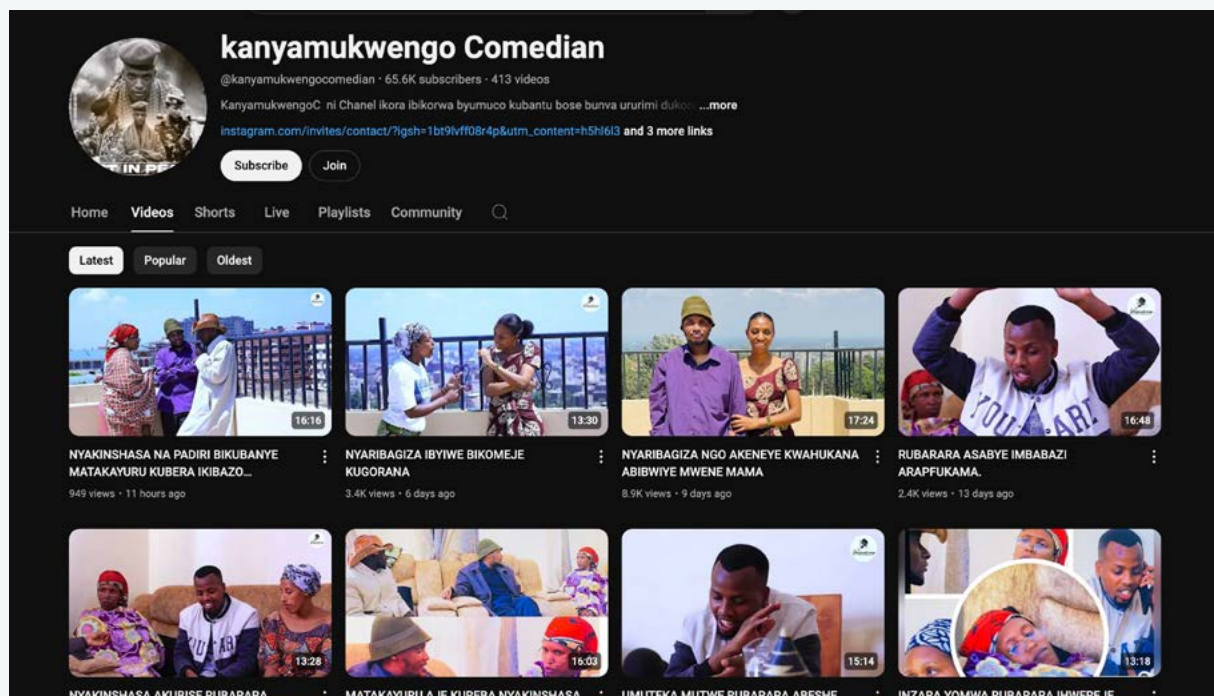
- Sharing personal narratives fosters cultural understanding and promotes community building.
- Social media enables refugees to connect with others, creating supportive networks.



Challenges

1. **High Competition:** Saturation in the digital space makes it difficult for new creators to stand out.
2. **Resource Barriers:**
 - Limited access to high-quality equipment and reliable internet affects content production.
 - Language barriers and legal restrictions hinder audience reach and financial transactions.
3. **Algorithm Changes:** Frequent platform updates impact visibility and income stability.
4. **Mental Health Risks:** The pressure to maintain an online persona can lead to burnout, especially for displaced individuals coping with trauma.

Case Studies



courtesy @kanyamukwengocomedian Youtube.com

- **Congolese Refugees in Nairobi:**

The Kanyamukwengo Comedian YouTube channel demonstrates how refugees monetize content, supplementing online earnings with offline opportunities like event performances and training services. The channel also highlights the potential for auxiliary businesses, such as video editing and equipment rentals.

- **Kenyan Refugee TikTok Creators:**

Refugee creators in Kenya use TikTok Live to receive monetary rewards and explore storytelling through multiple platforms. However, barriers like equipment costs and access to financial services limit their ability to scale.

Supporting Refugee Content Creation

Content creation on social media remains a largely unrecognized and unsupported income source for refugees. Many aid programs and organizations focus on conventional job placements or established industries, often viewing content creation as unsustainable due to its income unpredictability, competitive nature, and refugees' limited access to essential resources like equipment and internet connectivity. Privacy and security concerns also deter organizations from promoting this public-facing work for vulnerable populations.

Case study



Wowzi's Limited Impact

Wowzi, a platform connecting global brands with African content creators, illustrates the challenges in supporting refugee content creators. While Wowzi has included refugees in campaigns and launched initiatives like “Creators for Good” to connect them with brands and social impact projects, its efforts have faced several setbacks:

1. **Barriers to Entry:** Minimum follower requirements and lack of digital literacy exclude many refugee creators.
2. **Resource Limitations:** Refugees struggle with access to smartphones, internet, and essential content creation tools.
3. **Income Instability:** The gig-based nature of influencer work leads to inconsistent opportunities and earnings.

Wowzi's hybrid training and mentorship programs, along with subsidized equipment and connectivity efforts, have made some progress, but the overall impact remains limited. Refugees still face significant hurdles in scaling their content creation efforts and accessing stable income, underscoring the need for targeted support to overcome these challenges.

4. Conclusion and Next Steps



This handbook provides a practical framework for understanding and facilitating digital livelihoods for refugees. By exploring four key pipelines—freelancing, remote employment, digital entrepreneurship, and content creation—it highlights the opportunities and challenges refugees face in accessing the digital economy. Through country-specific insights, case studies, and tailored approaches, it offers actionable strategies to address barriers and foster inclusion. The information serves as a starting point for practitioners, policymakers, and organizations to design initiatives that align with refugees’ diverse needs and circumstances.

Practitioners play a vital role in facilitating digital livelihoods for refugees. To build effective programs and interventions, the following next steps are recommended:



1. **Assess local context:** Conduct a thorough needs assessment to understand the specific barriers and opportunities refugees face in accessing the four digital work pipelines within their local context, including infrastructure, policy and market conditions.



2. **Focus on foundational needs:** Use the enabling conditions and employability factors framework to identify key barriers—such as lack of internet, devices, or documentation, alongside skills gaps, training needs, mentorship, and internship opportunities—and develop targeted solutions to ensure refugees are equipped to access and succeed in digital work opportunities.



3. **Facilitate access to work:** Enhance access to global opportunities by leveraging models like the agency approach, BPOs, and similar initiatives, which bridges refugees with remote clients, managers projects, ensures quality assurance, and provides mentorship to address skill gaps and infrastructure challenges.



4. **Leverage partnerships:** Collaborate with governments, NGOs, private sector entities, and intermediaries to amplify reach and resources. Partner with platforms, training providers, or social enterprises and companies to create pathways into the digital economy.



5. **Monitor and evaluate impact:** Develop metrics to track the effectiveness of interventions and ensure continuous learning. Use insights to refine strategies and share best practices with the broader community. Measure not only livelihood outcomes, but also examine more long-term outcomes such as well-being and impact on households and communities.



6. **Advocate for policy change:** Work with local and national stakeholders to influence policies that support refugees' right to work, streamline documentation processes, and enable access to all work, including in the digital economy.

