



Innovation Spotlight: Microsoft



Tent's Innovation Spotlight series features companies that are leveraging their core business operations to integrate refugees around the world in new, exciting ways. We hope it inspires your company to consider new ways to support refugees.

This spotlight may be most useful to technology, financial services, or consulting companies.

The project in a nutshell



Azure Academy

The Azure Academy refugee program, a collaboration between Microsoft and IT Performance House Academy (ITPH), equips refugee job seekers in the Netherlands with the skills, formal credentials, and connections necessary to succeed as Azure IT professionals.

ITPH runs Azure (a Microsoft cloud storage solution) training courses for groups of refugees with support from Microsoft employee volunteers, who also act as mentors to program

participants as they develop their technical skills and learn to navigate the Dutch workplace. After the 16-week program concludes, Microsoft staff leverage the company's extensive client and partner network to ensure that the graduates' training is rewarded with an internship, and a full-time job offer likely to follow. In the first year of the program, 12 participants were successfully certified in Azure, and 10 of them have since been hired into full-time roles.

The Innovation



Training refugee job seekers *and* connecting them with employment

Professional training programs aimed at refugee job seekers are not a rarity. However, these programs often struggle to place their graduates into full-time jobs. Microsoft has managed to flip the script with Azure Academy. By pitching program graduates to Microsoft

clients and partners – and playing an outsized supporting role throughout the interview and hiring processes – Microsoft and ITPH have helped to secure work placements for most of their graduates.

The Results



The Azure Academy welcomed its first cohort of refugees in 2019. All 18 participants successfully completed the program and 12 of them earned Microsoft's official Azure certification. Of these, 14 of the trainees successfully secured internships or work-experience contracts, and 10 of them already have full-time jobs with Microsoft clients

or partners as of December 2020. Azure Academy's second refugee cohort, which kicked off in late 2020, welcomed 22 new refugee trainees.

In addition to its positive impact on refugee participants, the Azure Academy has delivered benefits directly to Microsoft. The clients and

partners that have hired the program's refugee graduates have shared positive feedback, and many have already asked Microsoft about hiring new graduates in the future.

From their clients' perspective, Microsoft is increasing diversity in the information and communications technology sector and filling a gap in the market for Azure specialists in the Netherlands. In doing so, Microsoft has enjoyed the added benefit of growing and strengthening relationships with its clients by helping them

to secure top-tier talent trained in Azure, which ultimately supports Microsoft's business.

Microsoft has also capitalized on the culture of volunteerism within its own workforce to enlist 50 volunteers to help staff the program – both as mentors, to assist trainees with soft-skills development and job placements, and as guest lecturers to supplement the core curriculum. This volunteer program helped to boost employee engagement within Microsoft – a clear boon to the company.

What made the project a success?



Microsoft and ITPH's innovative approach to post-program job placement is what makes Azure Academy stand out. The organizations work together to secure internships or work experience offers – which typically convert to full-time roles – for program graduates. Over half of the 2019 cohort have since landed full-time jobs. Microsoft staff and volunteers tap the company's clients and partners to find out which of them are hiring for relevant roles, then select the most appropriate candidate to pitch to each company. Depending on the hiring company's needs and interests, Microsoft and ITPH lean more or less heavily on the diversity angle when making the initial pitch. They then stay involved throughout the interview and hiring process, offering support and advice to the refugee job seeker and the hiring manager.

Notably, many of the companies in Microsoft's network are actively seeking talent with this skill set, which makes it easier for the team to pitch Azure Academy graduates. And, as Microsoft is a well-established and respected brand in the Netherlands, their recommendations are taken very seriously by their network.

Microsoft needed the right partner to launch a refugee program within the Azure Academy. ITPH, with its connections to talented refugee

job seekers and experience designing and implementing professional technical training programs for this population, was able to save Microsoft the time and expense of recruiting trainees for the program and running it in house.

Microsoft and ITPH take great care to select individuals who show promise, not only in terms of their aptitude for learning Azure, but also their capacity to thrive in a Dutch work environment. Most of these individuals are first pre-screened by referring organizations, then interviewed and further evaluated by ITPH and Microsoft.

The program design is also a significant factor: the Azure Academy curriculum emphasizes soft skills (like how to navigate a Dutch workplace, or how to use LinkedIn) in addition to Azure-specific hard skills, which have proven to be equally important for trainees in terms of their employment potential post-program. Thanks to a robust 16-week curriculum delivered by dedicated Azure instructors with support from Microsoft volunteers, most trainees finish the program with an official certificate from Microsoft, which then allows them to communicate their expertise to prospective employers in a universally recognizable manner.

NEXT STEPS

To develop a similar project - or brainstorm about other ways your company can work with refugees - reach out to the Tent team at info@tent.org!



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