

Global migration**Businesses are stepping up to hire skilled refugees**

A 'talent catalogue' for recruiters is helping forcibly displaced people to secure jobs — and new lives



Having fled Syria, Khalaf Abd has now made a home in Gloucestershire, where he works as a software engineer © Gareth Iwan Jones/FT

Janina Conboye 6 HOURS AGO

Khalaf Abd is a software engineer from Aleppo in Syria, who in 2013 fled the country across the border into neighbouring Lebanon.

Today he lives and works in the UK after earning a role as a software engineer at Iress, an Australian tech company. He secured the job through [Talent Beyond Boundaries](#), a Washington DC-headquartered group that helps forcibly displaced skilled people find jobs with employers that have skills shortages. Mr Abd, 31, is TBB's first UK placement.

In Syria, after studying you are required to enter the army, so Mr Abd left because "I finished studying and didn't want to join", he says.

After an unsteady start as a construction labourer in Beirut, Mr Abd saved some money, found an IT job in the small city of Jounieh "and everything was great". But things changed when the Lebanese government [introduced restrictions](#) on refugees and Mr Abd found himself without the right to work.

"When working illegally, you never know if you will get your salary at the end of the month," he says. "And you are not sure when you will be forced to return back to your country . . . you are not sure about anything."



Khalaf Abd at university in Aleppo. In Syria, after studying you are required to enter the army © HANDOUT

He was referred to TBB by a friend who was already registered. Following rigorous interviews with Iress while still in Lebanon, which included coding challenges, he was offered the job, describing it as if he had been “in a deep hole and someone throws a rope”.

He then needed to gather the right paperwork to meet his UK visa requirements — not straightforward when you are unable to return to your country of origin to collect them. Eventually, Mr Abd, along with his wife — whom he met in Lebanon — and two daughters, were able to start their new life in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.

Mr Abd’s placement using the Tier 2 visa for skilled workers with a job offer follows successful pilots by TBB in Australia and Canada.

In Australia, the immigration minister recently announced a new skilled refugee pilot scheme, which through a “labour agreement” between TBB and the Department of Home Affairs will offer skilled visas to 100 applicants plus family members. Canada’s immigration minister has committed to bringing in up to 500 skilled refugees and their family members under the Economic Mobility Pathways Project, which helps forcibly displaced people through the Canadian immigration system.

Almost 80m people are displaced globally, many of whom possess skills required by western companies. TBB’s mission, says Marina Brizar, its UK director, is to help them find work and receive safe and legal passage to the UK, Canada and Australia.

Speaking of Britain's National Health Service, she says: "The NHS is targeting 50,000 nurses by 2024 and we have hundreds of them sitting idle in Lebanon and Jordan, without the right to work. It doesn't make sense not to leverage the supply and demand, we just need to connect the dots."

TBB, which has placed 142 people and supported 610 candidates interviewing with employers abroad, has essentially built a LinkedIn for displaced people. This talent catalogue has more than 22,733 people living in Lebanon and Jordan, many of whom have fled the conflict in Syria. They represent more than 150 occupations, most of which are included in the UK's skills shortage list.

But Ms Brizar is keen to stress that TBB's programme works in addition to the UK's humanitarian intake. Humanitarian programmes, she says, "must be reserved for the most highly vulnerable, and those who are already in the UK seeking asylum deserve the right to work and to be visible".

Meanwhile, discussions with the UK Home Office about a Displaced Talent Visa have been positive.

Baroness Williams of Trafford said in the House of Lords in October that "the government is committed . . . to further constructive engagement on identifying ways that we can level up mobility for displaced persons across the labour market . . . I look forward to continuing those discussions over the next 12 months and to working together towards solutions".

The goal now is to get more employers on board. In Australia, TBB is working with consultancy firms such as Accenture, EY and Deloitte, and in Canada with Bonfire, a software company. The private sector has "a real role to play", says Ms Brizar.

The UK arm of Iress teamed up with TBB UK after being connected via Iress board member John Cameron, who founded TBB Australia. Iress in Australia had already recruited two displaced people. Julia McNeill, the company's group executive of people, says recruiting through TBB means that "we can get some great people that we wouldn't have otherwise had the opportunity to speak to". And while the scheme may help expand the talent pool, "it is probably the least of the benefits", she adds. "It's also about offering a change of life."

This, she says "is not a one-off sugar fix . . . this is real people . . . to offer them a new life, a new career". Internally there is also a sense of pride. "We thrive on diversity and this is a great opportunity to showcase that."

Fanny Prigent is co-founder and chief operating officer of Wero, a Paris-based recruitment agency that helps refugees in France secure good jobs. She agrees that including displaced people as part of a wider recruitment strategy can help promote diversity and inclusion.

Ms Prigent says that it can take up to 10 years for a refugee to get back to where they were professionally before being displaced. “We wanted to get this down to two years,” she says. Companies approach Wero because they want to diversify their talent pool or because they are aware it will improve performance. But some also have jobs they can’t otherwise fill.

Refugees also bring a different mindset: “They have a different way of seeing life,” she says. “You’re recruiting people who have higher motivation, higher capacity for adaptation and are resilient.”

But to ensure success, companies need to invest in refugees’ integration. Wero helps to support the transition, but creating a culture of inclusion has to be shared: “It’s about creating a culture where people at all levels [of a company] are engaged,” Ms Prigent says.

Ms Brizar adds that the experience in Australia shows that when employers take someone from TBB’s talent catalogue, that person can change the dynamic of the team. The employer is then keen to take on other staff with the same background.

Back in Cheltenham, Mr Abd is thankful he and his family have a second chance. His colleagues are supportive and he can develop his career. “I am hoping I can be a senior technical lead and help Iress be one of the best companies in the UK,” he says.

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