

# skillsmatch

**skillsmatch** is a platform that matches the skills, experience and interests of asylum seekers and refugees with a broad range of volunteering opportunities in the Newcastle area.

## Partners:

West End Refugee Service (WERS) – Project lead

Roots and Wings

Newcastle University

Teeside University

June 2018





Since the dispersal of asylum seekers to Newcastle upon Tyne began in 1999, West End Refugee Service (WERS) has played a pivotal role in welcoming, supporting and empowering men and women living as asylum seekers and refugees in the city. Over the last 18 years WERS has learned the importance and effectiveness of working with each individual client, building a relationship of trust and together identifying practical solutions to problems within an emotionally supportive context. During 2017-2018 WERS supported 522 men and women from 60 different countries of origin.

WERS' programme of activities falls into two strands: 'Strength through Support' and 'Strength through Society'. Our 'Strength through Support' strand includes casework and advocacy both at the project and through outreach, befriending, hardship funding and the provision of clothing and food – the emphasis being on helping people find their feet and settle into their new surroundings. 'Strength through Society' then supports their integration into the wider community to live independently, use and develop skills through volunteering, get a job if they have refugee status and participate in community activities. By delivering these two programmes, WERS continues to make a significant difference to the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Newcastle upon Tyne, meeting both the need for initial support and stability and subsequently for independent living with a sense of belonging in their local communities.

### **Volunteering opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees**

WERS' volunteers, currently numbering 50 and representing 13 different nationalities, come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences – local people and refugees and asylum seekers. A skills and interests audit carried out at WERS in 2017 revealed an extraordinary wealth of untapped skills amongst its clients, the majority of whom are not allowed to undertake paid work. Clients are frustrated by their inability to provide for self and family and this can have a devastating impact on their mental health. Clients have repeatedly told WERS that volunteering has a most beneficial effect on their mental health, well-being and English language skills. WERS currently offers regular volunteering opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers at the project in the clothing store and supported group volunteering at local events, e.g. the Haltwhistle Plant Festival. WERS also signposts clients to volunteering opportunities at other agencies and organisations.



Although WERS has identified a number of employment-based websites and initiatives, there has not been, up until now, a digital platform dedicated to matching asylum seekers and refugees with volunteering opportunities which specifically correspond to their individual skills sets and interests.

## Where the idea originated: the CrowdSkills Model

**Savvas Papagiannidis, Newcastle University Business School**

Crowd-funding solutions make it possible to raise money for a project or a venture from a large number of people, typically using an online platform. Contributions can be either reward-based, in which case entrepreneurs pre-sell a product or service to launch a business without incurring debt or sacrificing equity, or equity-based, in which case the backer receives unlisted shares in a company in exchange for the money pledged. Although financial capital can be important in helping start and scale up a project it only considers financial capital, ignoring human and social capital. A more holistic approach when it comes to forming teams for projects can be beneficial to both their success but also the individuals' development.

CrowdSkills<sup>1</sup> involves building effective teams with complementary skills and experiences. Having access to key networks cannot just help start-up a project, but can accelerate growth and increase the chances of success. Similar to crowd-funding, crowd sourcing human and social capital could be used to connect supply, in the form of those who possess the skills and knowledge, as well as access to networks, with the demand that we have seen from entrepreneurs who have the ideas but lack the necessary resources. CrowdSkills makes it possible to promote ideas and projects and seek the support of other users.

The pilot CrowdSkills online platform made it possible for entrepreneurs to engage in skills brokerage. Instead of only seeking financial support, they could ask for specific resources, both tangible and intangible, in the form of professional services (e.g. legal, financial, technical, marketing or ICT services) or to enable the growth of a pool, and the facilitation of matching amongst mentors, potential co-founders and other interested individuals. Promising start-up projects which were not previously able to access quality services and support may be able to do so, at no immediate financial cost. In doing so, they not only reduce their start-up barriers, but also lock-in the necessary expertise in the project. This may be even more important for social enterprises. In fact, such an approach may be more beneficial for projects involving sensitive stakeholder groups (such as asylum seekers, refugees, prisoners) as it can offer opportunities for personal development and psychological and well-being support.

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<sup>1</sup> (a) The Palamida, E., Papagiannidis, S., Xanthopoulou, D. & Stamati, T. (In Press). Capital, motives and their link to investment intentions: The moderating role of the financial crisis in Greece. *Journal of Small Business Management*. (b) Papagiannidis, S., Li, F., Etkowitz, H., & Clouser, M. (2009). Entrepreneurial Networks: A Triple Helix Approach for Brokering Human and Social Capital. *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, 7, 215-235. (c) Papagiannidis, S., & Li, F. (2005). Skills Brokerage: A New Model for Business Start-ups in the Networked Economy. *European Management Journal*, 23(4), 471-482.

## Developing the *skillsmatch* model

**Hannah Barnes, Volunteer Co-ordinator, West End Refugee Service**

The *skillsmatch* project has been created in close consultation with a group of asylum seekers and refugees. Two workshops held in February and March 2018 formed the basis of a plan to adapt the existing *CrowdSkills* model into a website that could effectively match the skills and interests of asylum seekers and refugees with volunteering opportunities out in the community. These workshops, alongside meetings and ongoing discussions with project partners have resulted in a pilot *skillsmatch* website which has then been tested by the participants in order to inform the next stage of its development.



### **Workshop 1 for asylum seekers and refugees: 7 February 2018** **Facilitation by Roots and Wings**

This session focused on:

- participants' motivations to volunteer
- individual skills & interests
- opportunities they are interested in
- what information they would like from organisations offering volunteering opportunities.

Key findings and observations:

- **Language and confidence levels** were very varied amongst participants, and this affected how much people could engage.
- Some people initially found it difficult to think about their real **aspirations** for finding relevant volunteering opportunities. Several admitted this was because they assumed that these opportunities don't exist. When pushed further, individuals began to talk about specific skills and interests, and their particular aspirations to apply and/or develop them.

- The range of **professions and skills** was impressive, and included: a herbalist, a welder, gardeners, teachers, special needs support, healthcare workers and translators, an economist and an IT/Marketing specialist.
- **Motivations** to volunteer included: helping people, happiness, satisfaction, learning new skills or improving existing skills, meeting new people, making friends, skills / improve, something to get out of bed for, responsibility, experience, integration, achievement, references, progression/development, sharing skills, sharing cultures.
- Participants stated they wanted the website to contain **individual profiles**, both in order to show organisations their **collective breadth of skills** to ‘create demand’ for the project, and to give participants the opportunity to write about themselves and what they can offer.
- Participants stated what they wanted to know from **organisations with opportunities** – this included information on the organisation and what they do, a clear description of the **duties** of a volunteer, what **skills** and **level of English** they were looking for, the **recruitment** process, training, **expenses, support** from other staff. Several participants underlined the importance of **managing expectations** of the organisation, and that they would like to volunteer but want to know as much as possible about what is expected so that they can satisfy the needs of the organisation.

**Workshop 2 for asylum seekers and refugees: 28 March 2018**  
**Facilitation by Roots and Wings**

This session looked specifically at functionality and content. Clients were also presented with draft templates for volunteer profiles and volunteer opportunities, created based upon first workshop findings.

Key findings:

- **Privacy** is important to participants, they want limited/ password access for all users. It was agreed that organisations could see all profiles, but volunteers could not see other volunteer profiles, and that any organisation posting an opportunity will have had contact with WERS about the project beforehand.



- Participants discussed **how much information** they would be willing to share, and this varied depending on the individual, and their situation, as well as their levels of English and ability to express information. We agreed that the profile template would allow for different levels of information, include an 'about me' section and that photos would be optional.
- Participants discussed **communication** and decided that the website could facilitate either volunteer or organisation making contact with the other, and then at this stage the recruitment process would begin (outside of this website) if either party wanted to proceed.
- Participants also gave input on what they would like to be communicated to organisation by WERS, this included some initial **awareness-raising** on some of the issues that they face as a client group. One client commented *'Usually I am responsible person, and I want to be that way, but here, in my situation I cannot always commit as I may be told, at short notice, to go somewhere by the home office. I cannot decide where I can be all the time, I don't want people to think I or others are irresponsible'*.
- There was also brief discussion around **branding and design**, however, it was clear that clients' main interest at this stage was to start creating profiles and looking at opportunities.

We decided at this stage to schedule the next session with clients as a profile writing exercise, where they write profiles, on the pilot website, with the assistance/facilitation of a local WERS volunteer.

- Participants also made it clear that they wanted a very **simple search function** at this stage, which would only match skills 'tagged.'

**The Crowdskills model** - The decision was made at this stage to create a new simple template for a website, rather than use the *CrowdSkills* platform. This original *CrowdSkills* model has advanced functionality that may be useful further down the line. However, for the purposes of this pilot (10-20 volunteers and opportunities), and taking on board participants' feedback, it was felt a better use of resources was to create a simple new template. This would allow more time to work with participants on profiles and testing of system, especially those individuals with limited language and confidence. It was agreed to explore the merger of the two digital platforms at a later stage in the project's development.

## **Workshop 3 for organisations: 17 April 2018**

### **Facilitation by WERS**

Organisations from various sectors were invited to bring volunteer opportunities to a meeting at WERS. Representatives came from **Great Exhibition of the North, St Nicholas Cathedral, Newcastle Hospitals, Seven Stories, Centre for life, Wunderbar, Haltwhistle Plant and Craft festival, Action Language, North East Solidarity and Teaching (NEST at Newcastle University), and Good Space at Broadacre house.**

The meeting began with a general discussion around the client group of asylum seekers and refugees and why this untapped skills resource exists.

Organisations shared information about their volunteer programmes, discussing what opportunities they offered, the skills they are looking for and what they want to know about applicants and how they manage, support and train volunteers. It was clear that volunteer programmes varied significantly across the organisations.

There was useful discussion around working with volunteers, and this client group specifically to deliver **a positive experience of volunteering**. Attendees underlined the important of understanding the **aspirations of volunteers** in order to best meet expectations. **Language** was also discussed as an important factor, and it was agreed that the volunteer profiles needed to include practical and understandable descriptions of the levels of English possessed, Action Language agreed to help develop this section. **'Buddying up'** with more experienced volunteers was also discussed as an effective model for working with people with **lower levels of confidence**. Some organisations had **specific opportunities** which they had brought to the meeting, and others were able to be flexible and said they would go away and **develop ideas for opportunities**, informed by the project and its process. All organisations who attended the meeting have completed a volunteer opportunity form for any available opportunities, and have given feedback on the template.

### **Volunteer Profiles and Opportunity listings**

From these three sessions with clients and organisations, Roots and Wings were able to devise a pilot version of the website, incorporating a template for volunteer profiles and listing the volunteer opportunities collected up until this point. The next step was to ask clients to come and test it.

## **Profile writing sessions with asylum seekers and refugees: testing the website prototype**

**16 & 23 April, 6 May 2018**

**Facilitation by WERS with local volunteer helpers**

Workshop participants were invited back to WERS to log on to the website and create their individual profiles. Each client worked alongside a local WERS volunteer, who was on hand to help where it was needed (typing, writing sentences in English). It was agreed, however, that each profile must be a realistic representation of the individual and their skills and that if help was given this was stated within the profile.

Clients spent around one hour with a helper, writing and completing their profile, using notes and prompter questions. Clients were encouraged to say how they found the process, and each helper also made observations on the process and highlighted any areas for improvement.

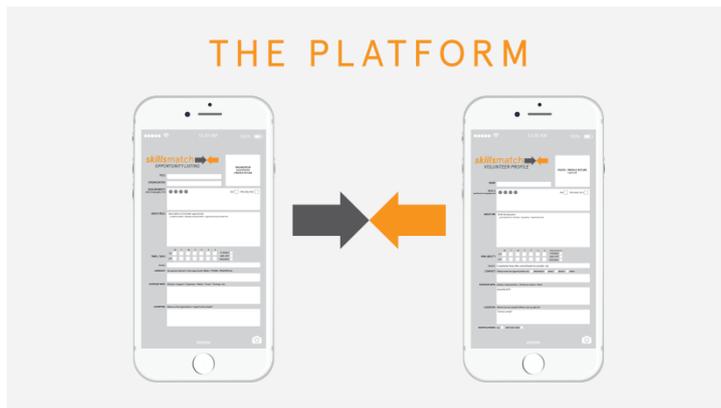


Generally, sitting and creating a profile and discussing the skills and experiences that each individual had to offer and what they would like to do as a volunteer, was a positive experience for all. Helper volunteers were very positive about the project, and all who took part as helpers are keen to stay involved in the project.

Clients were also proactively looking and asking about opportunities when they were viewing the listings section of the website. Many were keen to apply for positions straight away. One lady returned the following week to apply for a position, and has since completed the induction training. Two other ladies returned the following week to explore organisations' web pages that had opportunities to decide if they wanted to apply.



Some clients found creating profiles and looking for opportunities more challenging, this was generally due to lower levels of English and IT competence.



**Alan Ramsay**  
**Director, Roots and Wings**

We have created: [www.skillsmatch.info](http://www.skillsmatch.info)

This website allows Refugees and Asylum seekers to securely upload their profiles onto the website. On completing their profiles (which are securely hidden from the public) they gain access to the locked content which are the volunteer opportunities submitted by the organisations. Once unlocked these opportunities are searchable by skill type which allows for the 'skills matching'.

We have built the website using the 'Squarespace' platform because we feel this offers the easiest to use Content Management System for the project co-ordinators. Into this website we have integrated a 'Member-space' plugin which manages the sign up process and stores the volunteer data securely. Whilst these are separate platforms the user experience is that of one integrated experience. The public facing side of the website explains the project, advertises the skills present within this community and celebrates the partners and supporters of this initiative.

The site is fully responsive to mobile devices and across browser platforms. The website and content is created with Search Engine Optimisation being a paramount consideration. The website is built according to web standards for usability and accessibility to ensure that a seamless experience is provided to visitors regardless of their ability, limitations or how they are accessing the website. The website adheres to W3C standards and all coding was done with best-practice, performance and future-proofing in mind.

There are plans to fully integrate a database to allow for greater automation of the matching process as the numbers of volunteers and volunteering opportunities increase.

As a part of the evaluation of the outcomes of the first pilot of *skillsmatch* project we conducted face to face interviews with six asylum seeker and refugee participants. There was a mix of women (4) and men (2) and involvement in the project (participating in both workshops, one of the workshops and/or filling online profile for volunteering opportunities). The face to face interviews were chosen to allow individual participants the time and space to reflect upon and talk about their own experience of the project. This was especially helpful for participants with limited English.

Participants' motivations to do volunteering work were threefold. Primarily, this type of activity is seen as a way of individuals gaining some professional experience, tools, skills, and credibility for future work applications. Secondly, asylum seekers and refugees want to help other people, have the opportunity to interact with others in order to understand local culture and improve their spoken English.

All participants were extremely positive about the project. They took part in it because they were directly approached by WERS or had heard about it via word of mouth. Reasons for participating in the project and attending the workshops included having a reason to leave the house, doing something useful, escaping loneliness and boredom and meeting new people. The pilot project and the ability to browse volunteering opportunities were met with "excitement", "hope", "motivation". Participants felt encouraged by the trust put in them to express their views. In particular, the interactive form of workshops, ability to express their opinions and a tangible follow-up in the development of the website and profiles were among the best things mentioned about the pilot. The project also challenged the view of some participants that they cannot do anything until they have gained refugee status, some of them being "scared" of volunteering and breaching immigration law. The project provided useful information and clarification about volunteering opportunities. Most participants had previously undertaken volunteering before, either through WERS, their own networks, or simple walk-ins. Only one participant expressed a worry that some volunteering organisations may not treat them with respect and understanding of their situation where they are at the mercy of government agencies resulting in a lack of control over their own lives.

Most participants were happy with the IT system used for this pilot. Overall the creation of volunteering profile was considered an easy to moderate task. The majority of problems stemmed from poor knowledge of English language, or difficulty with written English. The form itself was clear, but some additional minor help was needed in most cases.

One participant suggested that the form or a separate function on the website could allow volunteers and organisations to leave feedback. Positive feedback from organisations could be used to enhance volunteers' profiles. Positive feedback from volunteers on organisations could provide useful information for other volunteers.

## **Plans for development: July-October 2018**

*skillsmatch* has been met with enthusiasm from both sides – WERS clients (asylum seekers and refugees) and organisations who have volunteering opportunities. WERS feels there is significant potential to develop the project.

*skillsmatch* has been awarded additional funding from Creative Fuse North East to further develop the project from July – October 2018. Over these coming months and beyond, additional content will be added to the website, increasing the number of volunteer profiles listed on the site and establishing new relationships with different organisations to offer a broad and varied mixture of volunteering opportunities in the community. The platform will be continually tested and refined incorporating participants' and partners' feedback.

## **Beyond October 2018**

WERS is pursuing additional funding for an extended project in which *skillsmatch* would be embedded in its overall Volunteer Project and WERS hopes to explore the wider use of the digital platform, enabling more volunteers and participating organisations to benefit from the project. By the end of the extended project, it is hoped that the *skillsmatch* website would be ready to roll out nationally to refugee support charities and agencies, each one having a unique login to give access to the website. WERS will also have disseminated the learning from the project by producing a *skillsmatch* resource pack for agencies wanting to use the website.

**West End Refugee Service (WERS)**

**Charity no.1077601**

**[www.wers.org.uk](http://www.wers.org.uk)**