

Syrian refugees invent app for Germany's bureaucracy maze

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Omar Alshafai (left) and Ghaith Zamrik pose for a picture after an AFP interview in Berlin's Mitte district, on August 11, 2016

Interminable queues, impenetrable paperwork, unpronounceable German words—the hurdles for any newcomer to Europe's top economy can be daunting but now there's an app for that, says a team of enterprising Syrian refugees.

It's called Bureaucrazy, after the often Kafkaesque process of getting housing, health care and a bank account, not to mention seeking asylum.

The team is made up of six budding programmers from Berlin's ReDI School of Digital Integration, a non-profit organisation that trains refugees in coding and entrepreneurship.

Its first class started in February with 42 students, of whom 35 were awarded diplomas in June.

"I was shocked by the long waits in line and when I first arrived, I waited two weeks for a paper called 'Kostenu uebernahme'—it's a permission for staying in an apartment or hotel" at state expense, said one of the developers, 30-year-old Omar Alshafai.

German tongue-twisters

"Also when I signed the paper—it was in German—we didn't know what we were signing," said Alshafai, who came from Damascus in April 2015.

The thicket of red tape facing Germany's refugees was highlighted last month by a Chinese backpacker who made global headlines after he accidentally signed an application for asylum when he lost his wallet. He was only able to sort out the mistake and retrieve his passport after spending 12 days in a refugee shelter.



Syrian refugee Omar Alshafai—who invented the BureauCrazy app—arrived in Berlin last Christmas Day

Alshafai's teammate Ghaith Zamrik, a 19-year-old from the war-ravaged Syrian capital, arrived in Berlin last Christmas Day.

Just two months later, he was enrolled at the ReDI school.

"At the first session we were doing some brainstorming—we were discussing what problems we had and how technology could solve these problems," he said.

"We had two main issues, the first was the language and the other was bureaucracy because we couldn't understand it, how the system works here."

But while the market was flooded with translation apps, the team saw a potentially huge audience for technology that could offer downloads of required documents, map the locations of relevant offices and address frequently asked questions.

The pair howled in mock pain as they recalled the German tongue-twisters necessary to open doors, with "Mietschuldenfreiheitsbescheinigung" (proof that you don't own rent for a previous flat) among the most devilish.

Even Germans they asked for help were often bewildered by the jargon of official correspondence, making their app a potential godsend for more than just asylum seekers.

"We're hoping to also help all the migrants, or anybody who comes new to Germany, with the bureaucratic system," Zamrik said.



Ghaith Zamrik (left) and Omar Alshafai started working on their Bureaucrazy app in February before holding a demonstrated at Berlin's Startup Europe Summit in June 2016

'Not the only ones'

The team started work in February and by early June had a successful demonstration at Berlin's Startup Europe Summit.

Anne Kjaer Riechert, the CEO and co-founder of ReDI, noted Germany had an estimated 43,000 unfilled jobs in the IT sector and that refugees represented untapped potential.

The Bureaucrazy team "had no previous experience in any kind of coding but of course they are what I would call extreme users when it comes to mobile technology because the smartphone has really been a lifeline for many of them while fleeing" including as a tool for navigation and reconnecting with family on the migrant trail, she said.

While Alshafai is a trained electrical engineer, he had initially been hired at luxury carmaker Mercedes-Benz as an intern on the factory floor.

Now ReDI is working with established companies like Mercedes to place qualified asylum seekers in their innovation departments.

"I firmly believe it is more profitable for everybody in the long term when we can support newcomers like Omar to help develop ideas for Mercedes' future digital retail spaces instead of having him work on the assembly line," she said.

A recent study by the Bertelsmann Foundation found that the number of

jobs created by companies started by migrants shot up by more than one-third to 1.3 million between 2005 and 2014, while the number of entrepreneurs with foreign roots rose by one-quarter to 709,000.



Germany took in 1.1 million asylum seekers in 2015

Alshafai and Zamrik said that beyond launching a business venture, they wanted to show that with a bit of hard work and ingenuity, refugees could more than pull their weight in German society.

"Lots of refugees actually are doing something but not all of them get media coverage so I think we're not the only ones," Zamrik said.

Bureaucrazy has captured the attention of the German media just weeks after a series of brutal assaults committed by refugees in the south of the country, two of which were claimed by the Islamic State group.

The news revived fears that Germany had made a grave mistake in letting in nearly 1.1 million asylum seekers last year, sending Chancellor Angela Merkel's approval rating plunging.

Zamrik said he was heartened in the wake of the attacks to see Merkel defend her welcoming stance and repeat her "We can do this" rallying cry.

"It gives me back the feeling when I left Syria, why I thought that I might choose Germany to stay in," he said.

The Bureaucrazy team, hoping for a January launch of the app, has opened a crowdfunding page: [www.betterplace.org/en/project ... y-german-bureaucrazy](http://www.betterplace.org/en/project...y-german-bureaucrazy)

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