Boundaryless Agile:

Peacekeeping in Pakistan

The importance of project management in achieving business objectives is becoming widely accepted these days. But can effective project management techniques also contribute to lasting social change? One registered charity, Peace Through Prosperity, is applying advanced Agile techniques to change the socio-economic landscape for some of the poorest and most deprived communities in Karachi, Pakistan with ambitions to expand beyond. Our Editor, Amy Hatton, caught up with the charity's Co-Founder and Entrepreneur in Residence, Kubair Shirazee, to get the low down.

From Business Boundaries to Social Innovation

With a distinguished background in IT project management, Kubair's journey to the urban slums of Karachi might not seem an obvious one. "I've been in the digital realm for almost sixteen years, starting by obtaining my Masters and jumping straight into a technology start-up" he says. "I've been involved in Agile development since 1998 when I started working with prototyping, rapid application development and learning the potential of micro failure to chart routes to success. I worked with the NHS for more than ten years on the Agenda for Change. The products I designed and managed were at the core of that project. That's where I cut my teeth on change management and started to understand what it can mean for the wider populous if carried out properly."

It wasn't long before Kubair's lifetime interest in international development began to converge with his professional experience. "I've always pursued that interest academically and I've consistently seen examples where large scale international development programmes fail. It doesn't always happen that way, but when it does the failure is usually colossal and gets prominent media attention. Being a student of Agile I was curious. After investigation I came to the conclusion that these projects fail because most of them take a Waterfall approach. Even those that do use Agile restrict it to the technical components of the project – so they're not designed and delivered with Agile at the core, and that sets them up for a high risk of failure."

Boundaryless Agile: The New Fight against Radicalism

At the same time, Kubair tells me, a number of personal experiences drew him to examine the growing threat of radicalisation in the developing world. "My life experiences brought me to a tipping point, I no longer had the luxury of sitting on the fence and decided to actively respond to the growth of extremism using the tools at my disposal. As with any project I work on, I started with analysis. What drives young men to join terrorist organisations? What makes those organisations function? How do they recruit? What is their talent strategy? I quickly realised that I couldn't possibly engage on all fronts with them. But what I do know is talent management, and I worked out that one deep seated need they have is the need to maintain an active recruitment base amongst the poor and expendable."

Kubair refers to this as the 'Pyramid of Power'. "They have their strategists – the war lords and leaders, their middle management – the ideologues and planners, and then their foot soldiers. And they need those foot soldiers. After all, there aren't many ideologues willing to step out in the field. So they need a ready-made pool of expendable resources. Those resources come from the poorest and most marginalised people across the world, whether it be Karachi, Lagos or Birmingham. It's poverty and hopelessness these guys prey on. Poverty doesn't lead to radicalisation in itself, but desperate social conditions create a ripe breeding ground where it's easy to sell a dark narrative."

It was this realisation that led Kubair and his wife Sahar, a solicitor, to set up Peace Through Prosperity and begin agile experimentation to tackle the causes of grassroots socio-economic issues that directly correlate with recruitment into extremist organisations. "As entrepreneurs, we take resources and support for granted in developed economies. We are the privileged. Such privilege is non-existent to the entrepreneur at the sharp end in conflict affected developing economies. The web is within reach, the infrastructure is there, but access is a tall order. So we considered how to change socio-economic conditions rapidly with maximum impact and minimum spend."

The initial solution was, some might consider, an unusual one, fuelled by Kubair's own experience. "In 2008 I undertook a mini MBA at Cranfield. Those sixteen weeks changed me as a consultant and entrepreneur. It changed how I see and evaluate opportunities. So I thought about designing an MBA programme for the street based entrepreneurs, keeping the duration short and practical to fit around their demanding schedules and focusing on practical skills and tools instead of just theory. It applied all the principles of service design, market and product development – but in the context of their day to day trade."

This is where the Agile approach began to come into play. "We piloted with a few traders in Northern Pakistan before running a five day mini MBA with a further twenty five entrepreneurs, after which we redesigned the programme. The results from each incremental cohort were increasingly impressive and the course content, material and delivery all evolved based on the results of the previous roll out. We schedule the class based component outside their work hours, pay delegates to attend and give them the business tools they need to improve their business. We've been able to show them that their weaknesses (for example the fact that their business is mobile) are actually their strengths."

That initial MBA pilot has, in true Agile fashion, provided the lessons to move the project on. "We've kept re-designing the MBA, but now we've added a consulting phase to complement the

The Mini MBA for Street Based Entrepreneurs

The MBA is taught over two hour sessions spanning five days, and includes training in:

- Customer relationship management
- Health and hygiene
- Forecasting and financial planning
- Market and product development
- Service innovation and opportunity development

The in-class component is followed by twelve one-to-one data lead consulting sessions over a three month period.

in-class component. We're like Bain & Company for entrepreneurs of circumstances, but without the fees" Kubair explains with a wry grin. "We spend an hour per week over twelve weeks with each participant at their place of work, reinforcing the knowledge we've shared during the MBA programme, and exploring their pain points and how they can address them. We research, analyse and share macro data with them in context to their catchment area and its market dynamics, from demographics to demand potential. We use Google Maps and open data to analyse and give them an edge in every way we can. In a nutshell, it's data lead consulting. We've also introduced the concept of peer sourcing with the help of my friends at 9others. This brings streets traders together to share their challenges and successes. In fact, our key challenge has been getting them to recognise what success is. If someone earns 100 rupees more today than yesterday then that's a success. We've helped the participants to recognise that, share their best practises and cross pollinate ideas from different trades. In turn that has created a community spirit within poverty-ridden neighbourhoods where everyone competes for resources as simple as water. Traditionally they've got multiple divisions based on language, creed, caste and the like. But this programme made them see that poverty has no creed or colour and that nobody's going to help them if they don't help themselves and their community."

Kanban, Agile and Scrum: An Accountable Success Story

Of course, disadvantage extends beyond the street based entrepreneurs and their community in these locations, and the project has had fascinating results in terms of local skills building. "We designed project delivery using Kanban" says Kubair. "Within our team of eleven staff only two have degrees. The rest didn't finish school, but they've all taken to Kanban and Scrum like fish to water. These young men were literally like sponges, absorbing everything about Agile. I spent two weeks training them on Kanban and Scrum and now they're just running with it. These are transferable skills that even tech engineers in the local economy lack."

So what has this approach achieved in real terms? "We've surveyed close to 700 street traders and of those we've taken 370 through our mini MBA programme. Amongst 113 of those we've raised their revenues by 50% and their profitability by 92%, and we're seeing similar results with a further 260 that we're working with now. That's incredibly important as a starting point. We hear so much rhetoric about winning hearts and minds (WHAM), but try winning the heart and mind of somebody who has an empty

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Peace Through Prosperity: Tangible Results

Since 2012:

- 700 street traders have been surveyed
- 370 have completed the mini MBA programme
- A further 270 are currently in the programme
- 113 have seen their revenue increase by 50% and their profitability increase by 90%
- Data on the other 270 is currently being gathered

stomach. It's important to meet that basic hierarchy of needs before you can go any further. WHAM starts from the belly up. If somebody has the promise of dinner on the table, not just today but in the future, they're less likely to become agitated and defensive and to be vulnerable to mass non-violent radicalisation. It's important to realise that in troubled parts of the world they've tried democracy, martial law, hybrid governments…but nothing has worked. In those circumstances, if someone comes along and tells you that their system of governance will work better for you despite their skewed extremist worldview then that's an easy narrative to sell. When you're hungry and thirsty with little hope of a positive change you just want change – any change - and you want it now. But our projects are giving people hope that change can come from within. Earning more, being in control, being able to plan - these small changes help them to transform their lives, the way they raise their families and the way they shape not just their own futures but the future of their communities."

Social change: The Family Unit and Beyond

Evidence of such change can be seen in a recent development – the establishment of a trade association to protect the rights of street based entrepreneurs who are currently unlicensed and vulnerable to exploitation. The experience has not been smooth sailing, Kubair tells me. "When we initially approached the local chamber of commerce we were literally laughed out of the office. So we decided to do it ourselves without their help. And we did. It's another example of our micro-fail Agile approach at work. We hired a lawyer, gave him a small budget and told him to go out and prove it couldn't be done. He came back a month later and confirmed that in fact it was possible. So we revisited the process on that evidence to make sure we had everything just right before proceeding. If it works you have grounds to improve it. If it doesn't work then you now know what not to do in the future. That's the benefit of micro-fail experimentation."

"The training was very good, if implemented surely there will be a positive change. I am optimistic about the future now." *Muhammad Saeed, Street based cobbler*

"If every individual thinks of personal development and progress, then their business grows. Your team has opened our minds to that." *Abdul Shakoor, Consultation Phase Participant*

"After training business is better. Now we record daily purchase and profit details and we know what we are earning." *Hussain Ahmed, Fruit Seller*

Indeed, evidence gathered through the pilot stages has enabled Peace Through Prosperity to expand the project to address the wider family. Further initiatives include a Kitchen Garden project, facilitating income generation for women through an urban farming cooperative, plus a new project in planning, designed to address the needs of the many street children who pick rubbish to supplement the family income. "We know that these kids are controlled by recycling mafias" Kubair explains. "They drop the kids in the neighbourhood to pick rubbish, then collect them and give them a bit of money. Of course, that stops them from being in school. We realised that the simple answer is: if there's no rubbish then there's nothing for them to collect. Right now we're in the design phase and figuring out the means to do this. The plan currently is to employ the kids ourselves, limit their work hours and give them access to education for at least part of the day, and help them pick rubbish up using vans, automating part of the process. It gives them a safe environment from collection in the morning to drop off in the evening, the opportunity to earn and study, and an opportunity to break from their current cycle. It's even more important to use Agile in this case to ensure that we design with caution. When we change someone's capacity and mind-set we risk putting them in danger from those who may not like it because it changes the status quo. With the street kids we really have to be extra careful. If we are to improve their lives and future prospects we must give them security and safety at the same time. By applying Agile design principles we can ensure that we experiment with different approaches and evolve the design and delivery of the project, avoiding inadvertently causing more harm than good."

Lessons Learned for Macro Projects

We started this conversation on the subject of macro international aid – so I feel compelled to ask: what does Kubair feel major aid organisations could learn from the Agile approach? He doesn't hesitate. "I think the key lesson is that they need to embrace micro fail experimentation. Instead of spending £1bn on a bridge that nobody needs, or creating localised employment that won't last, they should fund start up and pilot projects for much shorter time periods. If you cut through the bullshit development isn't expensive. When we started this work, a friend in the development sector told me that it would be a £250K project. In fact so far it's been more like £60K. We have to get away from the mind-set that big Waterfall projects work. By funding small experiments first we can find out what works on the ground and then scale it up in a pragmatic and cost-effective way. Anyone who creates five year projections for this type of development project in a volatile environment is basically making it up. That won't benefit anyone in the long run. I would like to see donor agencies begin to understand that innovation happens when the current state or process is no longer viable. To do so, you must first recognise the failure or short comings of the current process. Until we do that we won't see development happen, peace building progress and radicalisation recede."

About the Contributor:

Kubair is a specialist in planning and executing digital transformation programmes, with experience spanning the NHS, multinationals, leading agencies and start-ups. He has a diverse background across digital transformation, CxO advisory, strategy consulting, Agile/LEAN product design and business development.

Find out more:

Get information on the work of Peace Through Prosperity at **www.bringptp.com**

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Read more about Boundaryless Agile on Kubair's personal blog: **www.kubairshirazee.com**

Access information on the work of peer sourcing service 9others at **www.9others.com**

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