



“Understanding the audience is such a critical aspect of design, so we need greater diversity in digital design and in the tech industry as a whole.”

-Lars HØJHOLT, Angelika FREI-OLDENBURG, Richard EPSTEIN

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## Advocating new career paths in the digital creative economy – UX/UI Design in the MENA Region

**Manuel KUHM (MK):** With the help of funding from GIZ, Re:Coded just launched a media campaign addressing design professionals in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan advocating a career path in UX/UI Design. Tell us about the campaign. Who exactly is your target group and why is it so important to raise awareness for digital design disciplines in the Middle East?

**Lars HØJHOLT (LH):** First of all, it is worth taking a step back here to look at the global economic situation as a whole and where jobs are going to come from in the future. The digital economy has grown 2.5 times faster than global GDP in recent years, and even despite the pandemic, it continues to grow.

With this in mind, it makes a lot of sense to focus on job creation and job opportunities in the digital economy if we want to create more modern and sustainable economies.

While global demand is high, the local tech and digital design industry is in its early stages. But in a study from 2021, creative digital skills were cited among the top 5 skills employers required in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and this data is also validated by our own experiences as we have a 92% employment rate of graduates from our UX/UI Design Bootcamps.

So we know that there is both a global potential and a local demand for digital design skills, and that is the message we wanted to spread. We wanted to get youth interested in this field by showcasing the viability of pursuing a career as a UX/UI designer in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan and started a campaign to bring more awareness towards this new pathway.

For the campaign, we worked with a core message: ask the right questions to unlock your creative potential. Our target audience for this first campaign were young people in the current design community across all sub-fields of creative industries. The challenge is that they often struggle to build sustainable careers for themselves in the industry. We showed them how they might upskill themselves to apply their know-how in the digital field and what opportunities they could find here.

Throughout the campaign, we have interviewed people working as UX/UI designers in Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan to help young creatives see others as role models. We used the campaign to connect everyday skills to UX/UI design. We tried to inspire our audiences with examples that show how impactful UX/UI is in the tech space and give them clear pathways into this profession.

**MK:** Given the success of the campaign, how can development support and particularly funding be increased towards such measures in the future?

**Angelika FREI-OLDENBURG (AFO), Richard EPSTEIN (RE):** Development support, in particular our project “Cultural and Creative Industries”, which is implemented on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), aims to improve employment and income prospects for creatives. It is therefore crucial, as Lars already pointed out above, to identify career paths that are and will be in demand, but not only within a country but also outside in other countries.

UX/UI design services as a digital design discipline do not necessarily need a physical presence of the designers but can be delivered online and therefore easily exported to other countries as a service. Having said that, the country in which the designer is based also benefits from these service exports, as its trade balance shows.

Advocacy campaigns are the first step in raising awareness and building knowledge in this new field. In the context of development projects, the focus on employment is measured by the success of such campaigns. So if creatives confirm that the campaign has made them aware of this career path and they have actually succeeded in generating income and/or employment, then it is justified that these measures are extended and get more funding. This is why we are very excited to further monitor the continuation and progress of our advocacy campaign. But we also need to follow up on how decent jobs can be created, which is a precondition for our continued support.

**MK:** Following the media campaign, Re:Coded uses immersive courses and UX/UI Design bootcamps to “actively empower youth from untapped communities to build careers in technology”. Only 8% of your applicants are admitted and once admitted all your students learn for free. How do these courses and bootcamps ensure that young students learn the critical skills they need for scoring decent and stable jobs in the tech industry? Does creativity, as a skill and job requirement, play a role, and if so, how?

**LH:** Our bootcamps are basically designed for people to join with little or no skills to be, at the end, ready to apply for and get their first job in the digital economy. To get them that far in just 3-5 months requires two things:

First of all, an intensive high-quality programme that teaches not only the right technical skills but also the soft skills needed to work and collaborate with others to solve complex digital design problems. Secondly, it requires a cohort of highly motivated students who are ready to work hard, are eager to make a difference, and excited to build a sustainable career for themselves in the digital economy.

As for the training, our UX/UI design bootcamp takes our students through 250 hours of content where they learn through live online classes for 10 hours per week and do self-study through our learning platform for 15-25 hours per week. The curriculum is provided and certified by Flatiron School, voted the best coding and design school in the world in

2021, and adapted by Re:Coded to make sure that it fits market demands. The programme teaches students to think and build like designers by solving user-centred assignments and working on real-life projects. We believe the best way to learn is by doing, that is why the final four weeks of the bootcamp are all about applying everything our students have learned in a final Capstone Project. The skills they will learn within the project will ultimately prepare them for a role in the tech industry.

As for the students in our programmes, Re:Coded has a four-phased selection process for intensive bootcamps that we use to ensure participant interest, motivation, and determination. We often get over 600-1000 applicants for a programme and from that pool of applicants, we select 25-50 students. Often they already have some experience or interest in design from one field or another, but in essence, the bootcamp teaches them everything they need to know to land that first job.

**MK:** How else could GIZ projects support the digital skills development of youth from untapped communities?

**AFO and RE:** In our project we use different approaches to support the digital skills development of youth, especially in the subsectors design, animation, music, and fashion. These approaches reach from incubator programmes, bootcamps and workshops to the support of digital knowledge platforms, digital festivals and networking events.

Examples from the MENA region and Kenya are training measures for musicians that include the development of skills for the creation of podcasts or online music publishing and streaming.

Our project also puts trainings in place, that teach creatives how to use virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), providing skills for which there is a growing demand. Other trainings in VR filmmaking and drone videography have been designed specifically for women to enable young female creatives to enter a male-dominated industry.

An incubator programme for female fashion designers offers trainings in e-commerce and digital marketing, helping participants in installing or amplifying their presence on social media and adapting their marketing strategy.

Furthermore, quite a few GIZ projects support digital skills development from the “coding” side, such as in countries where the university education is still missing these elements or university education is only available for the “privileged” people. Precondition of course is internet access and computer access, which cannot be taken for granted everywhere.

**MK:** Not only regional industries benefit from a skilled workforce in UX/UI Design. COVID-19 has accelerated the shift towards international digital trade. Which potentials brings a skilled workforce in UX/UI Design on a global level?

**LH:** Great design is not only a huge added value for any product. In the digital economy, in which you are typically competing in a much larger market, whether nationally or globally, and in which the attention span of users is minimal, design and user experience is absolutely critical to the success of your business.

Businesses realize this and that is why the demand for UX/UI designers is on the rise and salary levels are higher than in other design fields. However, this is not just an argument for digital design in general. It is also an argument for educating local designers to enter in the global digital economy. Understanding the audience is such a critical aspect of design, so we need greater diversity in digital design and in the tech industry as a whole in order to build solutions that fit and attract a wider audience.

**MK:** Which challenges must be met to reap this potential?

**AFO and RE:** The most important step is to make the skilled workforce visible to international potential employers so that they can find and hire them. However, for many countries this is not enough: international trade in services regulations are not yet as unified as they are for goods, so locally the designers might face difficulties with regulations on taxation etc. (in some cases even on the employers’ side for customs and alike). Sometimes the banking system in countries is a huge burden for an individual person to cope with, with high charges for international transactions and rather tailor-made

for the big companies. Another challenge is to create conditions in the countries which enable fair working conditions.

**MK:** In design, form follows function. For this reason, one of the most crucial questions a UX/UI designer could ask is: What is the problem that we are solving?

If Re:Coded could ask global policy makers to solve one problem of your industry, what would that problem be? And how could a suitable solution look like?

**LH:** There is plenty of work ahead on a structural level to support the development of the digital design field that goes well beyond education. From ensuring stable high-speed internet or investing in the digital economy on a national level to creating networks or platforms for designers to meet and push each other forward or to help encourage greater diversity within the field. One thing that stands out, however, would be ensuring stable digital banking capacities so that digital designers can work remotely and still get paid easily. This is often a stumbling block to a lot of designers in the tech industry and as we are seeing an increase in and appetite for remote work, this is an opportunity missed. It would allow designers to work outside of their local economies, while still bringing that money back into the country.

**MK:** Given the logic of implementing development projects for the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), how feasible is the outlined solution?

**AFO and RE:** In many countries in which German Development Cooperation projects are being implemented, digital banking solutions are being supported to ensure financial inclusion and fair and easy access for all. The “stability” of the solutions in terms of internet connectivity might be a challenge, but most of these new digital banking solutions are already mobile phone based.

Whether and to what extent the receipt of money from abroad, also via digital solutions, is subject to taxes and fees, exchange controls and the like is, however, in the hands of the government regulations of the respective countries.