TIDES FOUNDATION
On the recommendation of the Upwork Foundation
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Gaza Sky Geeks Background

Gaza Sky Geeks launched in July 2011. From July 2011 until July 2013, Gaza Sky Geeks ran events to grow awareness of tech entrepreneurship and innovation in Gaza. In mid-2013, we made the strategic shift to expand our services to include a startup accelerator. Our accelerator launched in December 2013 and has run one round of startup acceleration so far. Gaza Sky Geeks' mission is to transform Gaza's most talented youth into the Middle East's tech business leaders and realise Gaza's potential as a startup hub. We spark awareness of startups in Gaza through our active outreach, build a vibrant community that nurtures innovation, incubate teams that show potential, and accelerate top teams (those which have received investment) by connecting them to the global resources they need to succeed.

Skylancer Program (AKA Freelance Academy)

The Skylancer Program upskills motivated individuals across a variety of fields to succeed in top online marketplaces for freelancers. Moreover, the Skylancer Program consists of three main components:

- **Freelance Mentorship Component:** Mentors talented individuals in areas such as web development, graphic design, translation, social media, mobile development, and front-end development to become successful online freelancers through intensive training sessions over 10 weeks.

- **Technical Training Component:** Introduces skilled participants to specific software technologies that are used to create online delivered solutions, e.g. mobile development, web development, digital marketing etc.
- **English Training Component:** Helps participants overcome English language barriers so they can join the Freelance Mentorship component.

The Skylancer program also consists of side activities targeting different groups to keep program alumni engaged and spread positive messaging about the online freelancing culture to the community. These include hosting various clubs and engaging with the university academic community.

She Rises On Upwork Bootcamp

Background

GSG designed a six-day bootcamp to help female freelancers in Gaza with profiles on the Upwork platform who were underperforming - either unable to get their first job or generate any income - to succeed via best practices and proper usage of the platform. She Rises is a modified version of a series of bootcamps held by GSG under the name Rise Up On Upwork.

She Rises started with an online application process which received 662 unique applicants for the bootcamp. These were filtered to 283 applicants according to the following criteria that meet the ultimate objective of She Rises:
- Motivation of applicant (this was gauged *through a question included in the online application)*
- Having an active account on Upwork
- Generated less than USD 100 on Upwork or did not win their first job
- Availability to participate

Following initial screening, the applicants were then assessed according to the quality of their portfolio submitted in the application, including the variety of samples, and their relevance to market demand. 149 female applicants were accepted into the bootcamp. Ultimately, the bootcamp graduated 133 female participants. Graduation was dependent on attending at least five of the six days, and unfortunately 16 of the initially accepted applicants were unable to attend enough days to qualify for graduation.

Over six days, the bootcamp was made possible by 4 lead female volunteer mentors who provided mentorship, coaching, different workshops and sessions in the bootcamp. The 4 lead mentors were in turn supported by another 17 female volunteer mentors who were responsible for following-up on the group work according to the lead mentor's guidance.
All of these 21 mentors are alumnae from previous freelance academy cohorts, motivated by their commitment to give back and extend the knowledge they have gained through the freelance academy

This female-led effort, where the bootcamp was primarily composed of female mentors, organizers, support staff and participants, was critical to its success. Beyond the unique opportunity to come together in an all-female, female-led and designed bootcamp, this event was the first of its kind in Palestine (to our knowledge none of the other ecosystem players have offered an event like this).

Structure

During the six-day bootcamp, the participants were introduced to the Upwork platform to learn tips, tricks and best practices on the platforms as follows:

- **Day 1 (in-person)** The first day was mainly focused on portfolio preparations to make sure participants had proper portfolio items when they started completing their Upwork profiles. After that, the participants learned how to complete their profiles and make them attractive for clients.

- **Day 2 (in-person)** On the second day, mentors worked closely with participants to make sure that all of their profiles (personal background) and portfolios (previous work samples, such as logos, videos, articles, etc.) were ready and met the requirements discussed on day one. Then the participants were introduced to the best methods to select the most suitable jobs and the right clients. After that, they learned how to apply for freelance jobs on Upwork and completed an exercise where they practiced selecting jobs and drafted at least four proposals. Once their drafts were reviewed by the mentors, participants were then asked to actually submit proposals to one or two jobs on the platform.

- **Day 3 (remote):** Day three was mainly focused on practicing what the participants learned in the first two days, by ensuring the previous and new targets were met as follows.
    - Everyone MUST have at least three different portfolio items added to their profiles, according to mentors' guidance
    - Everyone MUST have a 100% completed Upwork profile
    - Everyone MUST have drafted at least four proposals
        - Chosen four actual jobs
        - Copied the job posting into a draft google document
        - Written a proposal for each job
        - Shared the proposal file with their mentor
        - The mentor reviewed the drafted proposals
        - The mentor attached the link in our tracking file
    - Everyone MUST have applied for at least one job and at most two jobs by the end of the third day.

- **Day 4 (in-person):** Day four was focused on ensuring participants gained the soft skills needed to succeed as an Upwork freelancer. The participants were introduced to time management and negotiation skills, and had a Q&A session with Tiffany Ford, a Success Partner from the Upwork team. During the fourth day the participants were asked to apply for at least three more jobs under the guidance of the mentors.

- **Day 5 (remote):** On the fifth day, the mentors followed up on the participants' performance, proposal quality and for those participants who had already received a positive response, provided guidance on how to negotiate their offers. The participants were also asked to apply for three more jobs again (after they were reviewed by the assigned mentor).

- **Day 6 (in-person):** On the final day of the bootcamp, the participants were introduced to the different possible payment gateways and how to navigate the payment challenges in Palestine. This day also included a wrap-up session where the mentors provided extra tips, tricks and recommendations for the participants. We closed the day with a fun ceremony to both celebrate and show appreciation for the participants' hard work all week!

Impact and Assessment

Our initial target was to train 100 female participants through the bootcamp, which we overachieved by 34% with 134 female participants, graduating 133 (as 1 participant dropped out of the bootcamp due to external factors). During the six days of the bootcamp alone, participants cumulatively generated USD 8,200, and 54% (72 women) were able to obtain at least one job (29 women were able to secure more than one job and 9 women secured more than two jobs - the 72 women secured a total of 113 jobs).

During the bootcamp, the GSG team worked closely with both the mentors and the participants to assess progress toward achieving their daily goals via a tracker that automatically calculated the overall status of the bootcamp. This tracker allowed the GSG team to tackle issues instantly, stay on track and ensure successful delivery of each session.

Setting objectives: The daily objectives were designed to serve the ultimate objective of the six-day bootcamp in a measurable way as follows:

Day 1 deliverables	**Portfolio:** Every participant must present at least 3 different portfolio items
	Overview: All participants must complete their overview for review by the mentors
	Skills: With support from mentors, each participant to clearly set their best skills - what they are best at in their field
	Profile: All participants must complete their profiles
Day 2 deliverables	**Follow-up:** Check on Day 1 deliverables
	Choosing Suitable Jobs: Each participant MUST locate at least one job that suits their skills according to the mentor's guidance (How to choose the right job and client)
	Proposal Writing: Each participant must draft four proposals and have them reviewed by the mentors (without actually applying for the jobs)
	Upwork Plus Membership: Every participant MUST subscribe to Upwork plus membership[1]
	Bidding: Each participant must apply for at least one job and at most two jobs
Day 3 deliverables	**Practice:** Each participant must draft four proposals (without actually applying for the jobs)
	Bidding: Each participant must apply for at least one job and at most two jobs
Day 4 deliverables	**Let's work!** Apply for at least 3 jobs a day

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[1] The Upwork plus membership costs $15 per month and enables participants to apply for more jobs than those with a free membership.

In order to assess the participants' performance, data was collected at two stages post-bootcamp: at the end of the bootcamp and one-month post-graduation. The aim of the endline was to gather data about participants' overall performance during the bootcamp. For example, how many proposals they sent, how many clients responded to them and the conversion rate. The conversion rate was calculated in three ways: number of client responses / number of proposals - to give an indication of the quality of proposals, number of jobs / numbers of client responses - to give an indication of negotiation skills, and number of jobs / number of proposals - to indicate a general conversion rate. In addition, the main success indicators of freelancing in GSG programs are the income generated from the platforms and the number of jobs obtained.

To further track the performance of the participants, we conducted a follow-up survey one month later to gather the same data for comparison. The results were as follows:

TABLE 1

Metrics	Endline	1 month follow-up	Total
# of participants responses	133	130	-
# of proposals sent	3,708	3,947	7,655
# of clients who responded	351	449	800
# of participants who got jobs	55%	42%	62%
# of jobs obtained	114	93	207
Income generated	$8,200	$12,426	$20,626
Median satisfaction	10/10	-	-
Average satisfaction	9.7/10	-	-
% participants mentored others	-	79%	-
Number mentored by graduates	-	360	-

Our assumption is that if we continued to track participants, we would see even more income generated and more jobs obtained. One month after the bootcamp, participants had generated USD 12,426. This shows how our impact is sustainable post graduation. During the bootcamp, the average reported income of those who obtained jobs was USD 112. The same participants average income was less than USD 5 before the bootcamp - an incredible result after only 6 days! To further reflect, the following represents the average, and the total income increases at baseline, end of program, and one month after graduation.
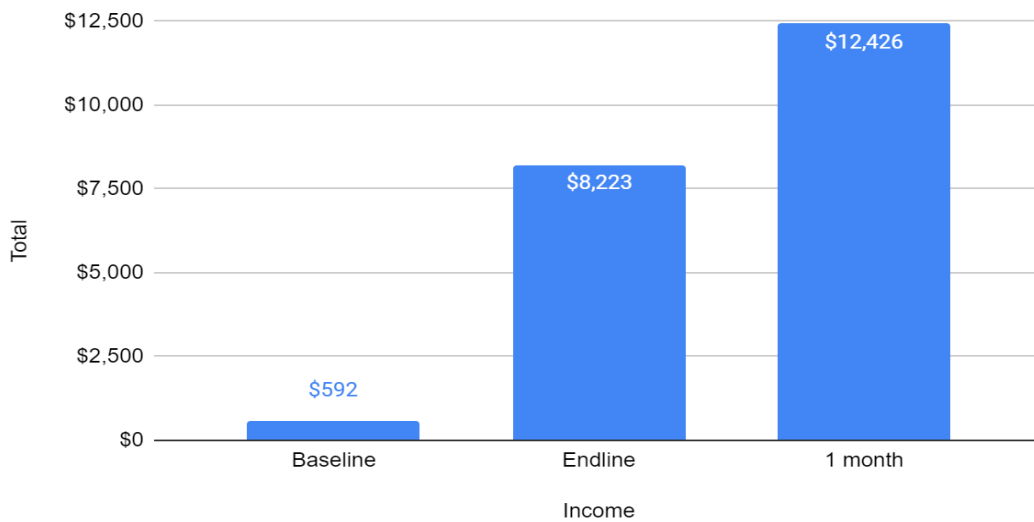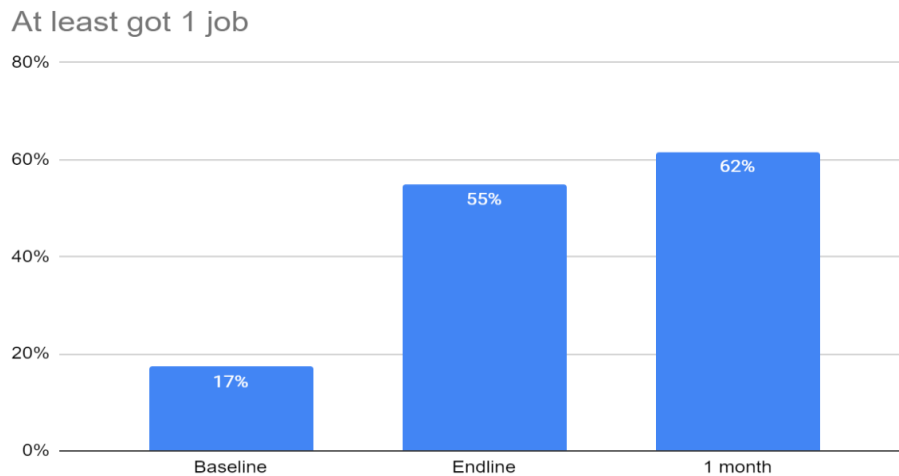
Average income
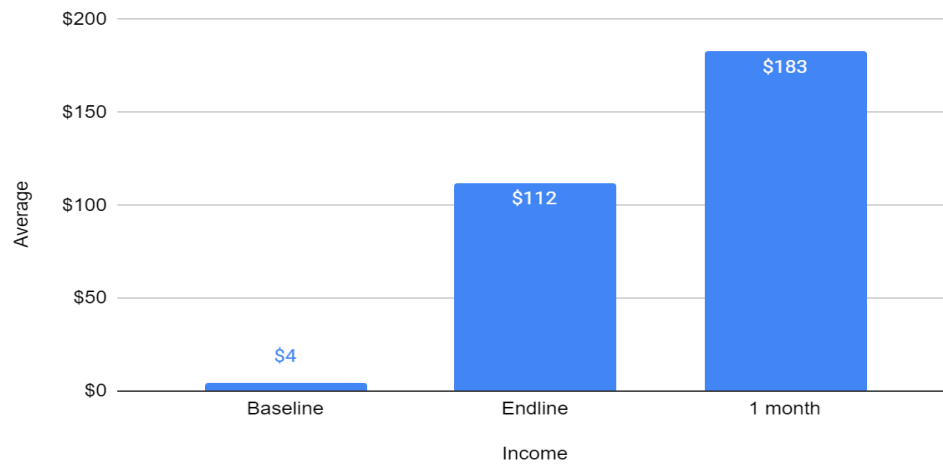
Periods	Baseline to endline	Endline to 1 month
Percentage increases	2,800%	163%

Total income

Periods	Baseline to endline	Endline to 1 month
Percentage increases	1,390%	151%

At least got 1 job

As reflected above, 17% of participants joining the bootcamp obtained at least one job. This number increased significantly at the endline, showing 55% of our participants having at least one job. On top of that, the percentage increased to include more participants within the one-month period following the program, as 62% of the baseline participants were able to secure one job.

In addition, the client response rate ($\# of\ client\ responses / \# of\ proposals\ sent$) increased from 9% to 11% between the endline and one-month post-graduation. This is a significant increase, given the short period of time and confirms that our participants are improving their ability to both negotiate and job hunt.

GSG proactively seeks feedback from our participants to further enhance our programs and services. This also serves GSG in better understanding participants' needs and expectations. According to Table 1, the overall satisfaction of the bootcamp from participants' perspective was 10/10. Beyond that, our participants are also contributing to their community by mentoring the people around them (360 people were mentored by program's graduates) and spreading the word of mouth on what Upwork can provide to them financially.

The bootcamp had many success stories to highlight. One case was a participant who had a USD 0 income prior to joining but was able to generate USD 1,300 during the bootcamp. This reinforces our purpose - with practical support and guidance, participants have the capacity to succeed on the Upwork platform.

Another participant had a USD 0 income prior to joining the bootcamp and was able to generate USD 5,000 in only one month after graduation - a huge improvement!

> *"I couldn't wait for success so I decided to go for it. I am Samah Jaber, UX/UI designer. I have a wide experience in this field but I never knew how to put my skills in practice in the freelancing world, so I decided to apply for She Rises organized by Gaza Sky Geeks, and fortunately I got accepted. I can only say that this experience was amazing. I learned the best way to use the Upwork platform. I am also more professional now in how I apply to jobs, and I was actually able to win jobs that I never expected to be able to win before. Thank you Gaza Sky Geeks for this amazing opportunity!"*
>
> — Samah

> *"My first real interaction with Upwork platform was in this bootcamp. I was able to generate more than 700$ in both fixed projects and hourly contracts in only 6 days! It was a high-quality educational camp with a perfect coherence in interaction between us, the GSG operational team, and the mentors. From my perspective, the Upwork platform was really challenging for me before, but I was able to overcome this obstacle through this bootcamp. I even took multiple trainings before this bootcamp with no result."*
> — Yara

Challenges

- **COVID-19:** After the first day, one of the participants tested positive for COVID-19. This meant we needed to unexpectedly pause the boot camp for five days. In all of our communications before and during the bootcamp, we asked participants not to attend if they felt sick or had any flu-like symptoms. We enforced mask wearing, temperature checks at the entrance and every couple of hours, as well as provided hand sanitizer at the entrance and on every table.

  The participant who tested positive was fortunately wearing a mask the day she attended. However, when she returned home that evening, she learned that a family member had tested positive for COVID-19. She then took a rapid test that showed a positive result and informed us right away, which resulted in the postponement of our event.
  Further, during the 5 days we paused the bootcamp, we encouraged participants to get vaccinated, if they had not been already.

  To keep participants excited and motivated during that time, we continued to engage online by offering fun activities and energizers to keep them in loop and ensure that they were motivated. Some of the activities included interactive posts in our Facebook group, such as competitions and quizzes about the Upwork platform, as well as utilizing Kahoot (a mobile application) for additional engagement.

- **Client Responses:** Most clients did take time to respond to proposals, but not always immediately; many participants were only able to land jobs only after the end of the bootcamp. By the last two days of the bootcamp, this began to affect participants' morale. To overcome this, we assured participants to remain optimistic and patient, and that hard work and positive mindset yield positive results. GSG also continued to engage with participants after the bootcamp through motivational messages and following up with them on different communication channels (Facebook and WhatsApp groups). Ultimately, 54% of women were able to obtain jobs.

Lessons learned

- Increasing the number of mentors leading the bootcamp will allow more personalised follow up with the participants, better addressing the issues faced by the participants on an individual level. The ratio of participants to mentors in our bootcamp was around 13:1, and our sense is that a ratio closer to 6:1 would support even stronger results.

- Always have a plan B! Flexibility is key, especially in the context of Gaza's operating environment and whilst COVID-19 remains an issue.

- Future boot camps will feature mentors from our "Superstars" community (i.e. participants who are earning over USD 2,000 per month post graduation) to increase knowledge sharing, as well as solve the shortage of mentors highlighted above.

Pictures from the event

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About Mercy Corps
Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within.
Now, and for the future.

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