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Odyssea: A social NGO supporting the employability of vulnerable young people



ΕΚΔΟΣΕΙΣ ΔΙΟΝΙΚΟΣ

### Odyssea: A social NGO supporting the employability of vulnerable young people

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## Odyssea: A social NGO supporting the employability of vulnerable young people

**O**dyssea is a non-profit organization that supports vulnerable young people with access to employment opportunities in society, by providing tailored vocational and life-skills training along with employability services. Odyssea's mission is to ensure that people have equal opportunities by harnessing the power of knowledge for employment and personal development.

### The problem

Young people are the driving force of any society. They are the most vibrant, dynamic and vigorous part of it. They are the foundation of development and progress, the future shapers, and the fearless voices that move society forward. Young people make up over a quarter of the global population, yet they are often excluded from opportunities to learn and work, inhibiting their ability to support themselves and be productive members in society. Worldwide, youth unemployment rates have not changed significantly over the last decade, nor are they expected to improve significantly in the next few years.

Today, 2 in 5 young people in Greece are unemployed and 40% of young people between 16 and 34 years old are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Our country holds the highest youth unemployment rate in the EU. Even when one has a job, they often remain unable to provide the basics for themselves. In-work poverty in Greece is also one of the highest in Europe and is seriously affecting the physical and mental well-being of those who experience it. Young people with low levels of education, limited job experience, a lack of basic skills and access to skills training, are therefore trapped in unemployment and poverty.

At the same time, the cracks in the international humanitarian system have been evident for years, for those willing to look. While the humanitarian system's ability to provide lifesaving assistance at the outbreak of a crisis is largely laudable, the inability of actors to provide programs that would result in dignified lives for marginalized and displaced groups, ultimately results in dependency, estrangement and eventually the loss of hope.

### The solution

The team of Odyssea works with and for economically and socially vulnerable young people to help them gain the skills and confidence they need to get a job, realize their goals and aspirations, and become productive members in society. We ensure that they have access to employment opportunities, and empower them to believe in their own ability to shape their future and contribute to progressing their own life and their community.

Odyssea is encompassing all its services in an integrated holistic model that places emphasis on employability services and bridges people with the world of work. Odyssea in 2022 through the use of psychometric assessment tools and the Odyssea employability platform will be providing cutting edge services (ex. talent and job matching algorithms directly linking job seekers with hiring companies) to its beneficiaries resulting in scaled impact quantitatively and qualitatively. Moreover, including such tools and processes enhances our commitment to an evidence-based model for decision making and allows us to share valuable Data and good practices with other organizations of the humanitarian ecosystem.

## The early years

One could trace Odyssea's humanitarian actions back to 2014 when a group of Greek friends that were living abroad decided to return to Greece amidst the zenith of the economic crisis and contribute towards transforming the plethora of social challenges into opportunities. Led by award winning architect and social innovator Jai Mexis, the team started directly on the field by setting up social kitchens and community spaces as part of the solidarity movement. Their initiative aimed to showcase the resourceful and creative side of the people of this country, promoting a positive image of Greece.

Odyssea was officially founded by Jai in early 2016 and gradually developed into a dynamic group of social entrepreneurs, architects, engineers and finance experts working together to develop innovative models and solutions to systemic social issues for Greece and other parts of the world. Driven both by the deep commitment to provide assistance to those in need, and sensing real opportunities to provide more effective, efficient and meaningfully impactful aid, Odyssea was formed as a multi-disciplinary leadership team with complementary skill sets and experience. The team was galvanized by a shared set of values that form the basis of its ethos.

The first version of Odyssea was created around Astrolab, a small-scale workshop of digital fabrication. A shared makerspace that provided technological education, mentorship and open access to hi-tech tools and skills to help catalyze positive social change. Through its offerings, Astrolab sought to serve makers, students, organizations, and entrepreneurs.

Soon, the educational aspect of Astrolab evolved into a stream of vocational training programs, responding to society's growing need for a means to integrate vulnerable, excluded members. The high quality of skills provided by the programs, soon attracted hiring parties and birthed the opportunity to establish a new department, the Odyssea Employability office.

## The present

By the end of 2021, Odyssea had provided services to over 3000 vulnerable people. A key addition to assist this achievement was the creation of the Academy Campus, a 600m<sup>2</sup> training facility specially designed to simulate real-life professional workspaces. In this space Odyssea was able to further scale up its operational capacities to over 1,800 students annually. The hybrid learning approach of blending theory with practice increased learning outcomes and rendered the beneficiaries highly competitive in the job market. What is more important however, is that the Academy serves as an inspiring safe space, a nurturing environment for personal growth, a melting pot that includes all races, genders, religions and social backgrounds. Within the educational process Odyssea creates a cultural hub that welcomes diverse mentalities and serves as an integrational stepping stone.

To expand its outreach, Odyssea has initiated a collaboration with every major NGO that operates in Greece. Since Odyssea's holistic approach of integration is unique in the humanitarian field, a huge awareness campaign took place between 2020-2021 in order to inform relevant organization about the individual services offered and the means of cooperation. Very soon a referral system was established, allowing NGO partners to work closely with Odyssea and complete the chain of integrational activities.

The Employability department has been developed to conclude the beneficiary's journey by providing career counseling services and networking with the labor market. The goal is to improve the skills of the beneficiaries in order to promote them effectively in the field of work.

In a solid effort to bring the job seekers closer to the hiring companies the department aims to create an impact that will promote social cohesion and avoid xenophobic, racist phenomena or phenomena of exclusion that are caused by unemployment and social isolation.

Odyssea's contribution has not gone unnoticed in the corporate world as well, as more companies reach out with certain requests to cover their needs in personele. Slowly but with a steady pace, Odyssea has been creating a name in the work market synonymous to integrity, reliability and solid results.

## The future

Gazing into the uncertainty of a post-pandemic future, Odyssea is determined, now more than ever, to upscale its impact to a national level, offering unlimited access and guaranteeing unrivaled results. In that tone, Odyssea is working on the development of the "Odyssea employability platform", an innovative online service to address the problem of the ever growing gap between job seekers and hiring companies. The platform combines innovative tools such as psychometrics, profile verification and AI recommendations to support both employers and their potential employees.

To complement the process of preparing potential employees, Odyssea has initiated a new type of Vocational Training courses. This type of courses will offer specific training, tailored to certain needs of certain companies or fields. Detailed research is required to determine the content and the syllabus of the course which, ideally, will be co-decided upon by members of the company or seasoned professionals in the field respectively. The advantage of these courses will be a significantly higher employment rate since the graduates will gain specific expertise to perfectly respond to the needs of Odyssea's collaborating companies.

## A beneficiary's journey

To better understand the holistic service provided by Odyssea, imagine a 29-year-old male refugee from Syria. Although he has been in Greece for 6 years and is a recognised refugee, he has spent most of his professional life in entry-level, low income, temporary job positions. He now wishes to start building a career for himself but is not sure which field would be most appropriate for him. After registering for Odyssea's services, its team of experts noticed that, although he has all the required legal documents he is not in a state to be employed, meaning that he lacks the skills, behavioral traits and professional expertise that would make him competitive and equipped to enter a professional environment.

As a first step, the beneficiary will enter the Soft Skills course, train on the essentials of professional behavior, create his digital footprint and prepare for the interview process. Although now ready to search for work, he does not have a clear view of the career he wishes to follow. In this case, the beneficiary will have the opportunity to follow a series of Introductory Courses to get a glimpse of the requirements and benefits of each professional sector that fits his personality and is currently relevant in the job market. Finishing this series of courses, he will now have a strong indication of what he wishes to do for a living, so he will be included in the Tailor Made course that best fits his goal and gain the knowledge that would make him the perfect candidate for hire in one of our collaborating companies in the sector. After finishing this course, he will be ready to be matched with an identified job position that fits his updated profile, education and newly gained professional expertise.

## Epilogue

Odyssea's goal is to enable socially and financially vulnerable people to enter the world of work. All future efforts will be pointed towards working with vulnerable people, to guide and support them throughout their professional endeavors and to connect them with the market. Odyssea will focus on young people who have gone through its capacity building program and are empowered to pursue employment opportunities and those young people who have the skills to get a job but lack the opportunity to do so. Through Odyssea, more than 6000 young people will be supported within the next three years through connection with employers, and preparation to get a job and maintain it in the long-run.

To achieve this goal, Odyssea has invested in a concrete team of visionary, open-minded individuals, diverse but sharing the same vision; to create a world where all young people thrive by realizing their full potential.

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