

IKEA co-workers support social entrepreneurs creating better everyday lives



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DECEMBER 2022 – Find out how co-workers added a new scope to their daily jobs by accompanying and learning from local innovators for positive change.

IKEA Social Entrepreneurship accelerator programmes co-created with our international partners are a unique opportunity for IKEA co-workers to engage with social entrepreneurs in different corners of the world. For a limited time, they share their IKEA business knowledge, finding solutions with them to overcome the challenges of scaling their business and impact.

“Supporting social entrepreneurs is an incredible opportunity to stretch beyond work and add a new zest in your personal life,” says Neetu Kapasi, leader of Public Affairs at IKEA Retail, India. “It’s a win-win. For us as co-workers, it’s a development opportunity, and for the social entrepreneurs it changes their perspective on how to be even more effective as agents of change.”

Leaders towards a fair and equal society

Neetu participated in Dela (2020), a global accelerator co-created with Ashoka. In this programme, IKEA co-workers were matched with social entrepreneurs on different continents. Over the course of the programme, they accompanied social entrepreneurs while they were designing their strategies to accelerate innovative solutions for deep-rooted social and environmental issues.

One of the social entrepreneurs Neetu worked with is Albert Mollah, co-founder and executive director at Access Bangladesh Foundation. This organisation is dedicated to ensuring that persons with disabilities achieve their full potential and become active contributors to society. “My journey with Albert and his team taught me compassion and the power of collaboration,” Neetu says. “He is a beautiful human being and an inspiring and motivational leader. Watching him grow in his work with deep purpose, his courage and belief in this great cause have been an eye-opener for me.”

Neetu is one of the many IKEA co-workers that applied to support social entrepreneurs through our accelerator programmes. Depending on the needs of the entrepreneurs, the co-workers act as mentors, coaches, strategic advisors or masterclass facilitators, or often a combination. Some accelerators have an international scope, working with social entrepreneurs across countries and continents, in others the focus is on local markets.

The accelerators support social entrepreneurs that enable people in difficult situations to get better jobs, have access to affordable quality products and lead their lives with dignity. In some programmes such as Dela, they also partner with entrepreneurs that work on a system level to address the underlying causes of social challenges.

Co-worker engagement is at the core of the IKEA strategy to be a leader in creating a fair and equal society. But it’s not all one way. On their journeys with social entrepreneurs, co-workers take away key learnings, including innovation skills, entrepreneurial mindset and knowledge of new markets and customer profiles.

Learnings from social enterprises

Jonathan Zycer, a commercial business navigator at IKSO (IKEA Chile, Colombia and Peru), recently started as a mentor in our Latin America accelerator co-designed with NESsT. He supports Lazarillo, a Chilean start-up that developed a mobile app for blind and visually impaired people. With real-time voice messages, the app helps them navigate their cities and building environments. His first meetings with the Lazarillo team have been so insightful and fun, Jonathan can’t wait for their next mentoring sessions together.

“I think those guys have more to give to us than I can give to them. I have already learned about different business models, new industries, tech innovations... It’s also humbling in a way,” Jonathan says. “At IKEA we are always talking about customers that don’t have disabilities. So, to me, the many were people that can see and speak. But

now I realise there's another customer out there right next to us, who also needs solutions. Working with Lazarillo, we came up with one new opportunity after the other."

Without experience mentoring other businesses, Jonathan was not sure what he could offer Lazarillo: "I soon found out one of the priorities they want to work on is pricing, and the knowledge I have at IKEA with pricing mechanisms is actually very useful for them," he says.

Transmitting that knowledge also supports Jonathan to improve his own skills: "I always found it hard to speak in public and effectively communicate my message. It's comforting to see that I'm already making improvements in those areas."

No need to be specialists

Jonathan's colleague Gabriela Rivera agrees that there's no need to be an expert at business mentoring to make a significant contribution. Gabriela is a replenishment supply specialist at IKSO, and supports Fresh & Co, an agribiz enterprise that is just starting operations. Gabriela explains:

"This is a really beautiful company that buys fruit and vegetables from smallholder farmers in a way that respects the environment. That costs more money than buying from large producers. That's why we work with them to optimize other parts of the business so they can save money there. They share information for me to have a look at, and together we construct something better. I feel really good I can support them with what I know. I would say to any other co-worker: it's easy, the only thing you have to do is use your knowledge.

Time should not be a problem, either, Gabriela adds: "We are all so busy with so many things we have to do in our daily jobs, but you can always find one or two hours a week to give to a social enterprise. You'll be happy and excited when you share your knowledge to open new opportunities. Just do it!"

Coaching role

IKEA Social Entrepreneurship in collaboration with our international partners ensures that there's a good match between the co-workers and the social entrepreneurs. To prepare the co-workers, they get appropriate training and along the way, they receive guidance so they can best support the entrepreneurs they're teamed up with.

While in some cases social enterprises are supported with hands-on knowledge related to the co-workers' daily assignments at IKEA, in others a coaching approach is preferred. Here, it's about asking the right questions and listening, without jumping in with practical advice from day one.



Caroline Steene, customer fulfilment infrastructure leader at IKEA Sweden, and Yuhua Wang, production manager for IKEA Components packaging and distribution, China, agree that this coaching approach is both fulfilling and challenging. As part of the East Africa accelerator co-created with Acumen (2021), they coached TAI, the Accessibility Institute in Kenya. This social enterprise produces the all-terrain wheelchair SafariSeat, which allows people with mobility-impairment people to move around freely.

Although Caroline is a professional coach and leads a coaching network within IKEA, she discovered she actually had to let go of some certainties that underpin her professional practice:

“As a professional coach, I know the setting and I know exactly what my role is in the coach/client relationship. Here, I had to get out of my comfort zone and step into the unknown. In our conversations with the SafariSeat team they came up with some practical topics where Yuhua and I didn’t have the answers. It meant I had to challenge myself and be vulnerable, and simply say: I don’t know.”

An outside perspective to move forward

Before joining the East Africa accelerator, Yuhua was used to coaching his co-workers “as part of many different types of conversations”. Here he discovered the benefits of using the coaching approach in a more conscious and strategic way: “Even if we are not specialists in the area of wheelchairs, we were able to ask the questions that helped them find the solutions themselves,” he says.

Yuhua and Caroline acted as sounding boards, creating a trusted environment for the SafariSeat team. Yuhua: “In their sessions with us, they could share their difficulties and challenges. Usually, when they talk to partners, clients or financial sponsors, they try to be perfect. In us, they had someone to talk to if they encountered problems.” Caroline adds:

“They felt less alone. For a small company as they are, it is important to have someone listening without judging. Some of the questions we asked triggered them to get out of the circle you sometimes get stuck in when you’re missing an outside perspective. We encouraged them to get away from the theory and their computer screens and try things out in the real world.

Meeting outstanding people

Anita Goyhenetche, supplier development manager at IKEA Switzerland and Jonathan Bengtsson, business area sourcing specialist, Sweden, also acted as a coaching pair in the East Africa Accelerator. One of their motivations to apply was “the opportunity to meet outstanding people in other parts of the world”. It not only gave them the chance

to work with passionate and mission-driven entrepreneurs in Africa. They say they are also happy to be connected with each other across the huge IKEA world and do this extraordinary job together.

Anita and Jonathan coached Vava Angwenyi, the founder of Vava Coffee, Kenya. She is dedicated to changing the coffee industry in Kenya by promoting ethical sourcing, high-quality products, and more women-owned businesses.

Anita: “Vava is a really powerful and inspiring woman, her energy was amazing. Bringing more women into the coffee business in Kenya is a tough job, but she made it happen. She always saw the potential of individual smallholder farmers who otherwise could not make their voices heard. Between the challenges of poverty, corruption and fear, Vava saw smiles.”

Takeaways for day-to-day work

Anita thinks the experience has changed her perspective in her daily assignment at IKEA in several ways: “I’m a manager for leaders and for business developers. If I consider them as a group, can I really find the roadmap to manage them? Probably not. Vava taught me to see the individual. So today, I try to meet them one-to-one much more often and, applying the coaching approach we used with her, the results are better. There is mutual learning, and the impact is more powerful.”

And there’s another important takeaway. Anita: “When working with suppliers, I did not have the social impact risks in mind. Now I do, and I want to make my business team aware this is an important topic for all of us when we think of supply chain security.” This goes two ways, she says: “Social risk is a risk for IKEA as a brand. But it’s also an opportunity when we support suppliers who create a positive impact in their community.”

More powerful than philanthropy

Providing a way to move beyond philanthropy and traditional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies, participants in the accelerator programmes feel this type of co-worker engagement has a clear added value.

Andres Heusser, IKSO regional finance manager for Chile, Colombia and Peru, immediately said yes to the opportunity to apply as a mentor in the NESsT Latin America accelerator. Andres works with PesCo, a social enterprise that provides local artisanal fishermen in Peru a higher income by reducing the number of intermediaries in the supply chain and ensuring sustainable seafood to consumers.

“Before joining IKEA, I had always been passionate about entrepreneurship. The purpose of doing social good was an extra motivation to apply as a mentor,” he says. Andres thinks it’s a great example for other organisations to follow: “There are all kinds of ways



you can help as a corporation. You can give money, buy implements, give medicines or build houses, but I feel that promoting entrepreneurship is something every corporation should do. It means giving support on a more powerful level. There's dignity and there's autonomy."

The social fishery enterprise he works with already has its revenue model well established, working with fishermen in different parts of Peru and delivering to a satisfied client base of markets and restaurants. Andres mentors them on key financial issues so they can grow and have a bigger impact.

This way of working shows how much a little input can do: "Give some feedback, tools, motivation and trust: that's all people with fewer resources need," he says. "If we as corporate organisations help to light that flame, we can support social entrepreneurs to solve big problems."

Co-creating a better everyday life

Sharing our unique IKEA business knowledge, values and culture with social enterprises we can co-create and scale solutions for a bigger social and environmental impact. It also allows us to learn and be inspired by the work of these pioneers. Only by working together can we make a fair and equal world and a better everyday life for the many people.

Do you want to learn more about how co-worker engagement with solution-driven social entrepreneurs works out in practice? Have a look at this video about the [East Africa accelerator](#).

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