



Mobile and Development Intelligence



1



2

SoukTel

SoukTel is a service based in the Middle East that connects job seekers with employers via mobile phone. Since its start in 2006, SoukTel has linked thousands of young people with jobs and training. More than 20 leading aid agencies also actively use SoukTel's mobile AidLink services to get key information to and from communities in crisis. SoukTel's technology is now used in over 15 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Year launched
2006

Business model
Donor funded

Targeted Device
Basic/ Feature Phone

Primary Delivery Technology
SMS, WAP, IVR

Products & Services
Peer to Peer, Push content, Interactive content

Markets deployed in
Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean

Estimated number of users
30,000 (JobMatch); 150,000 (AidLink)

Background and opportunity:

What opportunity existed and how was it filled by the organisation?

In Palestine, as well as other emerging markets across the world, there existed a real challenge in the labour market. The challenge was that job seekers, particularly young people who had either just finished school or dropped out of school, were entering the market with no good resources for finding out where work could be located. On the other side of the coin, employers were looking for skilled staff but didn't know how to find them. "This was happening at scale, across the country, across the labour market." While most job seekers had basic phones, far fewer had access to the internet (and even if they had internet enabled phones they weren't using them due to expensive data connection rates). In addition, there weren't any real university or high-school job counselling resources. "SoukTel set out to solve this problem using very basic technology. Whether looking for work or looking to hire staff, the service essentially saves time, saves money, and allows users to reach more people."

Progress since launch:

How have things gone so far?

SoukTel was founded in 2006. In 2007 it launched its first JobMatch service in Palestine, in partnership with four universities. The service was initially linked to around 100 employers. JobMatch ran well in the first year, matching several hundred new graduates with jobs. The main competitors weren't actually in the mobile sector, but were rather walk-in recruitment firms. These firms are typically very basic: job-seekers walk in, drop off a CV, and receive a call back if matched to a job. In this case, the job seeker must surrender his/her first month/half month's pay to the firm. The reported matching rate of these walk-in recruitment firms rate is about 15%. SoukTel achieved around 25% in the first year of launch. Since then SoukTel's service has been scaled up in Palestine, today serving close to 10,000 job

¹ <http://soukTel.org/>

² Image courtesy of SoukTel

seekers in any given month. While the number of employers is still relatively small, this is done intentionally in order to focus on larger scale employers, who typically have more jobs to post. In 2009, during a period of severe conflict in Gaza, SoukTel was also sought out to match people with emergency food and medicine there. This provided an opportunity for the service to re-align its technology for humanitarian aid purposes while serving the same user base. On the strength of this realignment, SoukTel started generating interest from a range of aid agencies in relation to their job training programmes within regions including East Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa. “The agencies were really interested in taking the service we’d developed, and growing it into those areas. This, in combination with having generated very positive attention for the service in the local Palestinian market, was a key enabler for successful expansion into other markets”

Scalability:

How is the service being scaled to reach a larger audience?

SoukTel consists of around 20 staff (a similar size to many mobile ventures in the sector). While having had intentions to grow, the organisation has faced two key challenges. Firstly, they have undergone significant service redesign with each new market, arising from the fact that every labour market is different to another. Secondly, limited resources prevent the organisation from setting up physical offices in each of the countries where the service is being rolled out. “If you think about it, these sorts of things can really add up in terms of eating into your bottom line.” In the context of these challenges, SoukTel discovered that the ideal path to scale was through strategic partnerships. The job training programmes offered by aid agencies, with which SoukTel dovetail its technology, are good examples of such partnerships. Furthermore, the organisation has found that partnering with MNOs in specific countries is a real path to scale (e.g., in Rwanda SoukTel works with MTN, in Morocco they work with Méditel, and so on).

User centric attitudes:

How does the organisation build itself around the end user?

SoukTel conducts opinion polling, operates hotlines whereby users can provide feedback, and runs periodic polls on its own service. The organisation also monitors its user data very closely—for example, tracking which job sectors are being searched for most frequently. In terms of designing the user feedback structures, the team started by monitoring overall traffic and then looked for interesting trends or patterns. Now they have a team that interacts with a random sample of users on a monthly basis doing SMS and voice polling. “Each month’s research feeds the next month’s questions.” As a result of this research, SoukTel found there was demand for a weekly push SMS to users with information about how they can prepare for job searching. They backed this insight up with the poll data, and then started delivering the push content requested by users. In some cases, where services are run on the ground by aid agencies, these partners have brought in a third party to carry out impact monitoring and evaluation. This sort of partnership has enabled SoukTel to be part of more rigorous assessments, which would have otherwise been impossible for them to conduct given their resource constraints. “We’re not equipped ourselves to conduct this sort of analysis”.

Challenges:

What are the internal and external challenges currently faced?

Internally SoukTel faces a dilemma: whether to lead with a new service, hoping that users will respond well, and then earning revenue from it; or waiting until there exists sufficient revenue to fund the development of a new service. They try to do both. Developers are afforded time, where possible, to work on new projects the team would hope to launch. On the other hand, the organisation keeps its existing services at the core, as these generate the revenue. While this is essential, the possibility of working on new projects is also critical because prospective partners must, generally speaking, be approached with some “new idea in hand”. This comes in addition to the fact that SoukTel can’t keep promoting identical services repeatedly. Externally speaking, regulatory environments provide a big challenge. For example, the team would like to develop services incorporating more of a mobile money component in Palestine. However, the regulatory environment in the Middle East is still extremely rigid, meaning that mobile money transfer is still not permitted in Palestine. This is in contrast to other markets, particularly in East Africa, with much less stringent regulatory frameworks. “For the markets we predominately work in, i.e., the Arabic speaking world, the regulatory environment poses a challenge”.

Partnerships:

What is the value of partnerships, particularly with MNOs?

SoukTel has core partnerships with both MNOs and aid agencies, both of which are

valuable. These are clearly different in that MNOs are fundamentally commercial entities which focus on earning revenue, while non-profits have social concerns more explicitly woven into their bottom lines. As a result, SoukTel's approach to partnerships between the two is very different. Even while trying to adopt a uniform method when approaching new MNOs, the reality is that these operators can be very different. In some cases SoukTel is directed to the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) team, in others to the VAS (Value Added Services) team of a given MNO. "This being said, once you get a handle on the way a specific MNO works then you can typically apply the same approach in multiple countries." The interesting thing that the aid agencies bring is insight into the needs of job seekers. "These agencies provide a lot of information that helps optimise the service to meet the needs of end users."

Looking back, looking forward:

What key lessons have been learnt, and what are the organisation's future objectives?

When SoukTel started – almost seven years ago – there was circumspection as to whether mobiles could be used to help people find jobs. However, in the last few years, when m-services started booming, the uptake for the organisation has been substantial. From this point of view the growth of the sector has been important. Previously, the organisation found it difficult to get in touch with MNOs as there was very little public data available that would help strategically determine how to best partner with them. This entailed either a lot of leg work, or "shooting blind". SoukTel's experience is that finding ways to partner with others at the sector level is crucial. "In this respect, the effort going into provision of good data is good for everyone. This is because good data helps organisations understand where new possibilities might lie, how to seek out new partnerships, as well as means of new service delivery. It also helps organisations track where their current market is heading." In terms of future objectives, SoukTel aims to expand into more countries. At the same time, they look at the current markets they operate in for new service possibilities that will enrich the experience of current users. In this respect they have both a horizontal and vertical focus. SoukTel also aims to contribute to the sector overall, they maintain a strong focus on the social impact of the services, and ensuring that communities are empowered by mobile technology. The organisation is particularly sensitive to the circumstances in the Arab world, which currently involves regime change in multiple countries. "The bottom line is ensuring that communities can get the most out of mobile under these circumstances."

Acknowledgements:

The Mobile and Development Intelligence team would like to thank **Jacob Korenblum** (SoukTel Inc CEO & Co-Founder) for assisting the GSMA to produce this case study.

About the GSM Association

The GSMA represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide. Spanning 220 countries, the GSMA unites nearly 800 of the world's mobile operators, as well as more than 200 companies in the broader mobile ecosystem, including handset makers, software companies, equipment providers, Internet companies, and media and entertainment organisations. The GSMA also produces industry-leading events such as the Mobile World Congress and Mobile Asia Congress.

About Mobile for Development - Serving the underserved through mobile

Mobile for Development brings together our mobile operator members, the wider mobile industry and the development community to drive commercial mobile services for underserved people in emerging markets. We identify opportunities for social, economic impact and stimulate the development of scalable, life-enhancing mobile services.

About Mobile and Development Intelligence

MDI is a freely available, online platform of market and impact data, analysis and access to an active community of practice. The mobile phone's ubiquity is uniquely well-placed to drive economic and social development in emerging markets. Investments in the mobile and development sectors are rising yet there is limited data on which to base these decisions. MDI is designed to bridge this information gap.