

INNOVATION

Refugee Turned Entrepreneur: We Are All Geniuses On The Day We Are Born

As a refugee who's worked 40-some jobs in his relatively short but eventful life, Ali Mahlodji, co-founder of [whatchado.com](#), knows first-hand about the power of opening your heart and mind to the possibilities of a career. He shared his amazing life story from refugee to entrepreneur during the recent

[SuccessConnect Berlin](#) event.

"A lot of young people don't have any idea of what to do in their future," said Mahlodji. "It's so powerful when you have a chance to talk to someone about your experiences. We started this platform to show people if they want to have a job one day, don't think there's only one way to get there."



Ali Mahlodji, co-founder of [whatchado.com](#), believes the most beautiful thing about life is its uncertainty. SAP

The [whatchado.com](#) platform features over 6,500 videos with people of all ages from around the world. Every interviewee answered the same seven questions about their careers – freely sharing the good and bad. Included are children as young as kindergarteners. Looking back at his learnings from these conversations, Mahlodji shared his insights about work, relationships and life.

Know your potential

Born in Iran and growing up in a refugee camp outside Vienna, Mahlodji was painfully aware of his outsider status. He rebelled against being told he wasn't good enough based on his origins or the color of his skin. Instead, he decided to be the best version of himself. That message seems to resonate with the over one million people using [whatchado.com](#).

"On the day you are born, you are a genius. We want people to have the freedom of choice for the future, and that's only possible if you see what's out there in the world, and then you can find your own path," he said. "We want to show that it's your story that counts...What we need in our world of complexity are human beings who know they are good enough, who know their own potential."

Detoured but determined

One of the hardest things to do while growing up is deciding on a career. Mahlodji initially came up with the idea of creating a "handbook of life stories" when he was a teenager. However, this was before video, the internet or social media. Following his parent's divorce, Mahlodji quit school.

"When you're a school drop-out, your name is Ali, and no one can say your second name and you're a refugee, it's not the best entry point to any career," he said.

He eventually earned his bachelor's degree in computer programming and held various positions in the technology industry. But Mahlodji never forgot his life story idea. After his father passed away, he had an epiphany and switched careers, becoming a teacher in Vienna.

"I had to get back to my purpose, helping kids like me," he said. "Every child had the world in their pocket but used their [technology] devices only for selfies or cat content. I had this idea of building a website with stories from people around the world."

Unite under one purpose

Despite detractors who said it would never work, Mahlodji launched [whatchado.com](#) as a team of four friends. Today over 30 employees from 15 countries work at his award-winning online platform. He's proud that the youngest is 17 years old and the most experienced is 54.

"When people are working together, there are so many points of view from the world in one room and this sparks innovation, so we can create a future for the better," he said. "What we all have in common is one dream, this one purpose bringing all these generations of people together working in one direction."

Keep believing

One thing Mahlodji said he learned from over 85 percent of the people his company has interviewed is that their lives were not a straight line. He challenged the audience to unleash their curiosity and embrace their mistakes to create their own future.

"Life itself starts and ends by chance, and in between we think we can make plans for the next 40 years which is crazy," said Mahlodji. "Life is a zigzag...The most beautiful thing about life is its uncertainty. Not knowing what's around the corner is what makes life meaningful..what we need today are people who believe in themselves and those around them."