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HOLY NIGHT

## Porsche Party in the Vatican

Whatever the venue of your work Christmas party this year, it won't top the Porsche company party in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome.

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**REFUGEE TRAINING**

# Work Wanted

With many refugees in Germany unable to work, a new business model gives refugees the opportunity to build and sell furniture.

BY SARAH MEWES



Refugees are working at Cucula, a firm that tries to get around laws that restrict asylum seekers' access to jobs. Source: Cucula

Ali Nouhou, a 21-year-old refugee from Mali, has built a chair and is painting it in the red, black and green colors of pan-African independence. He is one of five trainees who have been employed as interns by Cucula in Berlin. The organization is pioneering a business model that trains refugees in carpentry and design.

Like many refugees, he is keen to work but his status made it impossible, as a person who is tolerated in the country but forbidden to work.

Germany has long been the most popular destination for asylum seekers in Europe. The influx of refugees has increased dramatically since the outbreak of the war in Syria. In August alone, 17,860 people applied for asylum.

**WHY IT MATTERS**

Many refugees don't have the right to work in Germany, but are economic capital for the country.

**FACTS**

86 000 people are currently being tolerated in Germany, many of whom have been here for a number of years.

Refugees are not allowed to work for the first 9 months while in Germany, a law that has recently been changed to 3 months.

An organization called Cucula has built a business model that offers internships for refugees.

One of the biggest problems for asylum seekers is being left in limbo, either while waiting to be granted asylum, or staying on if their application has been refused. For their first nine months in Germany after having been given a work permit, asylum seekers are not allowed to work at all, although recently the Federal Council decided that this waiting period may be reduced to three months.

These legal constraints beg the question: what other alternatives are there for the tens of thousands of refugees whose status in Germany is not clearly defined?

Cucula is offering an alternative to this deadlock. The project registers the refugees as interns offering them the prospect of becoming full-time apprentices once their legal status is defined.

“We are building a real firm and if our refugees get asylum at some point, they can move on from gaining work experience towards becoming real trainees,” Barbara Meyer, the director of the project, told Handelsblatt Global Edition.

It is early days for Cucula, and finding the financial means to set up the company is difficult. At the moment it cannot pay its employees from income it generates but depends on donations. In November, the company will start a crowdfunding campaign. They have also looked for sponsors and charities.

“We want to highlight the possibility that charities can help to give refugees the opportunity for proper vocational training,” Ms. Meyer said.

Ms. Meyer has brought the Cucula concept to life with a team of young social workers, carpenters and designers dedicated to giving refugees the opportunity to learn marketable skills; and more importantly, to restore a sense of independence that they may have lost since leaving their home country.

The firm currently employs five trainees. They are using the “Autoprogettazione” furniture series by Italian designer Enzo Mari, from whom they obtained the reproduction licence. The Italian designer drove the idea of DIY furniture making in Italy in the 1960s and '70s. His work is currently being exhibited at Germany's famed porcelain maker KPM's exhibition area.

Cucula's business model has been positively received at local-authority level, even though it is seen as a small step in making use of the immense economic capital that the thousands of refugees offer Germany.

“We have many refugees here who are highly qualified in their own countries and could pick up the German language in no time,” Sascha Langenbach, the director of the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district authority, told Handelsblatt Global Edition.

He believes the German government could create a series of different programs to integrate refugees into work life and relieve them of their dependence on welfare. Refugees cost money, of course, but this would be minimized if they had the right to support themselves.

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