



Startup Refugees:

# Action report 2023





# 2023

## in Numbers



**224** employed to the open job market



**2 177** professional profiles collected to the Match platform



**3 000+** growth in network members



**3 500 000** euros saved in social security benefits

**24** trainings offered with **3 617** participation times

**22** mentees in our mentoring program

**5 220** personal advice given on employment and skills development

**3** long entrepreneurship courses and **6** short in **4** languages

**379** participants in entrepreneurship courses

**1 131** business advice given on entrepreneurship

**15** companies registered



# Contents

Introduction .....	4
Strategy .....	5
Communications and advocacy work.....	6
Match Made in Startup Refugees Platform.....	7
Making job opportunities happen .....	7
Strengthening skills and building networks .....	10
Supporting future entrepreneurs .....	12
Finance and Human Resources .....	13
Startup Refugees International .....	15
Other cool stuff from 2023 .....	16
We end our report with a word from our partners .....	17

## Introduction

Welcome to Startup Refugees, where we're passionate about making a real difference in the lives of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. We don't just talk the talk; we walk the walk by providing meaningful support and opportunities that help individuals kick-off their professional journeys. Through entrepreneurship, tailored mentorships, training, and unlocking doors to employment, we're here to transform aspirations into reality.

In 2023, we embarked on a journey of growth and innovation. Our employment, skills development and entrepreneurship programs received a significant boost, broadening our reach with impactful national services and diving into the world of service sales. We also re-launched the Match Made in Startup Refugees platform, an online space designed to bridge the gap between talent and opportunity. Though our physical offices are based in Helsinki, Oulu, and Rovaniemi, our online initiatives allowed us to connect with people across Finland like never before.

Our main focus remains on supporting those who are navigating the challenging transition to a new life, especially asylum seekers and refugees. We were proud to create a record number of skills profiles on our Match platform last year, extending a warm welcome to individuals fleeing from Ukraine, continuing the support we've shown in previous years.

Our network saw remarkable growth, expanding to include nearly 5 000 companies, communities, and individuals from over 90 different locations within and outside of Finland. This incredible expansion, with 3 000 new members joining in a single year, showcases the collective effort to support newcomers, offering expertise, mentoring, event spaces, and help in developing professional networks. We estimate that in 2023 we have saved Finnish society around 3.5 million in social security costs such as unemployment benefits by supporting people to find employment in the open job market and start their own businesses.

This report isn't just a collection of achievements from 2023; it's a reflection of the real impact and the innovative strides we have made. As you explore these pages, you'll discover what makes us who we are. And yes we also dealt with many failures, rejections and lessons learned but here we want to focus on the positive!

**Now join us as  
we look back  
through 2023!**

# Strategy



## Mission

Our mission is to accelerate the inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants through employment, entrepreneurship and skills development. We walk the talk.



## Vision

Our vision is an inclusive society where refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have fast and equal access to a meaningful professional life.

## Values



### **HANDS ON**

We spend our time with our customers. We do what it takes.



### **BASED ON NEED**

Everything we do is based on the needs of our customers.



### **NO FALSE PROMISES**

We only promise to do our best.



### **EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE**

We are not afraid to think and do big. We act fast, fail fast, and learn fast.



### **TOGETHER**

We work with everyone who wants to do something concrete to support our goal.

## Communications and advocacy work

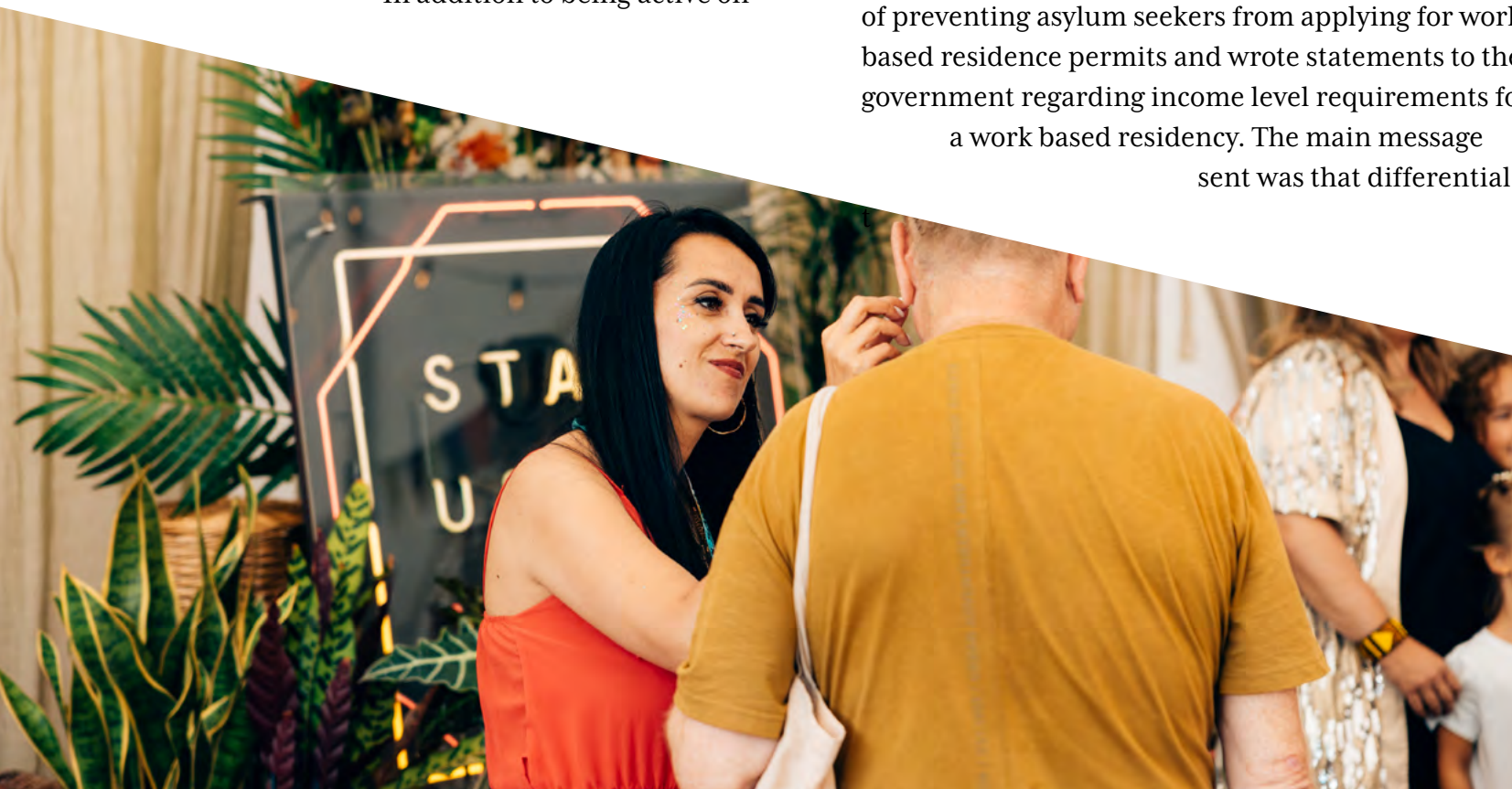
Startup Refugees' social media channels (Facebook pages, Instagram and LinkedIn) had a total of 18 448 followers. Follower numbers in the different channels grew by a total of 22 percent from the previous year. The different social channels reached a total of about 114 000 people in 2023. Startup Refugees was also featured on different media platforms including Kauppalehti, Helsingin Sanomat and Aamulehti. In addition to being active on

social media communications was strengthened by producing a new brand video that can be seen [here](#).

On the advocacy side, we have been deeply worried about the new immigration policies proposed and set forth by the government and the consequences for the immigrants and the international community in Finland. In 2023 the organization took part in protests that were directly linked to the employment and entrepreneurship opportunities of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants living in Finland. We also published opinion pieces against the planned policy of preventing asylum seekers from applying for work based residence permits and wrote statements to the government regarding income level requirements for a work based residency. The main message sent was that differential

treatment of social security and benefits will only lead to more segregation and poor wellbeing. In short, paying the same taxes should equal the same benefits.

- Reduction in the refugee quota in a world with more refugees than ever and complicating the already complicated asylum seeking process are counterproductive measures.
- Increasing the requirements for a permanent residency permit and Finnish citizenship are moves that scream "You are not welcome here!"
- Fast integration and inclusion happen through education, employment and entrepreneurship: the focus should be on making all three even more accessible and not the other way around.
- Immigration should be seen as brain gain, no matter what the reason behind it.
- Recognizing the need of NGOs in integration should not lead to cutting their funding but better targeting the funds instead.



Flow Festival,  
picture by Nora Sayaad

In addition to advocating on social media and participating in protests and events, we took part in direct advocacy work throughout the year and met nine members of parliament personally and had encounters with seven directors from different municipalities. The meetings discussed refugees and the participation of asylum seekers in Finnish working life and measures to improve inclusion. Social media channels were used as the main channel for communication but in addition the organization actively participated in writing opinion pieces on the aforementioned topics and contacting different media to spread the message.

## Match Made in Startup Refugees Platform

The Match platform, developed by Startup Refugees with the support of Futurice in 2017, has been fundamental to the organization's operations and success. However, as time has passed, it has become clear that the platform's technical features do not meet contemporary standards, necessitating enhancements to improve its user-friendliness and efficiency. Recognizing the importance of these updates, prioritizing the platform's development became essential in 2023. A suitable pro bono partner was sought to undertake this vital development work and Netlight was selected for this role. Through the assistance and expertise of Netlight, coupled with numerous workshops and meetings with staff, significant improvements were made to the existing Match platform. These enhancements included things such as better user-friendliness, faster operation, and new search functionalities. Following these updates and with the support of Netlight, a decision was made to transition to an entirely new system in order to not have to constantly work on technical updates and developments and have more time for the actual work of matching people with opportunities instead. A new Match platform, powered by Jobful, will be introduced in late spring of 2024.

## Making job opportunities happen

The job market is not buzzing at the moment and the slowing down of recruitments was already palpable last year. Still, our dedicated employment team faced the year's challenges head on as usual.

In 2023, the team managed to gather a total of 2 177 new skills profiles of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants around Finland. This brought the total number of individuals supported by Startup Refugees close to 10 000. Behind each of these profiles is an individual with motivation, skills, and potential who wants to find a meaningful career in Finland. According to what people say in their Match profiles: 98 % want to find work, 22 % are interested in also starting a business, and 44 % are interested in networking, education and workshops.

Although the economic downturn hit hard on migrants who are one of the most vulnerable groups in the job market, the team managed to support the employment of 224 people to the open job market. The job opportunities came from fields such as IT, office and project work, accounting, assembly, warehouse, hairdressing, community counseling, nursing, construction, cleaning and hospitality.

The length of the contracts varied from three months to a year and longer or indefinite. Personal support for employment and skills development was offered more than ever before: a total of 5520 times.

Of course not all of the jobs that we support people land are always exactly in line with their educational backgrounds. We continuously work on providing opportunities that directly align with the person's skills

and in the meantime know that landing that first job is of incredible importance.

Beyond conducting our own Match clinics and networking gatherings, we actively participated in major job fairs sponsored by various cities, ranging from the Fair Work event in Turku to the Job Fair at Mes-sukeskus in Helsinki, and the Recruitment Festival in Kirkkonummi. Furthermore, we engaged in the

Chamber of Commerce's event, the Suuri osaaja- ja rekrytointi tapahtuma, to broaden our connections, network and showcase our services. We also presented our services in a separate event organized by the RIHY Chamber of Commerce. We continued collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce by taking part as guest speakers in their info session on employing international talents, addressing over 100 companies with guidance and insights on recruiting international expertise.

### A few of our favorite recruitments from 2023:

**1.** Our skilled elevator technician, with extensive experience from Iran, shared that he was drawn to Finland by his aspirations and enthusiasm for a highly reputed elevator company here. He however had a hard time finding a job in his field, until he found us. Now, he is happily working full-time in his area of expertise!

**2.** We are proud to have assisted the Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, CMI, in the recruitment of a highly motivated and knowledgeable project assistant. As an organization committed to promoting peace, we align with CMI's noble cause and are always eager to support initiatives that contribute to peace and understanding globally. It's our honor to play a role in facilitating the work of individuals and organizations like CMI, who are at the forefront of creating a more harmonious world.

**3.** We achieved a milestone by supporting the employment of a non-Finnish speaking asylum seeker nurse in the nursing and healthcare field. This opportunity not only transformed her life dramatically but also significantly contributed to addressing the vast needs and filling the gaps within our society.

**4.** We initiated our first ever recruitment with Lidl resulting in many skilled workers securing permanent employment. Though unusual in construction, we successfully facilitated employment in a permanent position for a highly skilled client, specialized in rebar installation.



In the North of Finland we secured our customers with 25 permanent contracts. Our efforts extended across Lapland and Northern Ostrobothnia, where we engaged in a series of events and tied strong partnerships aimed at fostering recruitment, networking, and skill development.

A remarkable story from last year involves four seasonal workers who approached us after their unsuccessful work experience in farming. With our support, they not only transitioned to permanent contracts with Kaleva but also gained a comprehensive understanding of their rights and responsibilities in the Finnish working environment, thanks to our targeted training programs. This not only offered them a fresh start but also underscored the impact of our commitment to empowering individuals through education.

Another success story comes from an engineer with over eight years of experience as a factory assembler since moving to Finland. With our assistance, he secured his first job in his field of expertise in Finland, landing a permanent position as a graphic designer at Caverion. This achievement stands as a proof of our team's ability to match individuals with roles that fully utilize their skills and experience, leading to fulfilling careers.

We want to demonstrate that language barriers can be overcome with the right support. One notable example is our Ukrainian speaking clients who, despite having no Finnish proficiency, found permanent employment on a farm. This not only highlights the diverse range of job opportunities we've been able to provide but also emphasizes the inclusivity of our approach.

One of the year's highlights was also launching **[a study on the employment of Ukrainians](#)** from the perspective of Startup Refugees and our Match platform. We hired a Ukrainian researcher, Mariia Prys-tupa, to conduct the study and she did an excellent job digging into the stories behind numbers. You can read more about her insight in **[this interview](#)**.



## Strengthening skills and building networks

Our Skills Development Team has been dedicated to enhancing our customers' skills and upskilling and reskilling migrants to thrive in the Finnish job market for three years now. In 2023, we:



Trained over **695** individuals in Finnish work life and culture, and interview techniques.



Provided more than **129** people with training and guidance on creating effective CVs and cover letters that fit the norms and requirements of the Finnish job market.



Trained **305** participants on hygiene pass in Arabic, Dari, and Ukrainian with an impressive **98 %** passing rate.



Offered top-notch career coaching and professional training to over **600** people in fields such as software development, web development, UX/UI design, data engineering, marketing, and sales. One quotation from people attending the software development training was “The information shared has helped me to make informed decisions about what path to follow in software development.”



**Organized** specialized **events** for ICT professionals, healthcare professionals, bus drivers, textile and fashion industry professionals, foremen in the construction industry, and environmental professionals.



Conducted our fourth mentoring program with Telia and Tietoevery, bringing together **22** mentees from diverse backgrounds and nationalities.



We are proud to share that we achieved a **62 %** employment rate among highly educated migrants from our previous mentoring program in 2022.

**Words from our mentees:**

“It was an eye-opener, my mentor has helped me a lot, I have a clear image on how to proceed.”

“I am grateful and very glad that I will be able to find myself in a new country and become useful to Finnish society on the path of development.”

Throughout 2023, together with our partners and volunteers, we provided training, career coaching, mentoring, and professional development opportunities to our over 1 700 customers, demonstrating our commitment to facilitate career growth and boost the peoples' career prospects in Finland.



Recruitment  
for Oksana &  
Husky Oy



Recruitment  
with Lidl

## Supporting future entrepreneurs

2023 was a year of growing in volume in our entrepreneurship services. Three long entrepreneurship courses and six short ones were organized in English, Arabic, Ukrainian, and Russian, all online. Which is more than ever, with a record number of 374 participants. Also business advisory services were given more than ever, 1 131 times, which was 44 per cent more than the year before. These record numbers are largely due to Ukrainians finding our services in big volume. Our very own Telegram channel was started to answer their questions, and also small municipalities purchased entrepreneurship training in Ukrainian to their new citizens. 31 migrants received business mentoring a total of 86 times. Business services were given all together 1 448 times with 5 058 customer contacts. Volunteers and organizational partners collaborated with Startup refugees 224 times in organizing entrepreneurship services e.g. as mentors, workshop speakers, event organizer and so forth.

In November Startup Refugees Fund gave grants for the second time to early stage entrepreneurs to support their business development. The criteria for giving the grants were the feasibility of the project plan,



sustainability of the business idea (ESG) but also the diversity of the winners. The grantees chosen were:

- Magic Performance by Marina Pechorina (designing and preparing performance clothing to ice skaters and gymnastics)
- Salgado Consulting by Luis Saldago Lopez (sports coaching)
- PhotobyAN by Hanna Aziri (photography services)

Startup Refugees organized six market validation events in 2023 including Easter pop-up with all Ukrainian entrepreneurs in Iso Omena mall, Christmas pop-ups in Oulu and Helsinki and a continued

collaboration with Flow Festival. In August nine entrepreneurs and our staff hosted a Startup Refugees Garden tent at Flow Festival. The tent was busy, especially the workshops organized on Family Sunday were super popular and at least 2 707 people visited the tent. A total of 64 entrepreneurs took part in the events and the preceding coaching to learn how to sell to Finnish customers, present their products, market and learn from customer feedback to use it for further product development.

### Feedback from our entrepreneurship courses:

“The group exercises made everything more interesting and we came up with innovative ideas together as a team which can be applied in our respective business.”

“The investment of the entire team in sharing their knowledge and the speakers’ entrepreneurial journeys inspire me.”

“Startup Refugees entrepreneurship course was the best thing that we did. We were so scared of opening a business in Finland but we got all the needed information from the course.”

“I have finally understood how to manage costs and understand how it affects my price in the market. I understand the regulation system. Clear, accessible, coordinated.”

“So satisfied and happy with inspiring sources.”

## Finance and Human Resources

In 2023, our funding was a blend of both private (20 %) and public (80 %) sources. The employment program and activities supporting the professional skills of asylum seekers were primarily financed by grants from STEA, the European Social Fund (ESF), and Employment Offices. Two longer ESF funded projects ended during 2023, but on the other hand, two new projects with the same funding source started in 2023. The entrepreneurship program received its largest grants from the Private Entrepreneurs Foundation and the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM). Additionally, the year saw some donations and other small-scale grants. Support for clients who have fled the war in Ukraine, was sustained through smaller grants from various foundations.

The staff consisted of 32 employees altogether in 2023 resulting in 21 personal work years, 4 interns included, employed on various terms in Helsinki, Oulu, and Rovaniemi throughout the year. In addition, 18 hourly employees called “community leaders” assisted

occasionally in the employment program activities such as at events and in workplace orientation. Elisa Vepsäläinen ended her long career as Chief Executive Officer in March of 2023 but lucky for us continues as a board member. Aicha Manai was selected as the new CEO and began her role in April with a bang. In June and in November, the whole staff gathered in Helsinki for team and strategy days.

As in previous years, personnel expenses accounted for the largest portion of operating expenses. Also volunteers participated in Startup Refugees’ activities 160 times in 2023 along with many businesses donating their time and expertise to the network or otherwise supporting activities.

Staff development was supported throughout the year by offering opportunities to participate in various training sessions. Staff members received training in mental health issues, Occupational safety and health, Scrum Master, equality planning, and OKR method. Peer learning on entrepreneurship and managing one’s own work was also organized within teams. The monitoring of workplace well-being continued with a staff survey conducted four times throughout the year.



### List of ongoing projects and fundings in 2023

<b>Project / funder</b>	<b>Time</b>
Startup Refugees Academy / STEA	4/2021 - 4/2024
Strengthening the integration model / STEA	1/2022 -
Yrittäjyys- ja työelämätaitoja maahanmuuttajataustaisille nuorille / OKM	1-12/2023
Business program / Yksityisyrittäjain säätiö	1/2023 - 12/2024
Restart your career / ESR	4/2021 - 6/2023
Tueksi työpaikalle / ESR	4/2021 - 6/2023
Work Force / ESR	1/2023 - 6/2025
Diverse Talents / ESR	10/2023 - 3/2026
Ambitious / Erasmus, EU	12/2023 - 12/2025
Pop up services Lapland / TE-office	5/2022 - 12/2023
Developing fast integration model and digital Match platform / TAH foundation	10/2023 - 3/2024
Match Ukrainians / Ami Foundation	2023
Entrepreneurial services for Ukrainians / Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation; Startup Foundation; Alli Paasikivi Foundation; SYKE	2023

## Startup Refugees International

2023 was an international year. The CEO and the Head of Business Program participated in Refugee Entrepreneurship Summit in Izmir, Turkey in October networking, re-connecting and learning from the best in the field. In December Startup Refugees started a two year Erasmus+ funded project AMBITIOUS (Aiding Migrants through Business Idea Testing, Innovation and Online Understanding and Skills) together with Forward Inc (the Netherlands) and PLACE Network (France), who were originally met in the summit a year before. In June 2023-March 2024 Startup Refugees has coached the Refugee Council of Lithuania in starting their own entrepreneurship program to refugees, which has been an interesting new venture and process of coaching an organization.

Our Business Program Manager and Skills Development Manager traveled to Madrid to participate in the Work - Tools for Youth Employability and Entrepreneurship Forum held in March of 2023 by Juventud de España aka the Spanish Institute for Youth.

Startup Refugees was also invited to attend the **Regional Consultations with NGOs in Europe** held in Geneva, Switzerland and hold a speech on financial inclusion and entrepreneurship. Our CEO attended the two day seminar and networked with several other like minded NGOs such as Jobs For Ukraine, Micro-finance Center and SVOJA Association.

Another great highlight of the year was receiving the European Entrepreneurship Promotion Award in the category of Inclusive and sustainable business from the European Commission in Bilbao in November. Two members of the Business Program joined the European SME assembly and the award ceremony and were able to give a speech about our work and the opportunities refugees bring to European business life alongside networking.

European Entrepreneurship Promotion Awards at the SME Assembly in Bilbao



## Other cool stuff from 2023

- Our Helsinki office moved from Sturenkatu to the renewed House of Culture aka Kulttuuritalo in April and we get to enjoy the view of Linnanmäki straight from our office window!
- We hosted the funnest housewarming party with food from all over the world, beautiful Ukrainian singing, live statues and belly dancing!
- We hosted the annual Talent Boost Summit in Vantaa and gave a workshop on DEIB at work with our partner IKEA.
- We formed and strengthened partnerships with cities and municipalities as they prepare for major changes regarding the future of integration and employment services by participating in a Municipality tour with Suomen Yrittäjät.



Startup Refugees  
housewarming party,  
pictures by Julius Töyrylä



## We end our report with a word from our partners

Startup Refugees supports us in achieving our ED&I goals. We perceive our collaboration with SUR as professional, fun, proactive and co-creative. Besides recruiting refugees and immigrants through SUR, we appreciate contributing together to changing the narrative about refugees and immigrants. Last year, at the Talent Boost Summit in Vantaa, we had the pleasure to co-facilitate together a group of organizations on the topic “working with diverse teams”. And we are looking forward to hosting a group of refugees and immigrants for a mentoring event with our digital team.”

- Catharina Van Den houwe, ED&I, IKEA



📍📍 Tietoevry has been collaborating with Startup Refugees since 2018, focusing on the digital competences needed when entering the Finnish labor market. In 2023, we again organized a mentoring programme where Tietoevry and Telia employees acted as mentors and were matched with mentees through Startup Refugees based on shared competencies and professional interests. By supporting immigrants in developing their digital skills, we support the construction of their future and working life.”

- Liisi Hatinen, Communications and IR, Tietoevry

📍📍 Each year, Netlight participates in pro-bono projects, both recurring commitments and new initiatives in global and local partnerships. In 2023, we collaborated with Startup Refugees through a Master’s Thesis by Sinan Sakaoglu, a student at Aalto University and KTH and currently a consultant at Netlight. Sinan performed a security assessment of Match as well as the ways of working around personal data. A support team of three developers and two product designers from Netlight also assisted on Match’s short term performance and long term vision. In May, two Netlight recruiters took part in an online career day for IT professionals to shed light on the IT market and what employers are looking for.

We see that collaboration with Startup Refugees has been fruitful on many levels and there is genuine two-way knowledge sharing within DEI and social impact. We look forward to continuing supporting the digital solutions advisory during 2024 and exploring potential new initiatives such as mentoring. Startup Refugees’ growth mindset and people first attitude resonates well with Netlight’s culture.”

- Anna Routti, Talents & Growth, Netlight

Workshop with Netlight

Mentoring program closing event, with Tietoevry and Telia





It's great to work together with Startup Refugees. They help us find great people for our open vacancies and now there is already a third enthusiastic candidate going to a long-term employment relationship! It is amazing that there is an organization that helps people find employment so effectively. Truly everyone wins!"

- Joonas Huovila, Recruitment, Bolt Works

Recruitment event with Bolt



**Thank you for  
joining the ride.  
Now, let's rock 2024!**

Yours truly,  
[The Startup Refugees Crew](#)





START

UP REF

UGEES