

#TECH: Microsoft empowers microentrepreneurs with digital skills and tools

By **BOTS team** - December 1, 2022 @ 2:20pm



Malaysia's first five Microsoft Digital Entrepreneur Ambassadors Natasya, Suhaila, Ain, Zaleha, and Azizah.

Being a teacher had been Zaleha Zulkifly's ambition since she was young and hailing from a small town in Kelantan like Jeli, she was sure that teaching would be her lifelong career.

Zaleha also loves baking. On the side, Zaleha has been formulating ideas to start her own bakery business. Little did she know, seven years later, today, her side hustle, Azreha Bakery, is now a household name in her town.

Zaleha's experience isn't an isolated one. In a rural town like Jeli, most people rarely get the chance to come across a turning point like how Zaleha did – and one reason for this is the lack of resources.

Realising this, Microsoft joined hands with local social enterprise Me.reka to bring digital tools and skills to Jeli. Together with the support from MyDigital Corporation, Microsoft organised "Program Digital Usahawan Jeli" (Jeli digital entrepreneurship programme).

Through this programme, the company aimed to reach out to local entrepreneurs and guide them to grow and sustain their businesses by leveraging technology and digital skills.

Five of the entrepreneurs were selected for a three-month-long mentorship programme conducted virtually on Microsoft Teams where they were trained in three key areas: sales, social media, and partnerships.

TECH TRANSFORMING LIVES

"I never expected my bakery to grow to the extent that I could do this full-time, but technology has transformed my whole business," said Zaleha.

"Previously, only those who lived around the area knew about my business and I only sold in-store but now Azreha Bakery has an online footprint, and I have people reaching out to me daily to place orders for my cakes."

According to Zaleha, sales for Azreha Bakery have increased by 37 per cent while social media engagement shot up by 546 per cent. Beyond that, she is now also a mentor to others in her community, offering internship opportunities to students, further enabling them to pick up baking and entrepreneurial skills at a young age.

DIGITISING FOR ORDER

Like Zaleha, Siti Nur Ain Ismail also had a completely different goal in mind when she was younger. "I did long-distance running and thought my sports career was set in stone. I started Ain Aiskrim when I was only 25 years old, and my child was only a one-year-old then."

Ain didn't have high expectations when she first signed up for the workshop. While her regular customers liked her ice cream, having a small team caused her to let go of multiple opportunities to cater to larger orders.

"The mentors from this programme opened my eyes and provided guidance – not only through digital tools but they've also broadened my perspective on entrepreneurship.

"I used to scribble all my notes, now, I use Microsoft Excel. All the data is neatly organised and easily trackable – and I don't have to worry about losing my notes."

Ain ice-cream used to be available only at two schools and a grocery store in the district but has since expanded. "I want to continue growing my team and help more people realise their potential too – maybe I'll start putting up job vacancy postings on social media soon," added Ain.

While digital and technical capabilities are at the core of Microsoft's Skills for Jobs programme, the main objective for the programme is to bridge the digital divide and empower equal opportunities for every Malaysian to succeed in an increasingly digital future.

"This was what drove our commitment to upskilling an additional one million Malaysians by the end of 2023. We have since achieved more than 60 per cent of our target as of August 2022, a reflection of our continued partnership with Malaysia towards a future that is inclusive, innovative, and competitive – true to our mission to empower every person and every organisation on the planet to achieve more," said the firm.

GETTING IMPACT WITH SOCIAL PLATFORMS

Azizah Sulaiman launched SAS Mummy Power Legacy with the mission of encouraging health at a cheap price while also selling delicious, nutritious coffee. She had to halt her plan, though, when the pandemic broke out.

"It was frustrating. I wanted to do so much but I couldn't since there were movement restrictions in place," shared Azizah.

However, her grit and a willingness to explore alternatives made Azizah sign up for training programmes. Today, Azizah has up to 18,800 followers on social media compared to only 4,000 three months ago.

"I realised that like me, a lot of people were stuck at home with their devices so my consistent efforts in social media marketing were able to reach customers that I never imagined.

"There are so many readily available tools online that can help. All it takes is an effort to learn how to leverage these tools and with time, you'll reach your goal eventually."

STRIKING PARTNERSHIPS

This tenacity was also seen in Natasya Abdul Ghani, a fellow entrepreneur from Jeli. Unlike the others who started their businesses on the side, Natasya has always aspired to be a businesswoman.

Founded in 2017, Natasya's The Bee Garden sells pure honey and honey-based soaps. She also mentors aspiring beekeepers.

She signed up for the workshop with the intention of becoming more involved in various aspects of business operations, with big goals of expanding her business and creating job opportunities.

"The experience made me realise that I am far from reaching my goal, but it also enlightened me on many different approaches to growing my business. Recently, I even received orders from Singapore. This is a huge milestone I didn't expect to achieve so early on, but now I feel more motivated than ever to let even more people know about The Bee Garden," shared Natasya. She also recently secured

partnerships with J&T Express Malaysia, a leading courier company in Malaysia as well as deals with multiple sundry shops.

THE POWER OF ONLINE PRESENCE

When mother-of-two, Suhaila Jusoh started her business, it was to support her family.

Founded just before the pandemic, it used to be a brick-and-mortar business.

"I knew nothing about technology but to sustain my business, I only had two options – to learn or to lose out," said Suhaila who used to only make around RM300 in revenue per month. To date, Orfeo Perfume has increased its sales to 80 bottles of perfume in only two weeks.

"One thing I've learned is the importance of making your products visually appealing. I was initially worried if I would be able to familiarise myself with digital tools since they're all new to me, but Microsoft Sway is simple to navigate. It helped me create designs for the Orfeo Perfume website – and it looks good too."

Suhaila also mentioned that she now uses Microsoft Teams and Microsoft Excel for networking, acquiring new customers, and keeping track of business data without having to worry about losing it.

FROM JELI TO THE WORLD

Back then, Natasya, Suhaila, Ain, Zaleha, and Azizah were five businesswomen who knew very little about technology. They have become Malaysia's first five Microsoft Digital Entrepreneur Ambassadors in just four months.

Additionally, the Jeli Digital Entrepreneurship Programme's success motivated Microsoft to introduce the "Digital Entrepreneur Skills and Tools in a Box Programme", a framework that Microsoft hopes to use to replicate and support future digital entrepreneurial initiatives.

"We hope to continue nurturing these five entrepreneurs as mentors to other aspiring entrepreneurs, and continue empowering more people to realise their aspirations, from Jeli to the world."