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Samasource Founder and CEO Leila Janah describes how villagers with the wherewithal to survive on a dollar a day possess all the talent and initiative needed for digital work. She recounts how Samasource's first data-services center started as a four-station Internet cafe, and how it has since grown to a network of 2,000 full-time workers across east Africa.



Transcript

- I had a little experiment running in Kenya.. I had met a guy who was running an Internet cafe with four seats at the time, so four desks and four computers, and like many Internet cafe owners in developing countries he wasn't making much money because most people couldn't afford to spend the dollar per hour that his costs were running, so he was running this unprofitable Internet business.. I found him through an entrepreneur network in Kenya, and I said, "Look, I have an idea.. "What if we instead of using your computers "to rent the space and let people lease the Internet "what if we hire low income people from the slums, "and do tasks for Silicon Valley companies? "Probably the only thing I'm good at "is I can go and talk to anyone, "and get them to hopefully give us a contract, "and you're good at running a business in Kenya, "so let's partner." That was our first delivery center.. What started as four computers in Kenya has now grown into a global network of close to 2,000 full-time workers.. We're the largest data services provider in East Africa, and we've served all of these customers, and last year we actually became profitable off of our earned revenue working with clients including Google and Glassdoor, so it's been an incredible journey, and one that I could never have imagined starting from those very humble beginnings.. I think what's most exciting about the model, and how we've seen it grow over the years is that the least of our problems has been the talent.. Everyone at the beginning said, including people at big foundations when we decided to go the non-profit route said, "There's no way that you're gonna get "poor people from a slum in Kenya to do computer work, "like they need mosquito nets.. "How are they possibly gonna use computers?" I think we have a lot of paternalistic views about low-income people that very quickly get dispelled if you spend time in a place like a slum in Kenya where people just to survive have to be 10 times more entrepreneurial than we do.. If you made it to the point where you're 18, and a high school graduate in a place like Mathare you have the most robust set of entrepreneurial skills you can imagine, so we actually find that the least of our challenges is training and preparing workers to do digital work..

The challenges are more in terms of infrastructure, and logistics and scaling up in environments that are not always built for large scale enterprise...