

Public Sector Future podcast – Episode: Inspire – Guest: Mohammad S. Almadani, Classera

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Olivia Neal: Hello and welcome to *Public Sector Future*. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes.

I'm your host Olivia Neal, and together we will explore stories from around the world, where public servants have been successful at driving change. And we meet the people behind them, their first-hand experiences, and lessons learned. Throughout the series we will discuss technology and trends, as well the cultural aspects of change.

Today, and over our next 2 episodes, we're going to be exploring the work of some of the people and teams instrumental in helping Public Sector organizations deliver. The ecosystem that supports delivery is broad, and at Microsoft we work with partners around the world. Three of those organizations have been recognized as Microsoft Partners of the Year for their work with Education, Government, and Defense.

Today we're going to be exploring the work of the Education winner, Classera, who were recognized for their work over the past year in empowering schools, universities and colleges to keep teaching through the pandemic with their 'Learning Never Stops' initiative.

I'm joined today by Mohammad Almadani, the CEO of Classera. Mohammad was one of the founders of the organization in 2012, and he was driven to develop smart learning solutions which are more than just e-learning platforms - focusing on Artificial Intelligence, Gamification and social learning. We're going to discuss the growth of remote learning, and how it has supported education in conflict environments, how countries with limited infrastructures have embraced this approach, and his vision for the future of education.

Welcome to the show, and thank you Mohammad for joining me today.

Mohammad Almadani

Thank you for having me.

Olivia Neal

To start off, could you just tell us a little bit about who Classera are? What's your mission and where do you operate?

Mohammad Almadani

I'm focusing into how we can revolutionize education with, a few different concepts. From the very beginning when we started Classera I was in the college, And I wanted to, to have something different in the learning experience. I thought all the platforms that we saw wasn't, to the potential, to what technology can offer education. We founded a company that had three main things and pillars in the education experience. We said we wanted to have a platform that is inspiring for the education journey using gamification. I would like something that is personalized using AI and that is engaging, using social learning, all to get a better learning experience. So that's from the very beginning, what we came up with in Classera back 2012 in the U S it was, of course not an easy challenge, but fast forward we have inspired 10 million users in this journey so far. And we are proud to have that.

Olivia Neal

That's really fascinating. And to have started this journey back in 2012, identifying a new vision for how to engage people through learning, going through the last year must have been such an interesting time to be working with

educational authorities and working with schools with a product like yours at a time when they really needed it. When we saw the pandemic hit and really challenge schools and universities to rethink the way that they did learning. Could you tell us a little bit about some of the work that you've done in the last year? I know you've been working with schools and Iraq, Lebanon, Camaros, and other countries. Could you tell us a little bit about what what's been happening there?

Mohammad Almadani

Yeah, of course, that's part of the story. To give a context about how we came up to this. So from the very beginning, as I told you we wanted something to revolutionize education it was very hard at the beginning to convince people that, yes e-learning is not just about automating the process. It's about inspiring us, but about these concepts that we were talking about.

But we managed to get some of the top schools in the U S at the time. we started, somewhere in the US but we then moved to Silicon Valley to learn from the big companies. And we were doing a great but then we did have a strategic shift. We said, well, how about, go after some blue ocean and we showed that, in the MENA region to, have some focus there, because we saw a lot of potential, a lot of needs at the time. And we did, and that was back, 2013, 14, we did a big event in the, in the MENA region called the Future of Smart learning.

People were, looking at these kinds of things in the e-learning, it could education technology as more for luxury not a necessity. And, it was a big gamble from us in Classera. Back then, we did a big event that we put a lot of our assets in that event. And we gambled, basically. We said, we're going to try it. We want to change that mentality. We want to convince people that this is a lot more important. you're talking about 2014 way before the pandemic, that this is a future of smart learning. This is a necessity, not a luxury. And, but luckily we got some, good officials from the region. We got some good leaders from the private sector and they were the first mover after the event.

Little by little , we started to gain more momentum and, a little bit further down the road, war broke in the region in the border of Yemen and Saudi. And there was more than a hundred thousand students with no schools. So we did at the time before COVID the biggest virtual school in the whole region.

And we got some awards on it in some of the biggest event, you know, annual events about tech worldwide in London. It was a learning experience. And it was an example that, this is also a necessity for, any kind of disaster, whatever the disaster is. when you fast forward to 2020 and the pandemic time of course it did hit. And as you might know close to 800 million students worldwide, couldn't go to schools anymore.

Olivia Neal:

So before the pandemic hit you were already working with educational organizations to support remote learning, in some incredibly challenging environments. What did you see when the impacts of COVID-19 started to become clear?

Mohammad Almadani:

In the region that we were focusing on in MENA and Africa at the time we were in, 20 plus countries in MENA and Africa. We, so a very interesting scene at the time you had some ministries and private education institution that were able to continue education within few days some of them in one week, because they have the infrastructure, whether the Classera or something else, so you have the believers that this is a necessity, not a luxury. And we saw also the ministries and the private sector that did not believe in technology at the time. And they struggled big time. It was a big problem for several weeks students couldn't go and do anything. They were all over the place. And we saw that, contrast, and that's maybe the good side that we got out of the pandemic that many people started to switch their mindset, this is a necessity.

Olivia Neal

And how did you respond as an organization to that, and that clear need that was really being demonstrated?

Mohammad Almadani

What Classera did at the time in 2020, it was a time for us to make, some good money as you can say, we could have done just double our prices. we're the most trusted name at the time, and people would have signed for it, but we did something else. I was convinced that, this is the time to step in and show that we can, help. And of course, convince people that this does work. So we came with an initiative called Learning Never Stops LNS and we called some of our great partners. And we told them we want to, offer it as a social responsibility for free. And at the beginning of the pandemic, people now are in the middle of their crisis. We want to give it completely for free. And, thankfully Microsoft did join the effort and not just symbolically, they joined in supporting the initiative financially as well. And it was a great initiative. We gave it to any ministry of education to sign up worldwide. And we gave it to any private school. And there is thousands, of private schools and several ministers of education.

Actually it was so great that some of the international organizations started to adopt in the region, there was something called the Arab League and Elexa, which is the equivalent of the UNESCO for the MENA region. They adopted it officially, they start calling the ministries of education, that this is an initiative that you can use, and several ministries did sign up. And as you have mentioned, some of those countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Comoros, Djibouti. And so we had, several countries, that have good infrastructure and countries that have very challenging infrastructure, like, Sudan or Djibouti and Comoros. And there is countries with economic difficulties. It wasn't easy of course but at least we have the top officials convinced that this is a necessity, and they were convinced that this is not just a COVID thing, which is the beginning for something else, maybe it is started for COVID, but it could be something bigger.

Olivia Neal

So you were dealing with a lot of different countries, with different challenges, and supporting all of them at a time of great pressure. How did this feel from within Classera? What did you and the team have to do to support this huge effort?

Mohammad Almadani

So we started with the concept that even if we cannot achieve at all, at least let's try to do whatever we can. So each country was its own of course, unique story. The beginning of the pandemic, it was really interesting times and the heroic team in Classera, I couldn't see anything other than the heroic team we used to joke about working 26 hours a day. That's how it felt the time, because you're supporting different countries from all over the world, different time zones. people are signing up for free, and they're trusting what you have done, we done the biggest university academy in one of the regions or in the world, and you have these global partners. And one of the great things we saw that, even for some of the countries that you think it would have been impossible, people did say with this infrastructure, in some of these countries, you're going to get zero results.

Even though, with economic difficulties, with poor infrastructure We saw some amazing stories. people are gathering sometimes in the biggest home in the village and sharing the internet and trying to share the lessons together. We saw some of those students competing and getting the score because we have these gamification that classify students, isn't the score to gold and diamond. So the students are competing with each other and, oh, this is coming from this country. This is coming from that country and all different languages.

And this is a great example to the rest of the world, even in some of those troubled area where we would have worked, we have seen amazing stories with amazing teachers. And it was a transformation moment that the future should look like this.

Olivia Neal

And, I think what you're saying there is really interesting because of course you have the students who have to be engaged and able to use the platform and want to be using it. And then you've got all the teachers as well, who

this is quite a new skill for many teachers to be able to teach in a distanced method, to be able to not be in a classroom, to find different ways of engaging peoples. Were there any challenges and helping getting the teachers ready to teach in that type of way?

Mohammad Almadani

Of course, the biggest challenge is when you talk about them, especially the ministries the big issue of numbers it did change even our own assumptions, in Classera, that, if you want to do a change, you have to send a big team and you have to do these things in the ground. It turns out, when people are forced to do something, they can do it. We started to do online training.

Part of the lessons that, we both learned as Classera and the officials in those several countries: at least do it gradually. As I said, something is better than nothing.

Olivia Neal

You mentioned earlier. Some of these examples of people, even in countries where there is not very solid foundational infrastructure, some stories of people gathering together in houses and coming together and finding internet connectivity to make this work. 30 countries, 10 million users, clearly this is a great success, but are there any other pieces of feedback or, or stories that you've heard, which you'd like to share?

Mohammad Almadani

Yes. I mean, the numbers talk for themselves. So in the first, few weeks of this last academic year, because of the pandemic, we saw a number that were not used to. It was just the first, weeks. And we went over 1 billion page view on the system, so that was a huge demand, our infrastructure team was screaming. And they say, well, we're not used to this, our, engagement that we saw with the students is 32X compared to the previous years. Looking back at it we had different kinds of challenges.

It's very interesting because each country was its own thing. So one of the great examples is in some countries in Africa, especially, the internet was a big challenge but we saw those stories of people gathering, in the small cities and going in the villages in the biggest home there and trying to share the internet and share the devices. They're happy about this kind of teaching. And of course, they use some centralized, good teachers from the capital in some countries to teach people in other cities. So we had some feedback with some students that they were getting a better education because the level of teachers they're not used to, they're getting some of the best teachers from the capital doing a centralized lesson to the entire country. So we were able to do some of those techniques. And that was very great.

One of the interesting challenges we had is, we're not just working with, countries with difficulties in the economy. And we have in the other side countries like the Gulf countries which have a different kind of challenge. And for example, Saudi Arabia, it was a great challenge at the beginning of this academic year. They made a very, a bold and brave decision with the pandemic, we have the infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, so, we're going to go completely virtual for all nationwide, we're going to go virtual. And we have the biggest market share for in Saudi, for example.

So that was big news to us. And that, news came only three weeks before the school starts, we thought maybe a hybrid model, like most other the country. So this is one of the countries surprised us, it was a very interesting experience for an entire year, we Classera became the school for those students. There were no buildings, no one was going to, it was sealed.

And we were the school, it was a tremendous responsibility. We couldn't sleep at night. If the system is stopping for, for even one minute, it means all the schools, in the country are closing for one minute. It was a great challenge, but the thing that I was proud of the most is how students who are so happy about their experience and

how, with the gamification, they thought a school is a completely different experience this year. So those students who did their first grade with us, I think they will remember us for the rest of their life.

Olivia Neal

If that's been the first year of their experience and they've had a great experience and they really enjoy that, that really sets the schools up with a challenge as we go forward. So as we do go forward what do you see as the future in the educational world? Do you, foresee that schools will want to embed this type of learning for the longer term as well?

Mohammad Almadani

Yes of course, first, for the last part of the pandemic if we're going to the future. We, always see, that wasn't the success of Classera and the platform alone. It was that collaboration of everybody, from the ministries we work with and the real heroes were the parents. That's the hard part of that completely virtual school, of course, because they have to be the guardian over those kids, not to escape anywhere. So that was an extra burden.

They did a great job of making this experiment successful. So looking forward, of course we think it should be a hybrid model, so we're not, calling for the schools to shut down, like what we saw. But what we really think is, the hybrid model of going to the school, but using the technology to interact with-your learning experience, whether it is your assignments, your exams, sharing the projects, tracking, that's the way forward. And of course, we were not believing in a traditional e-learning because I mean, some of the examples we came up with, and that's what you, I think that learning experience is going to be a lot more fun.

So technology enabled you to do a lot more than automating the process. And that's one example that we have used. Also part of the future is, the deeper utilization of AI. And that's what we started, we have something called smart mate. The smart mate started to assist you, to analyze and give some suggestion. Okay. well, Adam, I guess you are weak in this and this area. How about I give you this video? How about they give you this from the question bank and try to polish those gaps without the intervention of the teacher, let me use the talent that teacher for something more valuable, try to, bridge those gaps in the students. Technology can help with that and make the teacher who's responsible for about 20, 30 students focus in the human relationship in the learning experience, the one that matter the most.

So I think we're going to see more AI in the education, in the future. The technology part of the future, of course, I assume, and we started seeing that. Then we started adopting that for also in class areas, the adoption of augmented reality and virtual reality. And I think, we can see most of the courses and most of the teachers blending their course, their lesson with some augmented reality experience or virtual reality experience.

Using the augmented reality in general, in all of its different forms, going to be a big part of the learning experience, and we have to be, adopting to that level because, that's what the students is playing with, all his animation and games that he's playing with goes to the education, which is supposed to be ahead of the game. He's, learning in the traditional way. So that's a big fix that I think we're going to see. And of course, I'm very optimistic about the future. Of course there would be some challenges. The biggest thing I think we got away from the pandemic is not the spike in users, I think the biggest gain, not just for Classera for the industry, is the change of the mindset.

So many decision makers, whether in governments, whether in private sector, they are convinced that this is a must have not nice to have, this is a necessity, not a luxury, and that what we have been preaching for since 2014,

Olivia Neal

Congratulations on making it to this point because I think the pandemic was a push, but you wouldn't be in the position that you were in, if your solution and your platform, wasn't something that was just of immense value to

people as well. So I'm sure that you and all of the team must be just incredibly proud of the part that you've had to play during the past year and, and in all the time building up to that as well, helping people put the foundations in place. This has been absolutely fascinating. I've really enjoyed your insights. And I think there's so much there, particularly on these ideas around how this isn't just something for the pandemic, but even pre pandemic, this really could help support in crisis situations. When you were talking about the students who were affected by the war and Yemen and Saudi, how that enabled them to continue their education and how it's enabled people to get access to better education from teachers who aren't in their locality. I think we focus a lot on, the potential and the reality of digital exclusion, where the infrastructure doesn't allow people to access things, but if we don't push and we don't try to put things in place, then we don't generate the demand for better digital infrastructure as well.

Mohammad Almadani

I guess we can impact a lot more societies around the world. We're going to see better students who can become better inventors, better their careers better in their professionals, whatever they are need, regardless of their background of their economic status. If we can inspire them from an early age, I think we can be part of the solution one step closer to their real potential. And that's what we hope for. That's what we are trying to solve for. And we're very thankful for Microsoft engagement in the Learning Never Stops initiative that we give as a social responsibility. And I think we're still working on it to helping more and more countries as a social responsibility until now, and then more and more countries are joining every quarter. We're very excited to have this great impact on the world and hopefully motivate and inspire a lot more student users in the coming future.

Olivia Neal

Well that's really inspiring. Thank you so much for spending all of this time with us and sharing all of that information. It's been really insightful, and I have learned so much from it and I know that our audience will as well.

Mohammad Almadani

Thank you. Thank you, Olivia. And thank you for this great talk, and hopefully we have inspired some people in this great subject.

[Music]

Olivia Neal: Thank you to our guest, Mohammad Almadani, and thank you to you for joining me today on *Public Sector Future*.

Our goal is for you to learn something new and be inspired to think differently about your own transformation journey. If you enjoyed today's episode and want to help others find it, please share, rate and review the show -- it *really does* help people find new shows like this one.

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