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One Text Message at a Time: Jacob Korenblum, Ed.M.'06

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By Amanda Dagg

Due to continued political unrest and religious turmoil, the Palestinian-controlled territories are in the news regularly. But amid the chaos of the region, one HGSE alumnus, Jacob Korenblum, Ed.M.'06, is creating positive change for the people of the West Bank.

While working for a nongovernmental agency performing needs assessment on the local education system in Palestine, Korenblum noticed that there seemed to be an issue with young people accessing job posting information. Despite the growing economy in the West Bank, the expense of landline phones, computers, and Internet plans makes communication difficult. However, 80 percent of the residents of the West Bank do own mobile telephones, inspiring Korenblum, in 2005, to found [Souktel](#), a nonprofit organization that uses text messaging, or SMS (short message service), to make it easier for young Palestinians to find jobs.

"We saw that there were not good resources for school-to-work transitions," says Korenblum. "I started thinking about what strategies could be used to fill that gap, so we began to look at the ways we could get people information about jobs that would be relevant to their fields of study."

Once at the Ed School, Korenblum developed Souktel's technology with classmate Dan Dellenbach, Ed.M.'06. Through Souktel, jobseekers answer a series of questions via text message from which Souktel's JobMatch service generates a "mini-CV." The CVs — which include skills, locations, and schedules — are then matched to job descriptions posted via text message by companies with openings.

The service has grown to include a similar network called AidLink that allows humanitarian aid organizations to notify people about the availability of emergency aid and support. Agencies create mailing lists based on the services they offer, while people in need

reply to surveys and are placed on the appropriate agencies' mailing lists.

After piloting the programs in West Bank university campuses and youth organizations like the YMCA to capture both college- and noncollege-graduate demographics, Korenblum says, Souktel "spread like wild fire." Now in its third year, the service has helped over 1,000 Palestinians successfully find work.

While the idea for Souktel was born before Korenblum enrolled in the [International Education Policy \(IEP\) Program](#), the encouragement and advice he received at the Ed School was essential to the project's success. "IEP is one of the few programs in the United States that gives you a really rigorous approach to planning educational programs in the developing world," he says. "It offers a very supportive environment, and I had many amazing mentors that helped me bring Souktel alive."

Souktel currently is available in both Arabic and English, which makes expansion into areas with troubles similar to Palestine, like Egypt and Jordan, a realistic possibility. He has also recently been approached with the idea of creating a U.S.-based branch of Souktel to assist migrant workers and Americans who do not have access to the internet. "There is no reason this kind of work needs to be confined to the developing world," he says, but he cautions that success in one market may not immediately translate to success in other regions.

"The main point is that school systems in many countries, especially in the developing world, don't have the resources or don't see that there is a responsibility to prepare people for the working world," Korenblum explains. "When this is the case, it often falls to the government – which is usually weak – or the private sector. As we do more research, we see that there is a need for what we are doing."

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