

Studying Talmud in the morning, writing code in the afternoon

An innovative program is bringing ultra-Orthodox Israeli men into the high-tech workforce.

By Inbal Orpaz | Dec. 18, 2013 | 2:10 AM



Haredim studying at Ravtech. It starts with the multiplication tables. Photo by Eyal Toueg

Hidden above a seminary in the largely ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak, some 20 young men are hard at work in the offices of software company Ravtech Beit Tochna Torani. They're building mobile applications and websites.

Representing a cross section of Haredi society, these men lacked even a basic knowledge of math or English as recently as last year. Now they combine Talmud studies in the morning with programming in the afternoon and evening.

"The goal is to enable a population segment with high potential to integrate into high-tech," says Vered Mor, Ravtech's manager. "This place says 'come become part of the community of Haredi men working in high-tech.'"

Cultural barriers and a Haredi education system that teaches few basic skills like math, science and English have kept most ultra-Orthodox from joining the industry. The government has invested plenty of resources into bringing Haredim into the high-tech world, but Ravtech is significant in having sprouted from the core of Haredi society. All that was needed was a little flexibility.

Defined as a social enterprise, the company works closely with Avratech, an organization that runs a software training program for Haredi men. The course of studies includes eight to 10 months of training starting with extreme basics such as the multiplication tables. The final stage is geared toward job skills and splits into specializations: mobile development (iOS, Android), website design (Java, HTML), and the testing of software for automated systems.

While training, students receive a 2,000 shekel (\$570) monthly stipend, equal to what they received during their studies in a *kollel*, a yeshiva for married men. And the course is fully subsidized.

Ravtech then guarantees the students employment for 30 months at a salary of around 5,000 shekels a month. The first round was completed by 20 of the 27 students who enrolled in the program. The venture's participants are high-ranking Torah scholars.

"When they complete the 30 months they have the tools and experience necessary to tackle any job outside or continue developing the Haredi software company," says Mor. "Many Haredi men who have studied in such frameworks have a hard time finding jobs because they lack experience. But anyone leaving here with 30 months of experience will have a completely different status." The team providing the training also manages the software company.

"The population arriving here is made up of people who decided at a certain stage that they need to make a living," adds Aharon Safrai, Avratech's director. "They can't integrate in a secular workplace because having a religious work environment is important to them. And something else is important to them – quality hours of Talmud study in the morning."

There's plenty of opposition from rabbis objecting to the combination of Torah studies and work, but Safrai notes that the program accepts men who would have left their kollel in any case.

"These are talented men who can quickly reach a level high enough to work," says Mor. "They can work remotely and therefore don't need to work at a secular company. There's also the possibility of flexible work hours so they can pursue Torah studies part of the day. Many who came here said we rescued them."

Starting the day right

Safrai describes the daily routine for a Ravtech employee. "Anyone living in the Bnei Brak area has it easier, but someone coming from Ashdod or Kiryat Sefer, for example, needs to leave the house by 7:30 A.M. or 8 A.M.," Safrai says.

"At 9 A.M. he begins studying Talmud and scripture. For him, these studies are part of his soul and get the day started on the right foot. Between noon and 1 P.M. he comes here to work until 8:30 P.M. Then he needs to get home by bus, which means he gets there when the children are already asleep."

The wages of Haredi programmers are below-market, but these guys didn't necessarily choose high-tech because of the high salaries but because of the possibility to work at a profession that gives them flexibility and isn't manual labor.

The choice of Mor, a secular woman with a management background in the public and nonprofit sectors, to run the venture attests to the open-mindedness of the man behind the initiative, Safed-born businessman Rabbi David Leybel.

"Combining work and being a Torah and Talmud scholar in a seminary is perfectly all right," says Mor. "Leybel knows that this doesn't happen in Israel, and for many years now he's been busy looking for a solution for talented but financially distressed Torah scholars who have nowhere to turn and lose their identification with the Talmud world when they leave kollel. We're addressing those who want to leave but stay because they have no choice."

Safrai says his organization only accepts a Haredi who has decided with his wife and family to take the big step.

"As we grow we'll need to develop more models," adds Mor. "Right now we mainly subcontract for other software developers. With time we can become a one-stop shop or develop products on our own." But she notes that, as a social enterprise, the company isn't gearing toward an exit. It was built for other purposes.

Mor says Leybel isn't interested in generating a profit but in keeping the business stable and the people working there successful. "It's no problem to expand operations because we don't need to cut a profit," she says. "I just need to break even."

And unlike many Haredim, these guys have Internet connections on their PCs.

"Not just at work but also while studying," Safrai says. "Today we have Internet Rimon [an Internet service adapted for the Haredi market] and other providers who strictly inspect websites. There are blocked sites, and if a specific website is needed we can approve access to it."

The group of programmers at Ravtech's offices is diverse. The program's target population is family men between 25 and 40. Safrai says they come from both the Hasidic and Lithuanian streams of the Haredi world.

In one room, with black hats laid out in a row at the entrance, Avratech graduate and Ravtech employee Shahar Ariel is diligently working in a team building an application for a film website.

“Before coming here I studied at a regular kollel with two study sessions a day,” he says. “I didn’t attend college or anywhere outside. I did programming, not for work but on my own. I enjoyed this field so I came here.”

At the outset, Avratech and Ravtech got mixed reviews from the Haredi community. But the graduates of the first session who recently began working seem content, and the program is signing up students for the second round. The program’s initiators may branch out to Jerusalem and Ashdod to give Haredi residents there the chance to do programming in a suitable environment closer to home.