



THE INFLUENCERS: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

TRANSCRIPT Solomiia Savchuk

<p>Leo von Gerlach</p>	<p>Hello everybody and welcome to another edition of The Influencers, our podcast conversations on digital transformation and law. I'm Leo von Gerlach and with me today is Solomiia Savchuk of Stanford Medical School. Solomiia is the founding CEO of TeleHelp Ukraine. TeleHelp Ukraine is the biggest and most relevant provider of telemedicine in Ukraine. It is headquartered not in Ukraine, but Palo Alto, Silicon Valley, California.</p> <p>So, before we speak about TeleHelp Ukraine, a few words about yourself. What's your background; tell us about where you come from in Ukraine and what brought you to the US?</p>
<p>Solomiia Savchuk</p>	<p>Thank you, Leo, for that wonderful introduction. My name is Solomiia, I often go by Sol as well. I come from a small town in the western part of Ukraine. The town I went to high school is called Kolomyia, a beautiful town. I then came to the United States and did a degree in Neuroscience at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Before coming to Stanford for medical school, I am also doing a dual MDMS programme studying cancer neuroscience, I think yeah, that's mostly the journey. A lot of my family remained in Ukraine and work in different ways to support Ukrainian resistance and towards Ukrainian victory, as do we all.</p>
<p>Leo von Gerlach</p>	<p>Thank you. So, while at Stanford Medical School, Ukraine was invaded, the war broke out and you founded TeleHelp Ukraine together with others. How did this happen? How did it come about?</p>
<p>Solomiia Savchuk</p>	<p>I think at the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, a lot of us reached for any tools that we can use to defend what we love. For some of us, that meant via weapons and going to the front lines to defend our homes and for others it meant something else.</p> <p>For me and a lot of us at Stanford, our tool was our community. For me, that was our medical community, scientific community, my classmates, my teachers, my faculty, all reaching out. What can we do to help? How can we be involved? How can we resist? How can we defend? How can we support and from days to weeks that the answer evolved and we were finding more and more ways to help, but what we started noticing is that a lot of the times people desired to help in specific ways that they are uniquely qualified to or they are uniquely able to and for us clinicians, that often means providing medical services and in a full-scale war that is a need that is severe, that is continuous, that is exacerbated by socio-economical factors, by numerous</p>

	<p>others. And so, being able to provide that, meant a lot to the medical community.</p> <p>At the time, there wasn't a means to do so effectively. You could get on a plane and fly to Ukraine as a clinician but that's not a possibility for most clinicians of practice in the US or anywhere else in the world. But that still means that a lot of hands that are available are being unused. So, the idea that came to mind is that, what if we build a platform that will connect all of those that are in need of medical and mental health services in the Ukraine to all the providers that are here offering their time on a volunteer basis.</p> <p>The idea evolved over weeks to months until we were able to offer the first appointment in April of 2022 and since offered over 2,000 more across numerous specialties, across many Ukrainians, both in the Ukraine and in Poland, from those that are internally displaced to those that are living still in their homes but are severely affected by having family impacted to even those that are near the front lines and can hear within hearing distance of shelling every day.</p>
Leo von Gerlach	<p>That is a very very commendable endeavour by all means, but perhaps just share with us what were the main challenges at the time of foundation, what made it difficult to realize it?</p>
Solomiia Savchuk	<p>There were challenges that we were able to foresee and ones that we were not able to foresee. We knew that a lot of our providers will not speak local languages. We knew that a lot of our providers will not be familiar with customs and healthcare practices locally. We knew that there would be barriers that will separate the provider from patients, not just distance, not just time zones, not just severe discrepancy in what they see outside of their window, and so those are things we were able to foresee.</p> <p>We were able to recruit interpreters early on, who were able to bridge the language gap. We were able to recruit healthcare coordinators and case managers and health navigators that are familiar with the local customs and could fill in that cultural gap. We were able to mount volunteers that help build infrastructure, including technological infrastructure, such that we could minimize the groundwork, the administrative work that would otherwise fall on clinicians and allow them to spend more time with patients.</p> <p>But I think the bigger and sort of broader challenge is that, some of us may have foreseen as well but not necessarily, is needing to adapt and not knowing how long will this war continue, not knowing how the needs of the population that we're serving will continue to change with weeks and months and years. Like, for instance, very early on we saw a lot of need for primary care providers. Over time that changed, where we saw more specialists that were needed and mental health providers that were needed and so throughout just needing to be ready to adapt and be ready to sort of decompose all those structures that we have built previously and re-utilize them to fit, to serve a new goal or to serve a new need. I think is a challenge that we continue to face and continue to struggle with.</p>
Leo von Gerlach	<p>So, you spoke a lot about the many volunteers you obviously need to realize that mission. How do you entice these people? How do you motivate the</p>

	<p>people to join forces, be it on contributing to the platform building, be it to provide medical service translation, organizational task and all that is needed?</p>
<p>Solomiia Savchuk</p>	<p>That's an excellent question. I think we have been lucky to have incredible volunteers that are just filling us with inspiration. Every new volunteer that joins, brings new ideas and brings new perspectives and sort of refreshes our commitment to our goals. I think the challenge is sustainability because we are sometimes working with breadcrumbs of everyone's time. Everyone has professional commitments, family commitments, lives that they can often only spare a little bit of time to contribute to our cause. So, we have to use their time very effectively.</p> <p>We also have to maintain that sort of motivation that first brought them to our organization, as that sense of novelty wears off as the news are getting tired of hearing about Ukraine and hearing about all the devastation that happens on the ground and just starts to perceive that as the new normal and a lot of that comes from, we build a sense of community where we can support each other as volunteers within our organization, support each other's sense of mission and support each other's sense of commitment to our cause. But it's not easy and we try to have regular meetings where we focus on what we can do best, where we celebrate our wins, where we support each other through the difficult times. It's definitely a challenge and continues to be one. But the idea was to structure an organization such that it can function as a volunteer-only organization and be sustainable for a long time and so the workflows that we've built in place are such that even if everyone contributes just a small amount of time, the entire shift can continue to run.</p>
<p>Leo von Gerlach</p>	<p>So, you built the sustainability with the help of so many pieces of time by so many people; how does it work and how is the machinery room constructed to keep it going?</p>
<p>Solomiia Savchuk</p>	<p>Yeah. So, at first, the team was broken down mainly into the two big categories: folks that are facing patients and folks that are working in the background and as, if you can imagine, when you walk into a hospital, there's someone that says hello to you, that takes down your information. Then there's someone else who takes down your vital signs, then someone else can start getting your history and clarifying what is it that brought you to the hospital or to the clinic. Then someone else comes by and does part of the exam and then another person can come by together and they might draw your blood work, they might image different parts of your body and then at some point you will see a physician that will incorporate all of the data that has been collected so far and condense that into a treatment plan or their recommendations for what the treatments might be.</p> <p>We sort of have to recreate the same thing but knowing the provider and the patient are a thousand miles away. So, we needed to have people that are going to fulfil, gather pieces of that information - some of it may be patient prior health records, some of it may be their prior imaging, some of it may be their medication lists - someone would need to gather all of that information, often translate it into the language the provider understands.</p>

	<p>So, at first, those were just people that would individually compile all that data into something that provide a concrete and utilize. Over time, we've been able to build technology that would streamline that process, such that all of the data is compiled and only one person needs to look over it, and perhaps translate it and forward it over to the provider.</p> <p>So, a lot of our engineers, for instance, they're part of a team in the back of the house so to speak, who made that technology possible. There needed to be a team that would bring our services to the patients, find the patients that are in the most need, find local partners that would publicize availability of our services among the patients that we serve. So, a lot of their research goes into localizing opportunities where our services can be best utilized.</p> <p>A lot of this is done through social media. The designers take huge part in that and building a connection with patients such that we can establish trust with the communities we serve and these are not even including ours...I have not even spoken about all of our physicians and all of our mental health providers and all of our interpreters that actually participate in the live video visit between the patient and the provider.</p> <p>So, if you can imagine a typical clinic visit that you would go to in your local city or town, we've attempted to recreate that model but knowing that everything will need to happen virtually.</p>
Leo von Gerlach	<p>So, technology can obviously just work wonders here to bring these services about and to help you but there are of course limits to what technology can do and telemedicine only goes so far. Perhaps you just share with us where you feel the pain points of those just technology reaches of telemedicine and how you work around the edges?</p>
Solomiia Savchuk	<p>There's definitely limitations that we can challenge ourselves to overcome, and there are some that are really outside of our reach.</p> <p>Among the ones we can overcome are, for instance, sometimes we're unable to do a physical exam and through COVID and our experiences in virtual medicine, in some specialties, we've become pretty good at doing parts of the physical exam virtually and some of our providers are very skilled with that. For instance, our mental health providers have gotten a lot of experience doing virtual psychology and psychiatry visits, and sometimes those are even nowadays preferred by patients.</p> <p>Sometimes we need to have lab work drawn that will impact our treatment plans for our patients, are imaging required. This is obviously challenging if we're so far removed from the patients but this is where our health navigators will come in and they know the local areas a little bit better and they are able to work with the patient to figure out what other resource is available to them in their area or is there a lab that is till functioning that the patient can go to and request to have those studies done.</p> <p>And then I think the biggest pain point is that we do need internet to be connected. We do need electricity. We do need a patient who has a phone or a computer that they can use to connect to us. And unfortunately there are places in Ukraine that that is not available. Over the winter of 2022 to 2023, when there was very intense and precise shelling of Ukrainian cities, not just</p>

	<p>cities near the front line but cities over Ukraine where such that the Russian army was intentionally attempting to disconnect our cities from internet, from electricity, and to wear down the society from having to live through the winter without electricity, without heat, without water. During those times we had constant interruptions. We would have patients that needed to discontinue the call, drop off and walk down into their basement or into their nearest shelter because it was no longer safe for them to stay in their home. So, those are the types of situations that we just couldn't do anything about or when there are patients that are so close to the front lines that there is no longer any infrastructure, and so our only hope is to have one of our partners take an ambulance and attach a Starlink and drive into a town and see, turn on the Starlink and connect our providers here in the US or elsewhere in the world to 30-40 patients that have not seen a medical provider in over two years now.</p> <p>And of course, that brings a lot of difficulties with offering continuity of care. That brings a lot of difficulties, especially with those patients that are so disconnected. When they need to be driven into a hospital for more studies or for procedures or for imaging, and we found wonderful partners that were able to assist us with those, but we're still just a drop in the bucket and we unfortunately need a lot more drops to fill it.</p>
Leo von Gerlach	<p>No, it's so clear to see that there is a very significant impact of the situation on the ground and how that affects your service. Perhaps more generally and from a different perspective, how do you plug into the system that exists in Ukraine otherwise, the health system, the whole provision system, the pharmaceutical system, so how do you link with one another?</p>
Solomiia Savchuk	<p>This is, I would say, a work in progress and this is something we continue to explore best ways to partner. We've been in communication with the Ministry of Health of Ukraine from the very start. We wanted to make sure in part that our providers are permitted to practice medicine in Ukraine as they are not formally licensed in Ukraine.</p> <p>We've also been able to partner with a lot of on the ground organizations. Unfortunately, there have been I believe, over 1,500 attacks on healthcare facilities in Ukraine, especially in the areas, the ones that are near the front lines, the ones that are most difficult to access. So, in those places, non-profit organizations and volunteer organizations that are local have been able to fill in the gaps and do evacuation work, bring in medications, bring in humanitarian aid, clean water, food and so on.</p> <p>So, it's a work on multiple fronts, a work that continues, as in an ideal world, we would like to be able to fill in where we're the most needed and the way to do that is to work with those that are on the ground and that can point us in the direction where we can be useful.</p>
Leo Von Gerlach	<p>So, with that system in place, you have apparently been extremely successful despite all the challenges. You've had thousands and thousands of patient consultations already leading me to the question, what can be done to support you best? Is Stanford Medical School doing what you expect, could they do more? Could we do more? Where would our support be best placed?</p>

Solomiia Savchuk	<p>I think there are so many ways to support because I do believe that this is a fight for truth. This is a fight for what's right. This is a fight for the future of humanity. So, I hope that for most people this is a fight they want to take a stand on and they want to participate in, and in this fight there's so many ways to contribute. There's almost anything that you're passionate about. If you're passionate about art, if you're passionate about environment, if you're passionate about education, if you're passionate about medicine, anything; this was an attack on every side of humanity that Ukrainians had, so you can help on any side that you feel like you can be most helpful.</p> <p>For us, TeleHelp Ukraine, almost the same thing. If you have a few hours of your time that you're able to participate, you can go on our website, it's https://telehelpukraine.com and you can volunteer. You can make designs, you can create social media posts, and you can help coordinate visits, you can lead team projects, research and investigations, whatever you're passionate about, or whatever your skill set is, I'm sure find use for it and finally, if you have financial means that you're able to support us with, you can do so as well. You can go on our website, there's a DONATE button, you can click and follow and make your donation. It can be as small or as large as you're able to make it and a lot of these costs are invested into our organizational expenses. Everyone is a volunteer and so far we've been able to sustain ourselves in that model, but over the long-term, as we discussed early on, that's becoming more and more challenging as Leo noted. Volunteers put their hearts into their work, but their time is not endless and so, over time, we would like to start to be able to put ourselves on a path that is a little bit more certain, as now we're seeing that this isn't, sadly...we hope the victory will come soon enough, but even if they're retreating tomorrow, Ukrainian healthcare is going to need support for many years to come. So, we see that our mission will not be complete for many years to come, and that's financial stability. Any non-profit organization that you can support that works towards Ukrainian victory, unfortunately, we'll need that support for many years to come.</p>
Leo Von Gerlach	<p>I would definitely just go to https://telehelpukraine.com and use that DONATE button right after that recording and I would clearly hope that whoever listens to that will feel encouraged through the same simply by the terrific work you and so many others, Sol, are doing to help Ukrainians on the ground. That's just very, very effecting so I'm deeply indebted to you for this interview and for the insights you gave us and with that, I would like to conclude our session today, I thank everybody for listening in and hope you join again for our next session of The Influencers coming soon. For today, thank you, take care and goodbye everybody.</p>