SOS Children's Villages dreams big to shrink the digital divide for a brighter future

The non-governmental organization partners with Avanade to build a new chatbot for supporting caregivers in remote locations

CASE STUDY
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Business situation
Getting important information where it's needed most

SOS Children's Villages – the world's largest non-governmental organization focused on supporting children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it – is on a mission to ensure that each child grows up with the bonds they need. The organization works in over 130 countries and territories to strengthen families who are under pressure so they can stay together. When this is not in a child or young person's best interests, SOS Children's Villages provides quality care according to their unique needs.

"At SOS, we have a structured learning and development agenda," explains Ahmed Mihaimeed, regional ICT director for the organization's east and southern Africa division. "We have regular meetings and trainings with social workers and experts, but these aren't always accessible to caregivers – or 'mamas,' as we call them – in remote areas."

SOS Children's Villages is very aware of the challenges posed by the "digital divide," which refers to the gap between people and places with access to modern technology and those without. This divide is especially apparent for many of the organization's villages in remote regions of Africa. In many cases, caregivers in isolated communities need to travel long distances to make a phone call or connect to the internet at an internet café.

"As our programs continue to expand, what we really want to do is make sure we're reaching those who live far away from modern infrastructure and might otherwise be left behind," says Mihaimeed. "We started looking at the kinds of things parents need the most, and how we can deliver a personalized, question-and-answer type experience. We were dreaming big."

It was during a NetHope "Dream, Design, Deliver" workshop that SOS Children's Villages began discussing these challenges with Avanade. Together, we identified an optimal solution to turn the organization's dreams into a reality: a personalized chatbot.

"After Avanade explained how the chatbot would work and gave us the confidence that it was the right solution for our mamas, we made the decision to jump in and give it a try," says Mihaimeed.

> "Many of our mamas own their own small businesses or are spending most of their time with the children in their care. They have a very limited window to get the information they need. As our programs continue to expand, what we really want to do is make sure we're reaching those who live far away from modern infrastructure and might otherwise be left behind."
>
> **Ahmed Mihaimeed**
> ICT Director, East and Southern Africa Division, SOS Children's Villages

Solution
Introducing Rafiki

SOS Children's Villages and Avanade began work on a Digital Care Assistant chatbot that would become affectionately known as "Rafiki," the Swahili word for "friend." Built using Avanade's CuriousBot chatbot accelerator – based on the Microsoft bot framework and Microsoft Cognitive Services, including the QnA maker – Rafiki is designed to be easy to use and available 24/7 as a digital friend. CuriousBot modules help accelerate conversational solutions, synthesize intelligent document searches and offer flexible, database-driven solutions that help organizations better reach their audiences.

We worked with SOS Children's Villages to begin populating the databases with important information and resources about topics such as child protection, mental health, self-care, education and business skills.

Because so many of the mamas rely solely on mobile devices with limited power and connectivity, it was important that Rafiki be designed to be practical and usable under any

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conditions. Information is presented on an intuitive interface with text only – no images or video – so that the solution still runs well in low-bandwidth settings.

One of the chatbot's most significant benefits to users is that it's always being updated. "Our biggest learning from this project has been ensuring that content is always available and relevant," explains Mihaimeed. "We are constantly updating Rafiki with new information and asking mamas to rate their experience and whether or not the information is helpful after every time they use it."

If caregivers aren't able to find the information they're looking for, they can use the "ask an expert" feature to submit their questions, which will then be used to update the content within Rafiki for future reference. The more it's used, the more personalized content the bot will offer.

"The bot will actually apologize and encourage them to ask questions in a different way. If they can't find what they're looking for, we encourage our mamas to tell us," says Mihaimeed. "In this way, Rafiki is learning as much from them as they are from it. This gives our mamas confidence that they're an important part of this project and encourages them to use it."

Results
Shrinking the digital divide while giving back to caregivers

After being tested among internal users and a small number of caregivers in Malawi, Nigeria and Rwanda, the response to Rafiki has been positive, and the solution is now being rolled out widely. The chatbot is currently available in English and will soon be available in French, while local language support is in progress.

Mihaimeed says the organization is focused on continuing to provide support where it's needed most. "We are committed to bringing technology to the more remote areas of Africa to help address the digital divide," he says.

"We can create the best tools, but if we don't have the right technology, power or connectivity, we have nothing. These mamas are doing incredible work for their children, and we want to give them all the support they need. In that regard, our work is never done."

About SOS Children's Villages

SOS Children's Villages, founded in 1949 by Hermann Gmeiner, is the world's largest non-governmental organization focused on supporting children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it.

Child neglect, abuse and abandonment is everywhere. Families are at risk of separation. Locally led, we work in more than 130 countries and territories to strengthen families who are under pressure so they can stay together. When this is not in a child or young person's best interests, we provide quality care according to their unique needs. Together with our partners, donors, communities, children, young people and families, we enable children to grow up with the bonds they need to develop and become their strongest selves. We speak up for each child's rights and advocate for change so all children can grow up in a supportive environment.

To learn more, visit www.sos-childrensvillages.org. Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn.

About Avanade

Avanade is the leading provider of innovative digital and cloud services, business solutions and design-led experiences on the Microsoft ecosystem. With 39,000 professionals in 25 countries, we are the power behind the Accenture Microsoft Business Group, helping companies to engage customers, empower employees, optimize operations and transform products, leveraging the Microsoft platform. Majority owned by Accenture, Avanade was founded in 2000 by Accenture LLP and Microsoft Corporation. Learn more at: www.avanade.com

North America
Seattle
Phone +1 206 239 5600
America@avanade.com

South America
Sao Paulo
AvanadeBrasil@avanade.com

Asia-Pacific
Australia
Phone +61 2 9005 5900
AsiaPac@avanade.com

Europe
London
Phone +44 0 20 7025 1000
Europe@avanade.com