

Thanks to Advanced Technology Training, Cisco Helps Hundreds of Students Bridge Digital Divide in Ethiopia



By now, Ethiopia's plan to spend upwards of 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on information and telecommunications technology (ICT) at a time when less than a quarter of its people have access to improved water sources is a well told story. Since unveiled five years ago, the idea has attracted interest from around the world and plenty of media scrutiny. Why, many wondered, would a nation burdened by debt, struggling with AIDS and stuck with one of the world's lowest standards of living commit to such ambitious spending? The answer, according to Ethiopia Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, is simple: "Ethiopia is too poor not to invest in ICT," he told the *Financial Times* in 2005.

While investments have yet to completely transform the nation of 72 million people, they are playing a role in shaping the lives of many there. That includes hundreds of men and women trained by local academies established by the American Internet giant, Cisco. One of the big suppliers of ICT equipment and services to Ethiopia, Cisco has opened 15 Networking Academies throughout Ethiopia, producing nearly 550 graduates in just three years. Through hard work and diligent study, these students have found a way to bridge the digital divide in their nation thanks to advanced technology training. Here's their story.

From Humble Beginnings

Early in her career, Eyerusalem Getu Tadesse supervised electric motors at a cement factory. Now the 27-year old Networking Academy graduate manages networks for the Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation. She configures and monitors sophisticated routers and switches that carry some of the country's most important information. With the advanced technical degrees she earned, she has since taken on greater responsibilities with her employer. "Taking Cisco training helped me to be satisfied in my job and changed my life," she says.

The story is true throughout Ethiopia, where more graduates are making an impact in their local economies. Gutema Jira Gemechu says he literally started with nothing as a young man. Now the 30-year old Networking Academy graduate is the legal contact, registrar and instructor at MicroLink IT College in the nation's capitol of Addis Ababa.

After completing his undergraduate studies in electrical engineering, Jira earned a masters certificate in computer science while working in various technical capacities. "I am very interested in Networking

Technology and I heard about [the Networking Academy] program when I studied for my MSC program at the Faculty of Technology in Addis Ababa University," says Jira.

Now he dreams of owning his own business focused on networking technology. "My vision is to establish well standardized, furnished and modern, research, training and consulting centers in coordination with Cisco to provide networking solutions in order to solve related challenges and to assist the Cisco gender initiative program," says Jira.

The latter is a particularly interesting aim given that one in five Networking Academy students is female in emerging market economies where Cisco does business. The percent is even higher in some unsuspecting places where cultural norms have not always prioritized women working outside the home. In Iraq, for example, 40 percent of Networking Academy students are female. In Jordan and Morocco, female participation has reached 50 percent, reflecting the growing diversity in emerging market countries and the social changes underway there.

Like Jira, female graduates in Ethiopia have found that their degrees and certifications can open doors to higher wages and better lifestyles. That includes Martha Teferra, another Cisco Networking Academy graduate in Ethiopia. She's currently at work as a help desk technology specialist in the ICT Development Office at Addis Ababa University. There she configures networking devices, troubleshoots hardware and installs networking lines to enable peers and colleagues to communicate around the world. Of late, she has worked on creating a university-wide email system. The 28-year has been in her role for three years and continues to reap the benefits of the classes she took previously.

"In the university where I work, there are more than 40 switches and 10 routers used for connecting the university's wide area network. And managing and solving networking



Martha Teffera believes the technology courses she took in Ethiopia will lead to better job offers and opportunities ahead.

devices problems are part of my job. Therefore, I had to equip myself with the necessary knowledge, and I believed the Academy was the best opportunity I could get in order to get what I was looking for," says Teferra.

As for those looking for a promising career, she advises following where technology is going in Ethiopia.

"The advice I would give to other young people looking for a job in IT is studying in such an academy like the Cisco Networking Academy," she adds. "I believe such knowledge helps in order to be selected for a job."

That will be welcome news to the newest graduates of Cisco's Networking Academies. They enter the Ethiopian job market at a time when the economy is among the fastest growing in all of Africa. One reason: the country's ongoing transformation. Ethiopia is hardly an information society today, but thanks to the efforts and ambitions of Jira and others like him, it is developing more of an established ICT industry. Graduates like Jira have become highly sought after individuals in Ethiopia by public and private enterprises alike.

Some worry that demand for talent may outstrip supply. While that bodes well for those with degrees and dreams of high, competitive wages, it can put a strain on those trying to keep pace with the government's deployment goals. The plan to connect schools in the nation has slipped behind schedule, for example, due, in part, to a talent shortage.

Thankfully, the Networking Academies are coming up to speed. In March alone, 115 students from Addis Ababa University, the College of Telecommunications & Information Technology and Admas University College completed their training. More recently, one of Ethiopia's newest Networking Academies in Jimma, Ethiopia, held a ceremony for its first 100 graduates. Now, 300 more are registered for classes. More, of course, are on the way. Cisco and the government want to establish another 90 facilities around the country.

The more that come online, the easier it will be for Ethiopia to transform its economy.



Networking Academy graduate Gutema Jira Gemechu

Right now, for example, 47 percent of GDP is generated by agriculture. ICT is one of several fields that offer promise for diversification. One thing that could help speed the transformation along is improved education. Thanks to individual successes, Cisco is hoping that the government will take ICT education a step deeper and consider integrating information technology essentials (ITE) into secondary education throughout Ethiopia. That will likely spur interest in technology usage and development, and potentially give rise to a new generation of Ethiopian entrepreneurs.

Could the next Bill Gates be found in Ethiopia in the near future? Anything can happen, Jira says. "God raised me from nothing to my current status and he helps also to achieve more!," he says of his work in the technology field. "This is funny for me."

Not to mention vital for the future of Ethiopia.