Technology leaders should join the fight against digital inequality

By Bradley Pulford

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In the past year, many learners, teachers, and parents experienced firsthand the grave impact of the pandemic on education: school closures caused interrupted learning, and many were not as prepared for homeschooling as others due to lack of access to equipment or the internet. This highlighted the stark reality of the digital divide and the lack of digital equity in South Africa and the very real and urgent need to address it.

Bradley Pulford, vice president and managing director of HP Africa

As we move into a more hybrid world of learning and working, the skills needed during the pandemic will not be wasted once it has eased or everyone is vaccinated. This experience has shown us how critical it is for the country's youth to be computer literate and have the means to learn from home, no matter the circumstances.

We need to find long-lasting educational solutions to create sustainable economic, social, and environmental programmes to improve living standards. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco), education for sustainable development means giving learners of all ages the knowledge and skills to address global challenges like climate change, poverty and, of course, inequality. Communications services and technological innovations should be accessible and affordable to all because of the implications they have for sustained economic development.

Learning Initiative For Entrepreneurs

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, we as an organisation, have ramped up our initiatives that support hybrid learning and to further advance the digital equity required, especially during periods like the global school shutdown. We have also been able to move halfway toward the company's goal of enabling sustainable learning outcomes for 100 million

people by 2025 - including seeing a 210% increase in enrolments in HP Life.

Life stands for Learning Initiative For Entrepreneurs and is a free skills-training programme from our non-profit foundation. It provides entrepreneurs, business owners and lifelong learners all over the world with more than 30 online courses in seven languages. The courses are modular, interactive, and full of information and practical exercises that enable users to grow their business skills.

Four key elements for true digital equity

To achieve true digital equity requires four key elements: hardware in the form of laptops and printers; access to the internet; high-quality learning materials; and digital literacy or the skills to use the technology.

To combat digital inequality, we need to commit to ensuring that all four elements are affordable and available for the most vulnerable and marginalised students and their families.

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But there is also a cost to the lack of digital equity; the US alone loses more than $130m (R1.8bn) a day in economic activity when people aren't online. For South Africa, where the level of digital inequity is much higher, the cost of not having our learners and workforce online is even greater.

According to Unesco, 73% of African countries reported using some online strategies by September 2020. However, access to devices and connectivity wasn't widespread, and even in places where technology was available, teachers often felt unprepared to deliver classes digitally. That's because until the pandemic hit, it wasn't an essential skill – it was just a 'nice to have' addition to core subject matter knowledge and traditional pedagogy.

We must work together

As digital technology transforms every aspect of our lives, there's a real danger of more and more people getting left behind. We cannot allow that to happen, and we must work together to break down this digital divide that prevents too many from accessing education, jobs, and healthcare they need to thrive.

These are important steps forward that build upon years of progress, but we have more work ahead of us. This is a challenge that no single company, sector, or country can meet on its own, which is why I am urging my fellow CEOs and business leaders in the technology sector and beyond to join our common fight to protect our future - before it is too late.

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