Are tech leaders doing enough to benefit everyone?

By Simon McCullough

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Across the world, countless digital divides between rich and poor nations are emerging, stoking stark developmental disparities and stymieing opportunities for cross-cultural collaborations. The IMF even suggests that technological progress is one of the main factors driving global inequality. It should be the opposite.

Meanwhile, Oxfam figures reveal that the richest 1% hoovered up a staggering 82% of all wealth created in 2017. The poorest half of humanity got nothing. This has a stark and detrimental impact on appropriate levels of connectivity, workforce skill levels, and R&D expansion, all of which can cumulatively and negatively hit global markets in the long term. These are particularly alarming consequences in the context of collectively dealings with major issues, such as climate change, global supply chain sustainability, or food and water supplies.

Today, the internet is a basic human right, yet far too many regions are being cut out of the loop as cloud platforms and network infrastructures are being rolled out across developed economies. The divide between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is widening. Governments can, and indeed are to some extent, helping to mitigate the situation. However, tech leaders need to take more responsibility than ever before when it comes to developing nations and this can be achieved with innovation ecosystems that can benefit existing and nascent businesses.

Time to unite

Now is the time to better unite the tech industry and inspire concrete commitments that go well beyond short-term sponsorships, charity initiatives or perfunctory Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) drives. At a minimum, all tech leaders should consider the following:

1. Review company values

Do you currently leverage your expertise and resources to effect positive change? If not, rethink your strategy. It is important to be brave and have a sustainable plan. Tweaking and humanising your priorities could also fuel a range of associated business positives, including becoming a more appealing employer for increasingly ethics-driven millennial talent.

2. Be a bold advocate for change

Collaborate with your partners, clients, and competitors to maximise deployable resources and eventual impact. Your stance should inspire others to champion worthwhile causes and catalyse change in critical areas.

For example, you and your peers may have abilities and technologies suited to combating climate change via monitoring, analysis or general resource efficiency. Why aren't you already speaking up more loudly on the issue and sharing progressive insights with governments, the UN or bodies like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO)?

3. Close the tech industry skills gap

Are you really doing enough to expand your recruitment and training in developing countries with significant talent pools like Africa, the Middle East, and India? Address the imbalance by nurturing indigenous skills and proceed with inclusive intent.

4. Make connections

The tech industry is a hotbed of virtuosic problem-solvers, so it is important to facilitate the right connections and communicate progress wherever and whenever it happens. We need an open source approach to the problem wherein every value-adding voice can easily contribute. Feel like there aren't any idea-sharing platforms suited to your needs and skills? Go ahead and make one.

5. Encourage employee secondments to regions that need them

Purposeful, transformative use of technology always needs local knowledge and feet on the ground. Get out there, get your hands dirty and, while you're at it, expand key employees' perspectives and career horizons.

6. Don't ignore adjacent grassroots

Work with industry bodies to galvanise the wider tech community to endorse a sustainable programme along the lines of "Technology for All". This can include investment in people, schools, universities and training programmes, as well as disclosing data with the capacity to create, educate and empower.

A charter for change

We can't stand idle on the sidelines anymore. Technological innovation and development should be synonymous with helping the less fortunate. Ultimately, it is the tech companies that can powerfully back up strong values with substantive resources and decisive action that will be viewed as tomorrow's true pioneers. Aside from the obvious ethical imperatives, it just makes good business sense.

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