

ADVANCING A FUTURE FOR EVERYONE AT MICROSOFT CORPORATIONS

Microsoft Corporation provides a wealth of software products, solutions, and devices to serve people and enterprises in order to allow them to accomplish their full potential. Throughout the company, there exist various organizations that address different social causes that are not necessarily related to their technological services or business goals. However, the desire for a strong social responsibility and contribution was redefined in 2015, when the current CEO, Satya Nadella was introduced. In the letter to Microsoft shareholders in 2015, Nadella stated, “in the year ahead we will continue to ask ourselves what are the challenges mankind faces, how can technology help, and what is the contribution of Microsoft?”¹. A part of the solution was the creation of Microsoft Philanthropies. The case describes a modicum of the overall efforts Microsoft Philanthropies engaged in, and more specifically the efforts related to assisting students with (and without) disabilities and equitable education opportunities, up to the present date. In order to truly achieve a part of its ambitions – to grant *everyone* the opportunities that enable them to achieve their utmost – how should Microsoft Philanthropies design its operations moving forward?

INTRODUCTION TO MICROSOFT PHILANTHROPIES

Microsoft Philanthropies’ mission is to create “a future where every person has the skills, knowledge, and opportunity to achieve more”². Microsoft has broken down this mission by creating several relatively more specific categorical missions: investing in communities, empowering people, and creating systemic change.

Investing in Communities

The efforts that Microsoft Philanthropies engaged in to invest in communities were: providing cloud solutions and other services to nonprofits, humanitarian action, and having employees involve themselves with local communities.

To create stronger and more robust communities, Microsoft Philanthropies partnered with nonprofits and governments to tackle the issues of inequality of opportunities in communities globally. By arming nonprofits with the right technology, Microsoft Philanthropies has assisted these companies accelerate their mission with secure and scalable solutions so that they can create greater impact without having to delegate too many of their resources to the technology stack that their nonprofit runs on. Furthermore, Microsoft Philanthropies has provided nonprofit organizations, mainly those involved with refugees (but are available to everyone from ages 4 and up), with digital skills curriculums such as learning how to code, digital art workshops, Microsoft Office training, and how to build a business³. Similarly, in 2017, Microsoft employees donated \$156 million dollars to over 19,000 nonprofits and schools⁴.

¹ <https://www.microsoft.com/investor/reports/ar15/index.html>, accessed April 20, 2018

² <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/philanthropies/default.aspx>, accessed April 20, 2018

³ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/philanthropies/refugee-resources/>, accessed April 21, 2018

⁴ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/philanthropies/employee-engagement/>, accessed April 21, 2018

Empowering People

Communities and markets have been rapidly transformed by technology. Consequently, many employment opportunities require one to have digital skills. One of the challenges Microsoft Philanthropies seeks to solve has been ensuring that people gain the right skills and knowledge they need to succeed as technology advances. In order to do so, Microsoft Philanthropies provides a multitude of resources to schools across the United States and Europe to promote STEM interest, computer literacy and education, and teacher development. Microsoft Philanthropies has further specified several other avenues that are beneficial to its cause: educating and empowering students, assisting youths build careers in the digital workplace, and making technology accessible to everyone.

Creating Systemic Change

There were 4 major changes that Microsoft Philanthropies set out to accomplish⁵:

1. Societal investments of technology or money into nonprofit partnerships and digital inclusion programs.
2. Utilizing the talents of employees to create solutions for social issues.
3. Strengthening and engaging in collaborative partnerships with various organizations.
4. Increasing outreach of Microsoft and its partners to garner attention and to influence others to take action on the root causes of social issues.

WHY MICROSOFT PHILANTHROPIES CARES ABOUT EDUCATION

Nadella recounted, in an essay he wrote in 2017, the events surrounding the birth of his son, Zain, and how that affected his family. Zain, suffered from utero asphyxiation and as result has severe cerebral palsy. Nadella recounts how his wife and he had differing reactions to this situation. Nadella felt devastated for him and his wife, but his wife immediately thought about what this meant for their child. After a few weeks, Nadella learned that he could not change what had already happened, but he could do his utmost to improve Zain's life. Nadella directly attributed this monumental event to his understanding the journey of those with disabilities, and his passion to expand on innovative ideas to support, empower, and bring compassion to others⁶. Nadella not only pursued this passion of his, personally, but he also sought to create a longstanding impact with his colleagues at Microsoft. As a result, Microsoft Philanthropies was created, and each of its segmented missions encompasses a common component – leveraging technology and its benefits to enable and teach people how to create a better future for their communities and themselves.

One of the initial solutions Microsoft Philanthropies came up with, was to properly educate youths and students. Consequently, Microsoft partnered with the National 4-H Council. The National 4-H council strives to cultivate and encourage youth development across the United States by providing these youths leadership skills, getting them involved with STEM projects, and a variety of other knowledge through programs (held in school), which are delivered by a community of over 100 public universities across the

⁵ <https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2015/12/15/microsoft-deepens-longstanding-commitment-to-philanthropy-with-expanded-vision-new-organization/>, accessed April 21, 2018

⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/moment-forever-changed-our-lives-satya-nadella/>, accessed 4/22/2018

nation⁷. The partnership between Microsoft Philanthropies and the National 4-H Council focused on fundraising and marketing initiatives to increase community involvement with 4-H's programming.

Prior to Microsoft Philanthropies, in 2010, Microsoft supported the belief that “every child [and person] has a basic right to excellent education”⁸, but Microsoft realized that the challenges associated with this belief were too big for any single organization to solve. Despite this, Microsoft understood that it had a social responsibility to invest in improving education. A majority of Microsoft's efforts toward this cause used to be strictly investing in partnerships or having employees volunteer with local schools. However, these efforts qualitatively transformed when Nadella joined Microsoft.

Nadella sought to further incorporate Microsoft's overarching, ambitious mission with Microsoft Philanthropies' efforts and services with respect to education – to ensure that *everyone* could better their own future. With Nadella's influence, a direct result of this new goal was that Microsoft Philanthropies would be more involved with those with disabilities and with other related organizations compared to before. In order to accomplish this goal, Microsoft Philanthropies focused on prioritizing “inclusivity”.

INSTIGATING CHANGE THROUGH INCLUSIVITY

In the United States alone, there are over 6.5 million students that have specialized learning needs resulting from disabilities – that's 13 per cent of all public school students⁹. Not all schools are well-equipped to handle such diverse needs because of a lack of proper resources. Consequently, these students whose needs have not been met struggle to find the same higher-education or employment opportunities as their peers.

To combat this issue, Microsoft added two main measures to create an affordable solution that fostered an environment focused on inclusivity, meaning that the environment would grant students and youths with disabilities the opportunities to empower themselves and to show that their performances in a traditional learning environment do not necessarily match their full ability:

1. Providing accessible assistive technologies through Microsoft Learning Tools and other innovative solutions.
2. (Using the tools provided to) support inclusive and more in depth collaborations between students and teachers or organizations.

Microsoft builds certain technologies into their existing tools, which are then provided to students, teachers, and classrooms. Some of the built-in tools Microsoft delivers are: Optical Character Recognition, Seeing AI, and Learning Tools. Optical Character Recognition is used on photos to detect certain text or enlarge parts of the image. Similarly, Seeing AI is an application specifically designed for those who have low vision or are blind; it uses image recognition software to provide audio guidance of a document, identify currency, and even recognize people (and their emotions through facial features)¹⁰. Learning Tools is designed to work in conjunction with Microsoft Word and other products, and it assists

⁷ <https://4-h.org/media/microsoft-nationwide-insurance-executives-elected-to-national-4-h-council-board-of-trustees/>, accessed 4/22/2018

⁸ <https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2010/09/27/why-microsoft-cares-about-education-and-what-we-are-doing-about-it/>, accessed 4/22/2018

⁹ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp, accessed 4/22/2018

¹⁰ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/seeing-ai/>, accessed 4/22/2018

with dyslexic students' ability to read by "reducing visual crowding, highlighting words, and reading text aloud"¹¹.

On top of this, Microsoft realized that in a classroom setting, generalized accommodations do not replace the benefits that modifications on a learning environment provide. Understanding this, Microsoft moved to create a collaborative, inclusive classroom – one that finds the right balance of tools and technology that give students with disabilities a personalized and unique environment, but also one that is not isolated from their peers' experiences. Another important goal of creating such an environment is that the students and teachers would collaborate and work with each other as frequently as they can. To make this possible, Microsoft integrated personalized tools, such as various reading modes for students with dyslexia, ADHD, or colorblindness, and using Skype translator capabilities to allow teachers to assist students that may be deaf or hard of hearing¹². Lastly, Microsoft provides a wealth of free educational materials to teachers to help them better understand and empathize with some of the difficulties their students may have had through <https://education.microsoft.com/GetTrained>.

Furthermore, Microsoft partnered with several initiatives like the Autism Hiring Program and Supported Employment Program, which allowed them to create an even more inclusive and diverse work culture that is supported by youths with disabilities. These measures Microsoft took provided comprehensive support for several cases and alleviated the pain of performing (otherwise mundane for those without disabilities) tasks, but the most important part was that these measures empowered people. In his essay, Nadella talked about several stories of how people gained confidence in themselves, or how they felt more included or connected to their peers or the world around them by leveraging these tools, being included in the school or work environment, and having organizations to wholeheartedly support them¹³.

However, Nadella pointed out that while the few implemented tools and efforts may not have had the most tremendous impact, the efforts taken have laid the foundation for the future. For instance, these examples showed the power and importance of inclusive design – how the technology and solutions were created as a universal solution that could work for the complete range of distinct users. More importantly, these examples created an initiative to propel and propagate inclusive principles in products or services that will impact diverse users, which in turn will give technology the influence to empower *everyone*.

MEASURING IMPACT AND SUCCESS

In response to such a grand objective, with respect to Microsoft Philanthropies' mission, complete success is defined as having impacted everyone globally in such a way where each individual is able to achieve his or her full potential. However, this is a goal that cannot be easily achieved, so instead, Microsoft provides concrete statistics in its annual letter to its shareholders about the increasing contributions the organization and employees have made since the previous year.

Mary Snapp, corporate vice president and lead for Microsoft Philanthropies, quoted that Microsoft donated \$465 million to over 70,000 organizations in 2016. Additionally, Microsoft Philanthropies delivered "connectivity to remote schools, health clinics and community centers in 11 countries through the innovative use of 'TV white spaces;' expanded access to computer science education to 225 U.S. high schools; provided more than \$30 million in technology and cash donations to organizations serving

¹¹ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/empowering/index.html?story=stevegleason>, accessed 4/22/2018

¹² <https://blogs.office.com/en-us/2016/10/19/accessibility-in-the-classroom-tools-that-impact-my-students/>, accessed 4/22/2018

¹³ *ibid*

refugees and displaced people; and raised a record \$142 million through the Microsoft employee giving program, benefitting 19,000 nonprofits and schools”¹⁴.

The goals set for 2017 were to make progress towards a \$1 billion contribution to technologies provided to nonprofits and others, and to continue driving initiatives in education, humanitarian action, and accessible technology for those with disabilities. In the 2017 shareholder letter, Microsoft announced its steady progress from 2016. It donated over \$1.2 billion towards the aforementioned cause, partnered with over 20,000 more organizations, and created new technologies like Seeing AI¹⁵.

CHALLENGES

Despite the progress Microsoft Philanthropies has made in generating more opportunities for economic or social mobility, and creating accessible technologies for everyone, there are still detrimental effects of this investment. Much of the impact generated from Microsoft Philanthropies’ efforts are heavily reliant on technology and the benefits that technology grants¹⁶. Brad Smith, the president and chief legal officer of Microsoft, pointed out some pivotal reasons why technology is sorely needed. In Microsoft’s official blog¹⁷, the first reason Smith mentioned was that many who live in poverty have limited access to the tools that can empower them to create a better livelihood for their families or communities. The next reason that Smith mentioned is that a lack of education – especially in STEM, now more than before – hinders people’s ability to participate in the opportunities created by economic growth. Lastly, Smith talked about how there exist too many barriers for new technologies that would assist and empower people with disabilities. Even though technology has become more accessible and adopted globally, the benefits technology brings have not been enjoyed by everyone worldwide. More importantly, these benefits have not reached those who need them.

MOVING FORWARD

With this in mind, what are some ways that Microsoft can make technology more accessible to those in communities that do not already have basic technologies? Are there different avenues aside from technology that will create as big an impact that Microsoft Philanthropies has already made? What are some possible innovations to lay a foundation and mirror movements such as inclusive design? In order to truly achieve a part of its ambitions – to grant *everyone* the opportunities that enable them to achieve their utmost – how should Microsoft Philanthropies design its operations moving forward?

¹⁴ <https://blogs.microsoft.com/firehose/2017/03/01/year-1-of-microsoft-philanthropies-more-than-1-billion-in-cloud-services-for-nonprofits-and-465-million-donated-to-71000-organizations/>, accessed 4/22/2018

¹⁵ <https://www.microsoft.com/investor/reports/ar17/index.html#>, accessed 4/22/2018

¹⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/empowering-every-person-future-ready-mary-snapp/>, accessed 4/22/2018

¹⁷ *ibid*