

# Investing in people is investing in the future

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While it has much to recommend it, South African society is also plagued by many social ills. The government has made a priority of dealing with these ills, but massive unemployment, limited resources and simple geography render this a Herculean task. It is for this reason that individuals and companies that are interested in building a better South Africa have started to play a role that exceeds that of corporate responsibility and extends to socio-economic development too.

It is a moral imperative for all organisations to share their success by investing in their less-fortunate fellow man. Poverty, crime, homelessness, familial violence, hunger - these are among the many problems that, as a society, we face every day. The problem is that there are common denominators to these problems, among which is that the people who are trapped in these cycles potentially have low self-esteem, which can be linked to their inability to access and fulfil personal potential.

## Education a primary tool

In the prevailing modern society, knowledge and skills are the means by which individuals can empower themselves to overcome the barriers to exploring and realising their potential. Education, therefore, is one of the primary tools by which the limitations of individual personal development can be removed.

South African companies should consider their roles in society in terms of responsible business practices that contribute to profitable and sustainable growth, while at the same time bearing in mind environmental issues. Certainly included in this is the necessity to invest in the development of what remains the most important contributor to value in any business: people.

That goes beyond the people who are employees of any given company; it should extend to the broader community in which business is conducted. And technology provides a powerful lever through which more people can access quality education, thereby maximising the reach of initiatives focused on societal change.

## Unheard-of efficiencies

We have to accept that the sheer number of those who are in need is, in itself, a substantial challenge. We've seen technology applied to achieve unheard-of efficiencies in business; the same principle can be applied to bring education, learning, training and skills development to more people.

It is something that is espoused in Business Connexion's "Connective Intelligence" concept, in which the power of people is combined with the possibilities of technology. In particular, the phenomenon of social connectivity, driven by platforms like

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other web-driven applications, which facilitate "Connective Intelligence". These platforms are driving collaboration and information exchange at unprecedented levels for those who are connected. However, for those who are not, falling even further behind becomes a distinct possibility.

Harnessing the power of technology to make change is emerging as possibly the most salient way of reaching more people, more effectively.

## **Empowering younger people**

The mission of socially aware companies should include empowering especially younger people to change their lives and communities through technology. When such a responsibility goes beyond a business imperative and becomes part of the overall sustainability requirements for an organisation, momentum is built. That becomes apparent in Corporate Social Investment and Socio-Economic Development (SED) initiatives, in which businesses work together with their clients and partners to improve access to sustainable economic growth for individuals.

A feedback loop is created in terms of which qualified and capable people are able to enter the workplace, fulfilling the need for the human capital, which is the cornerstone of almost every industry's ability to create value. Or, more succinctly, sustainability becomes a feature of the socially-conscious company.

## **Beyond simple learning**

Learning is more than simply reading or being told how to do something. Further dimensions include the necessity for mentorship and the engagement with other professionals in pursuit of the varied skills required in a professional setting. These abilities include life skills, entrepreneurship, the fundamental skills of participation and the ability to work within a team, leadership, and self-esteem.

An example of such a varied approach, in which technology is combined with personal interaction and input, is Business Connexion's "Let Me Learn" initiative. This is a movement to drive positive social connectivity through technology; its mission is to empower young people to change their lives and communities through technology.

In this programme, technology, business acumen, innovation and advocacy is combined. Young people are the future; therefore, the idea behind "Let Me Learn" is to spark a revolution for youth, led by youth. Where learning is not an option for millions of young people around the continent, "Let Me Learn" creates agitators who can raise the will, the desire and the motivation for these young people to access and benefit from learning. That, in turn, allows for a release of potential to contribute, to lead, to be a contributor to a community.

As part of "Let Me Learn", Business Connexion runs the School Development Programme (IT Labs), and sponsors the Soweto Canoe and Recreation Club, WWF Eco-school and Rally to Read Programmes, as well as partners on the Information Technology Business Learnership Programme. Again, these programmes combine formal learning with other aspects of social development.

## **Responsibility and participation**

While provisions are made within South African law for funds to be allocated towards corporate social investment, smart companies with an eye on the future look beyond the letter of the law to concentrate on the spirit. Simple donations, while they have their place, are a simple method of giving back to the community. If one looks further into the nature of the social and economic challenges faced by many South Africans, the spirit of the law requires that a greater contribution is made.

While it has worked towards economic participation through a BEE deal in terms of which 10 charitable and non-governmental organisations gained a stake in Business Connexion's performance, this is just one aspect. There is a necessity for initiatives that combine monetary and non-monetary values towards long-term sustainable social impact through resources to address social development needs. Additionally, SED initiatives should be geared towards creating

sustainable access to the economy for beneficiaries.

Business Connexion's commitment to its School Development Programme and the establishment of IT Labs in underprivileged schools allows the leveraging of the expertise of our people and our partners in the industry to provide far more than just a hand-out of money.

There must be a deeper involvement from the very people who are at the centre of value-creation within business. In particular, if we accept that education is the only viable means for emancipation from the shackles of poverty, then corporate social responsibility targeted at education and skills programmes and school development programmes are likely to achieve the most. And such programmes require not only money, but expertise from the more fortunate who can share their skills and experience to help others to gain the knowledge and attributes they will need to prosper.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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