



Microsoft Canada: ReBOOTing CED **Technology**

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How do big global corporations work with small, local community economic development (CED) organizations? Microsoft Canada's answer is to partner with a non-profit intermediary whose mission is aligned with the corporation's core strength: technology.

Translating Global CSR into Local CED

One of the world's largest, best-known and most profitable companies, Microsoft designs computer operating systems and software suites and sells licenses for this technology to retailers that, in turn, sell computers. Microsoft employs 60,000 people worldwide.

As part of its global corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy, Microsoft runs the Unlimited Potential (UP) Program. A wide range of community partnerships has been formed by Microsoft everywhere on the globe. UP relationships have been aimed at improving access to technology, shrinking the digital divide between rich and poor and urban and rural settings, and promoting skills development, particularly through on-the-job training initiatives.

Microsoft Canada is a relatively small operation, employing 700 workers. Applying the Unlimited Potential Program in Canada's

small-population, big-geography context is not simple. The company needs community partners that can reach into various social sectors that advance its CSR objectives.

Partnering with ReBOOT Canada

Nearly ten years ago, Microsoft Canada joined forces with ReBOOT Canada, a non-profit that provides computer hardware, training and technical support to charities, non-profits and individuals with limited access to technology. Since its inception in 1996, ReBOOT Canada has distributed more than 60,000 pieces of computer equipment to the third sector in Canada.

The partnership was initiated by a past Board member of ReBOOT Canada, who was also a Microsoft Canada employee, together with the former Executive Director of ReBOOT Canada. They approached the Community Giving group at Microsoft with the partnership proposal, and it received support.

““ *Multinational companies must, and can, find ways at adapting global CSR programs to the specificity of local contexts. As this case shows, choosing the right local partner is key.*””

Microsoft Canada makes three important contributions to its partnership with ReBOOT. First, and at the core of the relationship, is a licensing agreement under the UP Program that allows ReBOOT to include the Windows Operating System and MS Office on the machines distributed by the non-profit. Second, through cash sponsorship, Microsoft has supported ReBOOT’s annual fundraising event. Third, through its I Volunteer Program, Microsoft enables employees to contribute up to 40 hours of paid time to devote to a charity of their choice. Employees are invited to volunteer with ReBOOT.

Through this partnership, ReBOOT Canada has distributed more than 6,000 systems. Recipient groups and individuals, many of whom are active in CED, are enabled to participate in an increasingly digital environment. Their productivity and effectiveness have been improved by these tools. As ReBOOT’s Executive Director says, “having the Microsoft operating systems and applications on the system has been a key to our organization’s success.”

Of course, there are challenges involved in this kind of partnership. Microsoft as a global corporation must utilize the knowledge of its Canadian operations in order to fully understand the evolving Canadian context. Canada is one of the most highly connected countries in the world. Bridging the very particular digital divides Canada faces requires in-depth understanding of local actors and issues. At the same time, because demand from the non-profit sector for Microsoft Canada’s engagement is robust, and beyond the company’s capacity to respond, the company must have clear criteria for proposal selection that are aligned with its CSR and business strategies.

In addition, sometimes the priorities of the global program that runs UP are not aligned with the local action proposed by groups on the ground. But, says a Microsoft Canada representative: “Given the extensive history of our two organizations, we are able to make things work.”

Lessons Learned

Two lessons from this case are worth highlighting: First, multinational companies must, and *can*, find ways of adapting global CSR programs to the specificity of local contexts. As this case shows, choosing the right local partner is key.

Second, holistic initiatives like the Unlimited Potential Program must, and again *can*, be driven by the core competencies of the company. Such programs permit flexibility in terms of engagement *channels* – that is, in-kind donations, grants and volunteering – to advance both social and business objectives.

Conclusion

The Microsoft Canada – ReBOOT Canada partnership has proven to be a durable and valuable relationship for both parties. Canadian CED groups and corporate leaders have much to learn from this innovative, shared venture.

Sources

This case study benefited from interviews with key players in ReBOOT Canada and Microsoft Canada, as well as information from the organizations’ websites.

Carleton Centre for Community Innovation

The Carleton Centre for Community Innovation (3CI) brings together superior academic research and knowledge dissemination to Canadian communities in ways that promote long-term growth and sustainable development. One of Canada's leading sources of expertise in social finance, 3CI has also played a leadership role in grant-making, evaluation and policy analysis in the fields of community economic development and social enterprise. From 1997 to 2008, the Centre managed the Community Economic Development Technical Assistance Program (CEDTAP), with the support of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, The Ontario Trillium Foundation, Bell Canada and other partners. Other action-research priorities for 3CI include local governance, community learning and community-university partnerships.

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