

## **How to Partner with Big Tech Companies to Scale and Accelerate Your Positive Impact**

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**Keywords:** tech for impact, positive leadership, social entrepreneurship, tech for good

### **Abstract**

Microsoft and Ashoka have been working together for the past two years to launch the Entrepreneurship for Positive Impact Program at Microsoft, a program for impact entrepreneurs that also has a component of engaging Microsoft Leaders as mentors and sponsors of some of the entrepreneurs in the program. We compiled our lessons learned about how entrepreneurs can best partner with a major corporation like Microsoft to accelerate and scale their positive impact.

### **Introduction**

Microsoft and Ashoka joined forces in 2021 to launch the Entrepreneurship for Positive Impact Program (EFPI) at Microsoft, a program for purpose-driven entrepreneurs to embed tech, including AI, into their operations and/or develop tech products as part of their work. Through the program, Microsoft Leaders also mentor and sponsor some of the entrepreneurs in the program. So far, over 100 companies have gone through the Accelerator, and there are over 1000 companies in the broader community. Twenty-two social enterprises have taken part in the Microsoft Hackathon, and 108 Microsoft leaders have engaged with the entrepreneurs as 1:1 coaches, in turn, learning valuable lessons from the entrepreneurs. It's a two-way process. We started by defining the types of entrepreneurs who could benefit from partnering with Microsoft, then went through networks of social entrepreneurs to identify and select them for the program. In parallel, working with Microsoft, we selected and trained over 70 senior company leaders on the mindsets, needs, and challenges of social entrepreneurs, as well as on coaching and mentoring skills delivered through a program called Leadership for Positive Impact. This is one of Ashoka's Changemaker Company partnerships, where companies commit to driving internal change to improve their own capacity and culture of change-making so they can fruitfully engage with the social sector and help "impact natives" drive bigger, meaningful change. These two Microsoft programs – one for entrepreneurs and one for corporate leaders – were designed to foster lasting, meaningful interactions for individuals on both sides to deepen their positive impact.

We compiled some of our lessons learned on how social entrepreneurs can best partner with a major corporation like Microsoft to scale and accelerate their impact. First, we want to explore how to have the right internal conditions and mindset in your organization before embarking on a partnership with a big company:

***Make sure you have the right team and a robust ethical framework in place.***

It is key to have at least one person on your team who has expertise in the tech area you're trying to expand into. You don't need to have a CTO, but having someone working with you with some coding, analytics, or data science skills to represent your organization is crucial for these types of partnerships. With technology developing so quickly and the level of complexity increasing, you should have someone on your team who understands how to apply the tech within your organization and products. This is important not just for the initial rollout of the initiative but for its long-term success as well.

One key selection factor that companies look for is having an ethical framework already in place, especially if you plan to work with Artificial Intelligence (AI). Developing and implementing a structural, codified, ethical approach to the tools you will be using before you start using them is central to success. This is your starting point before you begin to deploy AI.

***Be selective about what you adopt.***

Don't feel like you must use every piece of exciting tech that is being developed. Take the time to understand what is right for your business, accelerate your impact and why, and know that the right thing to do is to be selective and rule things out. If you're not a Software as a Service (SaaS), you don't need SaaS offerings, so why spend time exploring how to integrate those? When working with corporate partners, have clarity about your goals. Be as specific as possible so you can ask for and access what you need to deliver.

For example, Nuup, an Ashoka Fellow-led organization that incubates new agricultural models in Mexico, joined the program to integrate a smart chatbot into one of their existing digital products, named Sirio. Sirio empowers farmer organizations to collect and manage their own data for increased productivity, efficiency, sustainability, and competitiveness. Sirio users generate a huge amount of data, but sorting through it can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate. By participating in the program and the AI for Positive Impact Entrepreneurs Hackathon, Nuup was able to develop an AI-powered chatbot that enables users to access data using natural language, leading to increased precision and better navigation and visualization.

***Explore the difference between tech as a product and tech as infrastructure for your organization.***

Take the time to understand the difference between tech as a product versus tech as infrastructure that helps organizations operate more effectively. Often, one side of the equation gets neglected or sacrificed over the other, and going too deep in each one can hinder being able to do both. Learning how to test and iterate technology in your own operation can help you develop a test-and-learn mindset for taking products to market. There is always something new to keep up with, and focusing on making the tech perfect or making sure it is on trend can hinder going to market. Developing the capability to test, fail, and iterate helps mitigate the "perfect being the enemy of the good" mindset.

In the example of Nuup above, the organization leveraged AI to improve the user experience with their data product, a great example of using tech to improve operating processes. Meanwhile, another Ashoka-Fellow-led organization, BeeOdiversity, invented a system that allows them to collect tiny amounts of pollen from worker bees when they return to their hives. Using machine learning and AI models, they can identify pesticides, heavy metals, and plants in the area surveyed at a low cost. This large trove of data, complemented with satellite imagery, allows BeeOdiversity scientists to make recommendations to clients and stakeholders on how to reduce pesticide use and increase biodiversity in their geographical areas. BeeOdiversity's unique approach has enabled them to attract clients such as Nestle and ABinBev, among other big organizations that can benefit from such big data insights.

This partnership between Ashoka and Microsoft has also taught us how important it is to choose the right program and corporate partner and to be mindful of the challenges inherent in working with a large multinational company. Here are some of our insights:

***Make sure there is a sponsor, coach, or other form of 1:1 personalized guidance.***

Social entrepreneurs need a meaningful person-to-person connection because they don't necessarily fit into the funnel of traditional success stories. Companies like Microsoft are large and complex, so without having direct conversations with individuals positioned to help with your baseline technology strategy, achieving a successful outcome is harder. Expert buy-in is key, but an ongoing relationship is even more crucial here to build visibility and an internal network that can support the ups and downs of your journey. Having the buy-in from senior people who have the network, connections, and power to make things happen is a way to counteract the size of the company and the many barriers to entry.

Fundación Capital, a Colombian-based non-profit working on financial literacy and poverty in low-income communities for the past 20 years, was operating as a more traditional non-profit and partnered with Microsoft to pivot to a technology-based model. Over the last few years, they started exploring how technology could help meet low-income individuals where they are in terms of digital inclusion.

They were paired with a Microsoft leader working in Finance, who quickly realized (through engagement in Microsoft's Leadership for Positive Impact program) that the coaching was really about helping the founders build a coalition of people to support them with their data management strategy. Together, they developed a cross-function, multi-geography team that has now identified new revenue opportunities in terms of skills and workforce. This partnership could not have taken place without the clear guidance and coaching of a corporate "insider" who helped them navigate complex systems and build the right relationships.

***Be ready to play the long game. Exercise patience and understanding towards the corporate world.***

Entrepreneurs can make quick decisions, pivot fast, and change processes or operations in a heartbeat, but it just doesn't work like that in a large corporation. Help corporate leaders

understand your entrepreneurial culture and make sure that this is worthwhile for you and your organization.

And most importantly, remember that it's a two-way learning process. The corporate sector has as much to learn from social entrepreneurs and how they get things done as social entrepreneurs have to gain from engaging with big technology companies to improve their capabilities.

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