

Can social intrapreneurship add value to your business?

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One of the business benefits of a corporate social intrapreneurship programme is talent development

Vodafone isn't a banking business – at least, that was what Nick Hughes was told when he first pitched the idea of a mobile banking system for Kenya's unbanked. But Mr Hughes, Vodafone's head of global payments at the time, didn't give up.

Instead, he applied for a start-up grant from **DFID**, the UK Government's international development agency, and initiated a small-scale pilot. Now, more than a decade later, Vodafone's mobile money service, **mPESA**, has nearly 30m customers worldwide.

Agents of change

It's an example of what business theorists now like to call "social intrapreneurship".

Social intrapreneurs are similar to start-up entrepreneurs, only, instead of beavering away in a garage, he or she is working within a large corporation developing initiatives, and has a social conscience to boot.

To many, it will sound like wishy-washy, corporate responsibility stuff. But it isn't, insists [Gib Bulloch](#), an independent consultant and specialist on social intrapreneurship. It's about companies releasing their best and brightest staff to convert the world's big social and environmental problems into market opportunities.

“Global challenges such as climate change, access to energy, health and education are really business opportunities in disguise,” he says.

“And it's social intrapreneurs who are best placed to seek out these opportunities and drive change [from the] bottom up.”

Such arguments tend to go down well with the hard-headed folk in the finance department. But, given the appetite among corporate employees to make a difference in their day jobs (especially millennials), corporate talent and innovation teams have every reason to love the idea too.

Social intrapreneurship has big potential in the wider world too. As Mr Bulloch points out, large corporations may not be as flexible as nimble [social enterprises](#), but such is their size that even the slightest of shifts can have major positive reverberations for the planet.

“If you're a person driven by making an impact, then remaining inside your organisation and trying to drive change internally is potentially more impactful than leaving to do so,” he argues.

In practice, social intrapreneurship remains a nascent phenomenon. Some of the brands at the forefront of the movement include Accenture, GSK and Standard Chartered, who were all sponsors of the inaugural [Global Awards for Social Intrapreneurship](#) in 2013.

Key to galvanising the idea are stories of success, says Maggie De Pree, co-founder of the [League of Intrapreneurs](#), which hosted the awards that first year.

Her growing list includes Rebecca Moore, a computer scientist at Google, who's [pioneering](#) the use of the company's mapping tools to help with everything from preventing illegal logging to clearing landmines.

Another individual innovator on Ms De Pree's radar is Sam McCracken, a general manager at Nike and the person behind its [N7](#) product line. Proceeds from N7 items, which are designed with Native American principles of sustainability in mind, go towards preventing high levels of obesity and diabetes among Native American youth.

Mentoring the mavericks

The challenge for business leaders is working out how to encourage social intrapreneurs to come out of the woodwork. For all the talk of out-of-the-box thinking, most employees in large companies know that not rocking the boat marks the surest way forward.

Milan Semani has come up with what he hopes might be a breakthrough solution, founding the [Intrapreneur Lab](#), which runs a three-day residential programme to help small teams from blue-chip firms brainstorm profitable innovations with a sustainability twist.

“It was originally conceived because we felt that there were people in large companies who were driven by the belief that business can have a positive impact in the world – and they had ideas,” he says.

“Making these relevant to core business tends to require innovating into new market spaces, which is a type of innovation that large companies often find quite difficult.”

To date, 22 companies have gone through the programme, which includes the option for a three-month follow-up process once employees return to their day jobs. Among the main motivations of participating companies, which include Disney, BMW and Barclays, is the desire to unlock innovation, promote talent development and create an entrepreneurial culture, explains Mr Samani.

Mark Thain, director of social innovation at [Barclays](#), praises the Lab for generating a pipeline of ideas and then whittling down the best until they're investment ready.

Later this month, for instance, the UK bank is due to launch a portfolio product aimed at making business investments that promise high sustainability returns.

The idea was hatched by a Lab attendee from Barclays' private wealth division. Another product to have recently emerged out of the process is a bespoke banking service for military personnel.

He concedes that many firms remain trapped in a philanthropic mindset, where their social contribution is channelled through well-meaning but non-strategic charity partnerships.

“Social intrapreneurship is much harder,” he adds. “You have to drive change through the business, bring others on board and develop products and services for the long-term. There are only a few companies that have truly embedded it.”

David Grayson, co-author of the book, *Social Intrapreneurism & All That Jazz*, is equally down-to-earth. “Think very carefully if this is something that you want to do, because it's hard work and there's a lot of risk,” he advises.

“However, the difference between a social intrapreneur and social entrepreneur is the capacity to take your idea to a much greater scale and at a much earlier point.”