

Microsoft teaching, learning in Africa

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Anand Mariappan spends his days at Microsoft building data-analysis tools largely designed for people like him. That is, office workers accustomed to high-resolution computer monitors, lightning-quick Internet and the creature comforts of a modern office park.

In January, the 31-year-old software developer spent three weeks doing his best to help a different constituency: startups trying to get off the ground in Kampala, Uganda.

There, things like optimizing an app's layout for the iPhone didn't have quite the same importance as ensuring the software could function smoothly if Internet service cut out.

"Here, you have so many resources. Engineering talent, easily available Internet," Mariappan said. "In developed countries, you don't consider some of those factors."

Mariappan's trip was part of Microsoft's 2-year-old, \$75 million 4Afrika initiative. The MySkills4Afrika program has shuttled about 400 Microsoft employees on two- to three-week stints to customers in African countries to share their particular skills, from software development to marketing.

Part business-development effort, part workforce-leadership training, part public-relations push, 4Afrika is billed as a program to bolster the capacity of the continent's firms and government entities to use technology. In the best-case scenario, it also improves Microsoft's image

and expands the company's roster of customers.

"It's not philanthropy, it is not a charity," said Fernando de Sousa, Microsoft's human resources chief for the Middle East and Africa and the program's founding manager. "We're investing in the continent in order to enable economic development."

Microsoft's investment in Africa started, like that of many U.S. companies, in South Africa, long the continent's largest and most industrialized economy. The company was among the first U.S. firms to return to South Africa after Congress lifted its trade sanctions amid signs of a thaw in the enforced racial abuse of apartheid.

De Sousa joined Microsoft in South Africa in 1992 and was on the team that in 2005 put together a noncommercial strategy for the continent, focusing on how technology could help fulfill the United Nations' development goals for the continent. In 2013, Microsoft announced a three-year 4Afrika initiative, committing what de Sousa said is the largest development investment anywhere outside of China.

"In the background there was the understanding that we needed to think about Africa in a different way," said de Sousa, who was born in Mozambique.

The program hasn't been without its flops. The flagship piece of its early days, a push to spur adoption of a low-cost, Windows-powered smartphone, "did not do so well," said Winnie Karanu, a program manager with Microsoft in Kenya. That effort coincided with Microsoft's global struggles to grow its tiny smartphone market share amid fierce competition from Google and Apple.

More successful, Karanu says, were training programs, internships for youth, a pilot program to use television white space to broaden the reach

of the Internet, and the MySkills4Afrika program.

Mariappan's work in Uganda centered on sharing his insight on Power BI, Microsoft's relatively new data analytics tool. He spent time with companies trying to make sense of sales data involving farm goods and helped a startup build mobile-payment tools.

"My goal was to teach," he said. "But I learned a lot."

Eileen Chou, a manager in Microsoft's information technology support group, spent three weeks in Kenya in October, working alongside a few other Microsoft employees to train the Kenya Red Cross' IT department in workflow methods and how to make use of a grant of Microsoft software.

"We all kind of came to a realization that the core issues are very much the same," she said. "You always feel like you never have enough people to do everything; you always wear multiple hats."

She added: "We all would do it again in a heartbeat."

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