

Claire O'Halloran

Thinking like an entrepreneur



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As we become more and more reliant on technology, we need to help people to understand how technology is an enabler to their lives. As our Chief Operating Officer, Kevin Turner, said at our last partner conference: "Our future will be decided by what we do today." It's not simply about people embarking on courses to learn coding or programming; it's about having an appreciation of the benefits of technology and what it means for us with regards to how we communicate and connect with people in this fast-moving and complex environment.

In this 'Web 2.0' world, people will need an holistic appreciation of the internet and all of the fantastic things that it facilitates. I don't think there

are many people that really understand Web 2.0 – it can be fairly nebulous – but we do need to grasp what these technological advancements mean to us as individuals, as consumers, as students, as family members, and as business people.

Whether you want to be an employee, an employer or an entrepreneur there's a common denominator which is an understanding of the broader landscape of enterprise. But can you teach enterprise? I asked Professor Dylan Jones-Evans, Director of the National Entrepreneurship Observatory for Wales, this. He said you can't teach it, but you can learn it. This requires people to be open to learning and to try to think "more like an

entrepreneur" and, in many cases, this is about giving people confidence. So skills and confidence go hand in hand.

But how do we learn these skills and gain this confidence? Gordon Brown talked last year about the benefits of 'shared experience' and the need for people to learn from other people. This is vital as it gives us different perspectives and a new appreciation for how things are done or what someone else has created. It's more about connectedness rather than connectivity; feeling aligned with someone and something.

We need to harness the technology we have in order to connect to people. Take, for example, Horseshmouth (www.horseshmouth.com)



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horsemouth.co.uk). This is an online mentoring website where people can find experts in a certain area and seek advice and share experiences on a whole range of things free of charge. It has many potential applications in both corporate and consumer worlds.

Another example is the work that The Music Factory are doing in Rotherham on an application for students called U-xplore (www.u-xplore.com) which "connects the business community of today with the business community of tomorrow". The initiative, which won a Microsoft award for innovation through technology in 2007, helps young people and adults identify their skills and how best to use them. It is a great example of how technology can really bring work experience to life and engage even the most disenfranchised schoolkids, encouraging them to consider attaining qualifications and entering the workforce.

While we harness technology to connect people, it's still important we don't get lost in a virtual world. As someone said recently: "Forget Second Life; get a first life". Working

in technology, we see both the advantages and disadvantages of communicating online and off-line. A huge percentage of our communication is non-verbal and often there is just no substitute for face-to-face. Giving people confidence to network effectively is crucial and it's encouraging to see so many networks, organisations and support groups in the UK entrepreneur and business community today. We're also seeing lots of UK-based groups reaching out to India, China, Middle East and Africa. Travel – or at least engaging with people in other countries – is a great development tactic as it challenges our beliefs and preconceptions.

At Microsoft, we're doing a lot of work on skills for the future: we work very closely with all levels of the education system looking at how to create better all-round business skills and entrepreneurship. For example, we have worked with football and rugby clubs to create an online game enabling young people to run a virtual sports store for a year. As well as being branded in their favourite team colours, the sports store enables them

to learn the nature and challenges of business and management as an entertainment as well as an educational experience.

Broad skills acquisition is imperative if the UK is going to continue to be competitive and a leader in innovation on the global stage. As Sir Digby Jones says, it is up to the private sector to work with the public sector to improve the skills level in the UK so we can compete effectively into the next decade.

Microsoft is working closely with a broad landscape of partner organisations who aim to create an environment where innovation and enterprise flourish. For instance, with the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship we are helping IT graduates become software entrepreneurs. They may have a great idea or concept and we give them a better appreciation of business and an understanding of how to put together a business plan and how to build and sell their product or service. We also plan to assist them with 'investment

readiness' and broker introductions to angel investors and venture capital companies. This combination of an understanding of the capabilities of technology with business skills will be crucial for success in the workplaces of the future.