

Microsoft and South Africa Focus on Sustainable Community Development: Partners in Learning

Reza Bardien, Microsoft

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Lonmin Community Development
Trust

1. *Context*

Lonmin Profile

Lonmin is one of South Africa’s largest platinum producers. Operating in the Marikana region of the Northwest Province – about an hour from Johannesburg – the company draws its labour pool from 29 local schools.

Situation

As mining has become increasingly sophisticated, workers need high levels of digital literacy to be effective. The local school system was unable to provide ICT skills to its students.

Solution

Lonmin partnered with Microsoft Partners in Learning to gain a framework for giving students the ICT skills they needed.

Benefits

- Created 25 computer labs within six months
- Will reach 15,000 students through 500 teachers
- Used local resources for sustainable community development
- Gained a model that can be used throughout the country

2. *Background*

Platinum mining company Lonmin operates in the Marikana region of South Africa, a historically economically depressed area. The company teamed up with Microsoft to train teachers how to incorporate information and communications technology (ICT) skills in the classroom, a move that has improved both the mining business and the local economy.

When many people think about South Africa, they think about apartheid. But what they do not realize is that for many years, the government has been actively promoting a wide range of broad-based black economic empowerment programs to address inequalities. Coupled with empowerment programs is a growing movement for private sector companies to give back to the communities in which they operate. South Africa has discovered that this thrust benefits not only

the communities, but the companies as well. One key example is Lonmin, the world's third-largest platinum producer.

Lonmin operates in the Marikana region of the 'platinum belt' of South Africa, an area that has long relied on cheap local labor. But as mining has become an increasingly high-tech business, it requires a correspondingly high level of digital literacy. Lonmin found that it had to train workers on technology after they graduated from one of the region's 29 schools. The training was time-consuming and hindered business success. The company already recognized that training students in digital literacy was the key to overcoming this challenge. Even though many South African schools already had ICT initiatives in place, digital literacy remained low. The problem was that merely having PCs in schools was not giving students the technical skills they needed.

3. *The Solution*

Lonmin Community Development Trust, the sustainable community development arm of the company, contacted Microsoft® Partners in Learning to help broaden the scope of ICT training in schools. 'Our vision and mission is that we must serve and deliver tangible results for the communities in which Lonmin operates', says Kgomotso Tshaka, President, Lonmin Community Development Trust. 'Our strong partnerships with entities such as Microsoft help us liberate the potential of the individual within the communities we serve'.

To start, Microsoft launched a pilot program to train 24 teachers in one school according to Partners in Learning Teacher Training methodologies. 'For the first few months, we focused on thought leadership', explains Reza Bardien, Academic Program Manager, Microsoft South Africa. 'We needed to shift the focus away from pure technology and toward developing ICT programs that teachers could use on a daily basis'.

This shift in thinking paid off. As a result of the pilot program's success, Lonmin Community Development Trust decided to fund the training of the 28 remaining schools. 'Having the support of someone like Microsoft gives teachers and learners unlimited access to information they never dreamed of', says Kitty Scott, Development Manager for Education, Lonmin Community Development Trust.

During the process, Microsoft and Lonmin Community Development Trust also addressed the need for IT infrastructure. Microsoft provided software, while Lonmin Community Development Trust equipped 25 computer labs with 25 to 30 refurbished PCs per lab. In addition, a local Microsoft partner was brought in for implementation. This partner is also a black South African empowerment partner, thus contributing even more to community development.

The South African Department of Education has also become involved, a move that has raised the project's visibility throughout the country and encouraged other companies and districts to adopt a similar approach.

4. *Benefits*

All stakeholders are benefiting from the partnership between Lonmin and Microsoft. Students are gaining valuable skills that enhance their employment viability and earning power. Teachers are getting the resources they need to improve the quality of teaching and learning, using ICT programs. And Lonmin is getting a trained workforce. Ultimately, this program will reach all students in the Marikana region, all of whom will graduate with competent levels of digital literacy. To put it in perspective, consider the following: this program will reach 15,000 students through 500 teachers.

The ramifications of these numbers are staggering. The platinum belt has historically provided cheap, unskilled labor, leading to a stagnant economy. But as people graduate from school with higher levels of technology skills, they have more employment opportunities and greater earning power. In turn, the community as a whole benefits. In addition, Lonmin Community

Development Trust and Microsoft deliberately chose Spherical Consulting, a local, black South African-owned Microsoft integrator, thus contributing to community self-sustainability and tangible economic development.

Lonmin is also reaping the benefits. In the past, it has either had to provide extensive on-the-job training to local workers, or bring in workers from other areas – a move that is expensive for the company and bad for the community. Local workers now have better skills, and the company has a greater pool of local candidates from which to choose. This pool will grow during the second phase of the program, which will focus on creating Microsoft IT Academies for further education.

The program is not just benefiting the Marikana region and Lonmin; instead, it is proving to have much more far-reaching effects. Other South African companies are following the process with keen attention. ‘Our ICT program in schools has interested a few other mining houses’, says Tshaka.

In addition, the Ministry of Education became involved because it recognized a sustainable, effective methodology for deploying ICT in the classroom. ‘The biggest success of the project is the thought leadership’, says Bardien. ‘There has been a high failure rate in a lot of ICT projects. But by structuring a program that includes all the critical success factors and focuses on the needs of users and brings in valuable partners, we’ve clearly demonstrated public, private, and civil society best practices’.

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Reza Bardien,
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For further information

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