



Digital skills bring Indigenous businesses to life

By embracing cultural traditions and values, the nonprofit Shared Path narrows the opportunity gap among Indigenous Australians

Shared Path is a nonprofit that brings together entrepreneurship training, digital skills and traditional culture to deliver economic opportunity to Indigenous Australians. As it matches Indigenous communities with partners in private companies, government agencies and academic institutions, Shared Path trains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the digital skills they need to participate in the 21st century economy—on their own terms.

The challenge

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia face, on average, much greater hardship than non-Indigenous citizens. For example, Indigenous Australians are twice as likely to struggle with poor health, and the average family earns less than two-thirds of non-Indigenous families—a gap even more extreme in remote areas, according to the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#)¹.

Rural Indigenous communities are often isolated by lack of connectivity, technology infrastructure and digital skills training as well as by poor roads and flooding during the wet season. This isolation limits education, employment and health care opportunities. As a result, attempts to solve these pressing problems are often created outside the community and without input from the people they are meant to serve. Well-intentioned solutions that are imposed from the outside can be culturally insensitive and, without community buy-in, they often don't work.

The fix

Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach can force communities into an agenda that doesn't fit their needs, "we figure out how to adapt our programming and deliver digital skills training so communities can build out and enhance their own solutions," says Ben Bowen, co-founder, CEO and director of Shared Path.

The flexible process looks like this: Members of Shared Path meet with community members—especially those from underserved groups, including women—who surface problems they want to address. The group then brainstorms solutions and how technology can help, whether by automating outreach or analyzing concrete data. Next, community members outline the project—e.g. by making a business plan, storyboard or app wireframe. Finally, Shared Path connects them to experts in the business and technology field to make the idea a reality. In addition to hands-on lessons covering marketing, e-commerce and business development, participants learn cloud computing, machine learning, internet of things platforms and programming, among other in-demand digital skills.

¹A statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia: Social Justice Report 2008, Australian Human Rights Commission

“Our model is proof that if you put good infrastructure and technology in our communities, we rapidly adapt and come up with amazing solutions. We are embedding technical skills in Indigenous communities to empower self-determination.”

-Ben Bowen, co-founder, CEO & director of Shared Path

One of Shared Path’s most critical partners has been Indigital, an indigenous, woman-led augmented reality startup that supports Indigenous communities in telling their own stories through emerging technology. The two groups focused on developing Indigenous talent to increase representation in the technology industry.

“The people we work with are building innovative, tech-based solutions that impact their everyday lives through technical and entrepreneurial skills,” says Bowen, who is Indigenous Wiradjuri.

Before joining the Microsoft-funded Shared Path-Indigital program Digital Custodians, Lucille Cassar had only used technology to occasionally check Facebook and answer emails for her husband’s construction business. Now, she is learning to code using Minecraft, experimenting with 3D painting and taking online training through the [Microsoft Learning Community](#). She has been developing an app that will link Indigenous people with chronic disease to local clinics and on a project that digitally displays 3D images of cultural artifacts.

“It’s my ambition to use these skills to develop a business of my own,” Cassar says. “I want to be able to turn around and say, ‘I’m female, I’m Indigenous, and yes I’ve done this!’”

Promising practices for deeper impact

Incorporate Indigenous values. By working with Indigenous communities from the get-go, Shared Path ensures projects respect local customs and beliefs. “We ask, how can we make technology work within cultural norms?” Bowen says. For example, participants in the Microsoft Philanthropies-supported Digital Custodians project use machine learning for language, Azure cloud computing, and knowledge of intellectual property rights “to record community leaders telling stories in their native tongue. Participants chose this route to ensure their

language is preserved within context and doesn’t share safeguarded phrases meant only for segments of the community—a cultural misstep common to other language preservation initiatives.

Follow the community’s lead. “The best advice we give is, don’t become gatekeepers of ideas and technology,” Bowen says. With Shared Path’s model, Indigenous groups generate solutions uniquely tailored to the community’s needs, geography and preferences. For example, one community noticed that diabetics’ blood sugar tended to spike during flooding, so participants are designing an app that analyzes weather forecasts to trigger automatic advice, such as reminders to stock up on healthy non-perishable food and beverages before a storm.

Support business opportunities that fit the community’s needs. Many isolated communities are shrinking as people leave their traditional lands to pursue jobs in more urban areas. Shared Path is helping to grow sustainable local economies by training entrepreneurs in digital skills to make business ideas a reality. For example, the organization has taught an artist to build a web site that displays her art along with an e-commerce solution so she can sell her paintings online, then list her business on web maps so tourists passing through the area can stop to pick up a souvenir.

Nurture partnerships. Shared Path acts as a hub, bringing together volunteers from private businesses, government agencies, nonprofits, private partners and entire communities, from schoolkids to elders. The organization taps into skills and ideas from each to support the creation of truly innovative solutions, Bowen says.

Link generations. Indigenous leaders are concerned with losing the wisdom their peoples have curated over tens of thousands of years; knitting together youth and elders through technology ensures cultural lore is passed down to future generations. For example, in a Microsoft-funded program that trained Indigenous primary school students in augmented reality skills, children learned the Dharawal dreamtime story from elders. The youth then coded, animated and activated the story in augmented reality using Paint 3D and Minecraft Education Edition to create a resource for learning Indigenous languages.

Microsoft is working with nonprofits to ensure every person has the skills, knowledge, and opportunity they need to succeed in the digital economy. Learn more aka.ms/skills-employability