

Microsoft employees train Malawi school teachers

By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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A group of Microsoft employees from Microsoft's Customer Service and Support (CSS) team across Europe, Middle East and Asia and the US, have volunteered their personal time to training teachers to set up their own computer labs and maintain the Malawi Learning Partnership network (MLP).

Running for a second year, the MLP is a community networking project using ICT tools to connect students and teachers giving them access to critical learning resources. The Microsoft employees visiting Malawi are rolling out a targeted ICT education training drive as part of their global community service initiative.

'DigiGirlz' - empowering female students



John Nielsen

John Nielsen, general manager of Microsoft's Europe, Middle East and Africa Customer Service and Support, leading the Malawi team, hosted what they call, 'DigiGirlz' events.

"These are training courses for female students on Microsoft products, as well as an IT Master class, for high school students interested in pursuing a career in IT," he said.

The five 'DigiGirlz' events took place at venues in the district of Chikhwawa, where they had to use generators for the computers. The high school girls were given information on technology-based careers.

Nielsen explained that over the five days, approximately 100 girls from Blantyre gained confidence in their IT skills, using Microsoft PowerPoint to develop presentations; Kudo, the visual programming language, to write a computer game and a web design programme, and Microsoft Expression Web, to create a basic web page.



Chris Scutt

Chris Scutt, facilitator of the project, who is also head of eLearning at St Andrew's Secondary School, said that in Malawi there is a tendency for poorer families to prioritise the education of boys over that of girls.

"The 'DigiGirlz' events are great because they give young girls a taste of the type of jobs they can pursue in the technology industry and the realisation that they can achieve much more than they might believe," Scutt says.

An IT Masterclass, for older high school children who are interested in pursuing a career in IT, combined discussions around more advanced topics like cloud technology and emerging technologies with career advice from senior Microsoft executives.

"Good training is important so teachers can help each other and assist the Malawi Learning Partnership team in running the network," says Nielsen.

"Computer maintenance in Malawi is particularly difficult due to an unreliable electricity supply, dust, and high incidents of virus infections. Our training programme aims to help teachers understand how to address problems caused by these conditions in order to be self-sufficient."

Access to new learning tools and ideas

Teachers who attended the networking training were drawn from Blantyre Secondary School, Chichiri, Soche Hill, Ngumbe, St Patrick's, Malamulo, MDF Secondary School, Domasi Institute of Education and Jacaranda Private Orphans.

Scutt says they are excited that the Microsoft team is back to continue the work they did last year.

"By training more teachers to use the network and use technology in the classroom, the schools in Blantyre will be able to integrate much more closely, and more teachers and students gain access to new learning tools and ideas," says Scutt.

Over the next week, the Microsoft volunteers will provide training to 23 teachers from 13 different schools on how to set up their own school IT labs, basic troubleshooting and computer maintenance.

'Opportunity for Action'

These projects are part of Microsoft's global response to bridging the opportunity divide recently highlighted in the 'Opportunity for Action' report released by the International Youth Foundation, which outlines actions to prepare the 1.2 billion global youth entering the 21st century workforce.

Nielsen explained that the CSS team are experienced in a broad range of both Microsoft and non-Microsoft technologies, and by bringing their expertise to Malawi they hope to support the country's National Education Sector Plan to facilitate the adoption of new approaches to teaching and the improvement of teacher training.

MLP launched last year through eight local pilot schools and has since expanded to include a total of eight schools.

Nielsen explained that last year, part of the Customer Service and Support team's work also involved raising funds to deliver 5 000 mosquito nets to families in the region to protect them against malaria.

"This year, the team has started a fundraising campaign to raise money to install 10 new boreholes to provide access to clean water for 2 500 people," he explained.

Microsoft making a difference

He says Microsoft works with its employees around the world to make a difference to communities through its volunteering initiatives, which connect skilled employees to causes they are passionate about.



Marie Da Silva

Microsoft also donated 20 laptops to Jacaranda Foundation in Blantyre which provides free education to 400 orphans. Marie Da Silva, president of the foundation said she was dumfounded with the gesture.

"Last year, Microsoft has been assisting the institution and the initiative has since helped them link up with international schools through Skype and other such facilities," she explained.

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