

knowledge base

Loyiso Nongxa, chairman of the Telkom Foundation, says ICT technologies can help play a crucial role in education. **BY KERRY DIMMER**

As South Africa's twentieth year of democracy draws to a close, there is a sense that companies have begun to really enjoy having corporate social investment (CSI) programmes, and not because they provide platforms to display a social conscience and thereby win the 'ah' vote of customers, but because the true value of CSI effects societal change, and when people see and feel that, the 'ah' factor touches hearts.

Largely the extent of CSI efforts are voluntary, despite regulatory frameworks, and while it may be that the private sector gets most of the publicity, there has been strong participation and engagement by public corporates, such as South Africa's national telecommunications provider, Telkom. Through its Telkom Foundation, established in 1998, the company has spent close to ZAR1 billion on the transformation of disadvantaged communities primarily focused on education, entrepreneurship, and social development programmes, which provide assistance to disaster stricken communities.

Professor Loyiso Nongxa was appointed chairman of the Telkom Foundation in January this year. He, along with other trustees, makes decisions on projects to be funded. One of the projects is the annual National Teachers Awards. Nongxa explains that in partnership with the Department of Basic Education, the focus is to highlight the dedicated and caring teachers that serve the country's learners.

'It is the teacher who can make, and often does, the biggest impact on the quality of education,' he says. 'The investment into teacher development is a critical intervention and studies throughout the world show that the best performing education systems are characterised by teachers who are well-trained and motivated.'

'In South Africa teacher development is an area faced with challenges and we know this just by looking at the STEM (science, technology, English and mathematics) disciplines, which are the core of development. It is in these areas that we have a shortage of qualified teachers, especially in mathematics

and science.' Nongxa emphasises, that with Telkom being primarily an information communication and technology (ICT) business, the foundation is looking at the extent to which ICT technologies can be included in education.

He says that currently teacher training does not expose student teachers to the use of technology in the classroom. 'This needs to be addressed. We must also move away from the perception that providing students with ICT devices is a panacea for improved performance in education.'

'A number of studies show that it's how ICT devices are used, and what is accessed, that is most important, not the type of the device. An example is the Kahn Academy videos that can be accessed by students in South Africa. In most cases these are presented in Americanised accents and may be hard to understand for some students. There is an organisation that translates these videos into African languages and this is the type of effort that the Telkom Foundation would consider worthy to support.'

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PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREAS EBELN/SHUTTERSTOCK

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The Telkom Foundation does not only connect schools to ICT, but ensures that once connectivity is achieved the service becomes valuable to learners and teachers. ‘We want to know a number of things such as what services can be delivered; what educational materials can be offered; where we can source content and so on,’ says Nongxa.

‘We are rather excited about this because it means that rural kids who attend a connected school will not be constrained in terms of learning opportunities. They will be able to find free reading materials that they would otherwise not have access to.

‘Additionally it creates a community of learners that can reach not just across the country, but the continent and globally too, each in support of one another to share knowledge.’

Nongxa says, however, that educational ICT support is not a ‘replacement’ teacher. ‘We need teachers to act as motivators and mediators who provide highly valued and necessary guidance.’

There are currently nine ongoing projects the foundation is supporting for 2014. The board of trustees is currently investigating new projects that could also be supported. With the foundation strongly embracing

the inclusion of technology in education, it has commissioned a desktop study to discover what ICT interventions have been introduced in the past 10 years and in what form – be those computer labs, cellphones, television broadcasts, etc.

‘We are looking for the gaps, and the best practices that we can emulate so that we can enhance our CSI interventions,’ says Nongxa.

The current emphasis of the foundation is on leveraging technology in the projects, be that education, social development or employee volunteerism, the latter of which is a highly valued aspect of Telkom’s CSI.

Telkom employees are encouraged to become a volunteer of the foundation and the concept is simple, but with huge value. The programme focuses on three areas. Firstly, Adopt-a-Project, which is aimed at Telkom executives who choose a project to support, motivate it to the foundation, and claim from a specially earmarked fund to support it.

Secondly, the support of national events. Such volunteering opportunities are organised by the foundation to support organisations during South African national days such as Women’s Day or Youth Day.

The third focus, Giving from the Heart, provides for Telkom employees to contribute

from their salary to their chosen field of community development. Their contribution is matched rand for rand by Telkom.

The reason Nongxa speaks passionately about educational challenges is because he personally experienced the frustration, some 40 years ago, of an education system that failed the majority during apartheid.

What concerns him is that some of those challenges still remain. ‘If one looks at the case of maths and science, it is evident that they remain a challenge. Lack of exposure to these subjects has an impact on career opportunities.’

Nongxa is the former vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand and can speak authoritatively on the positive impact that the Telkom Foundation is making.

‘I recall Telkom providing the university, as did other foundations, with ZAR500 000 over 2006/7 for the Targeting Talent Project, which we established to help identify Grade 10 to 12 students with talent that would probably not have been exposed to opportunities for study at university level.

‘Unless we invest in society, especially in helping to develop the youth, we do our communities a disservice. Institutions like the Telkom Foundation must continue to do what they do best, to help others do their best.’ **AD**