The New Internationalists

David Alan Grier and Erin Dian Dumbacher

Social enterprises flip the motto, “don’t be evil,” and aim to make good.

We can agree that technology has connected continents in mere decades. How citizens and technologists use those connections is another story.

/DAG// At the end of last month, I was at one of those dinners that draw family members together for the consumption of food, the exchange of gossip, and the assessment of recent events. Grown children gather from the distant reaches of the globe and must present their accomplishments at these gatherings so that their elders can judge them.

The center of attention at that evening was Corrine, a new engineer who had started her first job with a large technology firm located in the center of the country. She responded easily to questions from those around her, describing her work, the qualities she appreciated in her new city, and the nature of the relationship with her new young man. Corrine’s life is fine, for now.

Eventually, she “wants to do something international,” although she has yet to define what that international something might be. She expressed no interest in joining an international firm, volunteering for the Peace Corps, or teaching at a Chinese university, as one dinner guest suggested.

As she talked, Corrine suggested that her sense of international work was more significant than just living abroad. She wanted to be involved in activities that cross cultural boundaries and require cooperation among diverse groups of people.

/EDD/ Today, international work involves using social networking tools to follow the news that Kristi has moved to Berlin, Sujeet works in Singapore, or Melanie has a new job in Cameroon. To David’s friend Corrine and our contemporaries, technology is a way to engage new people and ideas—not only to teach but also to learn.

One example is Dave, the director of engineering for a social enterprise. He started his career as a consulting engineer and worked in environments, such as Brazil’s favelas, quite unlike traditional technology firms. He now works for Samasource, a hybrid organization that’s one of the “third sector” alternatives to conventional corporations and nonprofit organizations. Samasource’s business model accepts foundation grants and undertakes projects financed through the market. Many social enterprises are technology firms with nonprofit missions; they flip the motto, “don’t be evil,” and aim to make good.

Task by task, Samasource provides work to those who don’t yet have access to the global market. The company software divides work into segments, serving up images to be tagged and items to be verified. These work segments are distributed to individual workers in Asia and Africa, who complete the tasks and return them for compensation. Like workers in any part of the industrial world, they’re encouraged to accumulate wealth, contribute to their communities, and build their own businesses. That’s Dave’s internationalism.

/DAG// I suspect that Dave and Corrine and their peers might accept the notion that they’re working to “advance technology for society.” However, in their work, technology isn’t a tool that passes from one hand to another. It’s the means for taking someone’s hand, even someone who might live 12,000 miles away, and inviting that individual to an evening of discussion, gossip, and collaboration.

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