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TECH ENTREPRENEURS

WORKING TOWARDS SOCIAL CHANGE

Interview with Eldon Marks, Founding Director of V75 Inc., Social Entrepreneur and Innovator

Could you share your journey as a tech entrepreneur in the Caribbean?

My professional career started as an academic in the Department of Computer Science, at the University of Guyana. Here, I became cognizant of the fact that Guyana was blessed with an abundance of talent but cursed with a grave shortage of deliberate environments to discover, aptly engage and retain our tech talent. It was a seasonal occurrence to witness these bright minds emigrate. I realized that I would have been a similar statistic had it not been for the environment at the University. I was fueled by the will and my civic responsibility to make a difference when I

conceived V75 - a community disguised as a tech company. It was a unique community with the purpose of helping students hone their skills and start their professional journey in tech through knowledge sharing and intrapreneurship. When it was first initiated, other tech entrepreneurs in the local industry asked, "why are you creating your own competition?" My mission was to create an opportunity factory with technology as its great enabler. Many individuals working under this umbrella community grew up professionally within their own ventures with an appreciation for the entity. Instead of competitors, we created collaborators. To date, the V75 community has evolved into a for-profit conversational AI tech company (V75 Inc) with a



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non-profit counterpart (NeXus Hub Inc), focused on youth development through industrial training and job placement within the local tech industry.

Can you share examples of how the private sector collaborated with other sectors with frontier technology to advance social inclusion in the Caribbean?

When the COVID-19 hit our shores, we saw an opportunity to assist in informing the public using our expertise. We created a virtual assistant that allowed individuals to ask questions about the virus and go through a step-by-step diagnosis of symptoms and even get reports on statistics related to the virus. This was launched under the previous administration.

In addition, we had the opportunity to collaborate on the Spark Program, a mass Leadership and AI upskilling program with the Ministry of Education, Government of Guyana, BCS Technology and Jaseci Labs and IDB Lab. We supported the AI track which introduced key machine learning concepts and practical guidance on building AI products with a bleeding-edge AI stack called Jaseci. We were also contributors on the Jaseci OpenSource Project where we helped build the open source ecosystem. This program was successful, and many high school students were given practical exposure to the field and learned how to build their own conversational AI based products.

Our most recently acclaimed public-private partnership was with the Transport and Harbors Department under the Ministry of Public Works, Government of Guyana. We digitized a manual ferry transport system which had been the source of much anguish for commuters and staff. In Guyana, there are many areas where ground transport can only be accessed via ferry. The ferry service has been around for 90 years and has been a first-come-first-served system for commuters. People would line up for hours beforehand to board a particular vessel. Corruption regarding ferry access was also prevalent. Members of the government clearly identified that the mission was to improve lives by reducing waiting times and uncertainty, while addressing inefficiencies in the overall scheduling system. The new digital system and the accompanying change management process was transformational. Commuters now book online and pay electronically in advance.

The system and accompanying processes have brought transparency and fairness to the operation and with these assurances, commuter traffic has increased since its launch.

Our past endeavours have taught us that there is much value in striving for tripartite collaborations, involving the government, the private sector and civil society. Ideally, we should have these entities work together for the betterment of all.

What are the main advantages and challenges as an employer of ICT talent in the Caribbean?

Guyana's unique advantage is that we have an abundance of naturally occurring (raw) talent within our youth population. Our greatest challenge is the availability of environments to effectively help them reach their true potential and retain them. To mitigate the export of our talent, our work focuses on creating opportunities at the industry level. In collaboration with IDB Lab, we conduct tech upskilling programs to prepare youth for industry and then integrate them into the work environment. Guyana has a relatively small population of just over 3/4 of a million people, but a high number of these individuals live on the coast in more developed areas and are more inclined to be assimilated into tech-related jobs.

Additionally, we sit adjacent to developed economies. One of the benefits of operating in a digital industry is that we can connect and work together virtually. Learning from the partnerships with entities of developed economies and connections with surrounding facilities helped us leapfrog in our development.

Guyana's high emigration rate and prevalent skills gap, however, has left low numbers of work-ready individuals that can be hired into tech-related jobs. Since the pandemic, we have faced a new challenge directly related to the Global Resource shortage and the widespread adoption of remote work of tech firms. Some large tech firms have



been aggressively sourcing talent on an individual basis from the global south. While this is great for the contracted individual, it compounds existing challenges faced by smaller tech firms in developing countries. These international firms do not have to face the same rules of the regulatory bodies that local firms face, and they offer high compensation packages. It is typical for an independent consultant to opt out of contributing to the local tax base in countries like Guyana. Ultimately this shift, if left unchecked, has the potential to create a significant negative disruption in developing technology ecosystems and economies. Developing local tech firms, which offer employment opportunities, drive innovation and contribute to the tax base, will be starved of talent while being forced to compete with international rates of pay.

Could you suggest improvements in policy or support from the government to advance the tech industry in the Caribbean?

The tech sector in any developing economy, if properly supported, brings rapid job creation, advancement through digitalization, measurable economic growth and the potential to grow entirely new industries. Three of the top four companies in the world by market cap are technology companies, with Apple leading the way - a company that started in a garage.

Tech brings much sustainable benefits to people and economies. Governments should engineer systems of low resistance to growth-focused technology companies. Starting with access to seed capital, mentorship, tech-oriented educational programmes starting in primary schools but most importantly, intentional programmes to support and encourage the growth of existing technology firms. Without these firms, we will be doomed to continue our export of high-quality talent.

With the hyper-globalization brought on by the pandemic, our recommendation for immediate growth in local tech firms is to have government-backed policies which align developing tech firms with nearshore opportunities, instead of freelancers. From experience, this creates more employment opportunities per engagement, more resources delivered per rate of pay while supporting the growth of local tech ecosystems.

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Eldon Marks has spent almost two decades in the tech field as an academic, practitioner and social entrepreneur.

He has mentored thousands, founded companies, started movements and created empowering opportunities for the next generation of tech innovators in Guyana.