A DIGITAL FUTURE

Lopa Patel
STEMNET Technology Ambassador and Diversity UK founder

STEM IS CRITICAL to the creation of future businesses – Gartner predicts that by 2018, digital businesses will require 50 per cent less business process workers and 500 per cent more key digital business jobs, compared with traditional models. I really do believe that we are standing on the verge of the next big scientific wave – whether this is in robotics, artificial intelligence, advanced materials, biotech, nanotech, 3D or something else!

In 2010, think tank Fast Future released a report and highlighted 20 jobs that we could be doing in the next 20 years. Among them were jobs like nanomedic, vertical farmer, memory augmentation surgeon, narrowcaster and waste data handler! So the reality is that we have to prepare today’s young people for jobs that don’t yet exist.

My role is to promote STEM, particularly technology, by hosting coding workshops, speaking about career paths in IT, developing business strategy, mentoring on tech business pitches, talking to graduates, etc. There is no single route to tech entrepreneurship but the key aim should be to develop skills. The future belongs to those who are highly skilled – whether this is through formal qualifications or by simply making it happen – each person has to learn in their own way.

MINORITY GROUPS UNDERREPRESENTED IN STEM
The future also belongs to businesses with teams that are both highly skilled and diverse. McKinsey analysis shows that companies with more diverse workforces perform better financially: gender diverse and ethnically diverse companies are 15 per cent and 35 per cent more likely to outperform those in the bottom quartile, respectively. Despite the benefits of a diverse workforce, a Race for Opportunity report on ethnic minorities and STEM published in February 2015 revealed that only 13 per cent of the science workforce is women. The conclusion also highlighted that most black and minority ethnic (BAME) students choose medicine as their top choice; there is little social mobility, with the majority of students located at universities in high BAME population areas,
Diversity UK is therefore urging legislators to consider positive discrimination and ethnic only shortlists as a means of correcting this imbalance in the short term. This action, combined with legislation to stop individuals holding more than two public appointments concurrently and preventing incumbents from being reappointed for a combined term exceeding six years, will also help clear pathways for new people to enter the boardroom.

In terms of targets, Diversity UK applauds companies like KPMG who voluntarily publish the gender and ethnic make-up of their employee base and set their own diversity targets. However, legislators should set ethnic and gender targets for the public sector, local government and parliament itself. The Davies review of 25 per cent gender target for FTSE 100 companies is laudable but does little to help ethnic minorities. Diversity UK believes that the UK should adopt the 40 per cent gender target recommended by the EU Commissioner Viviane Reding and should set its own targets for other underrepresented groups like ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals and those with disabilities.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

In addition to her company and STEM ambassador responsibilities, Lopa Patel is also a Non-Executive Director of the Ethnic Minority Business Group (EMBG) – a not-for-profit organisation established in 2005 to promote the interests of the ethnic minority business community in Britain. EMBG has 2,000 business members in London and the South East, a network of 4,000 contacts nationally and links with key government departments and business networks. Her role is to devise a marketing strategy for the organisation and help EMBG take full advantage of digital platforms.

Patel is also a Trustee of Raha International, an educational charity that supports disadvantaged young people into schooling in Kenya and in other programmes in the UK and India. Her key input at Raha is on strategic direction, governance and fundraising having initiated the ‘Kizito Fund’ to support Kizito Ajong Ouma through university.

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