TAKING HEART

Providing digital skills for the underprivileged

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PROVIDING opportunities for underserved communities to bridge the digital divide is a key facet of tech stalwart Microsoft's corporate social responsibility programmes in Singapore.

Speaking to *The Business Times*, Microsoft Singapore's communications & philanthropies lead, Antonia Ong, said: "We believe technology is a powerful force for social and economic inclusion in a rapidly changing world and are working to ensure that opportunities in our rapidly evolving digital economy is accessible to everyone."

Many of these efforts are channelled through its partnership with SPD, a charity organisation in Singapore that works with individuals who have disabilities.

Since 2006 they have equipped over 2,200 beneficiaries with information technology (IT) skills. This include its efforts through the Microsoft Youthspark Scholarship where 29 youths from SPD were given scholarships to pursue IT-related studies at tertiary institutions here since 2009.

In June, the two organisations teamed up with coding academy, Coding Garage, to organise the Microsoft-SPD Coding Quest, where 65 SPD beneficiaries received lessons in web coding and design, and setting up an online store.

At the end of the programme, participants put their skills to the test at the Microsoft-SPD Coding Quest Finals, where they had to set up a fully-operational online store.

The results from the programme have been encouraging.

Ms Ong said: "It was heartening to

Microsoft-SPD Coding Quest mentor guiding a participant through basic HTML, Javascript and CSS coding at a training camp.

know that beneficiaries from the programme scored employment and entrepreneurship wins as a result of participating in the Microsoft-SPD Coding Quest."

This includes Joshua Tseng, a first-year student at Singapore Management University with visual impairment. Through skills picked up in the programme, he was employed by Coding Garage as a research and development intern.

Meanwhile, Heather Wong, a wheelchair-bound student at Kaplan Singapore, used her new skills to build up her online business, which supplies watch straps and door gifts through e-commerce platforms such as Qoo10 and Carousell.

"With her new coding skills, Heather went on to develop her own e-commerce website, which paved the way for increased exposure for her goods beyond local shores and

helped secure her first international deal for her business," Ms Ong said.

Youths with disabilities also participate in other programmes that Microsoft runs, such as the Microsoft Imagine Cup, Code for Change and Digital Maker Programme.

"We also work with our partners to empower youths at risk, youths with disabilities and female youths to enable access to computer science education through initiatives such as Hour of Code, We Tech Care, DigiGirlz and TechFemme."

Through its global Microsoft for Nonprofits Programme, the tech player works with non-profit organisations to realise the value of technology, and how it can help them run their organisations more efficiently.

She said many non-profits have been left behind in the digital revolution that's reshaping business and society.

"As a result, we want to help more non-profits in Singapore and around the world more fully leverage the power of the Cloud."

From July 2017 to June 2018, over 380 non-profits in Singapore have been supported by a programme where Microsoft provided over US$4 million in software donations, a 70 per cent increase from the previous 12 months.

This, Ms Ong said, "signals to us that non-profits understand that technology has the potential to transform how they pursue their missions and drive impact in the community".

Microsoft Singapore employees are currently participating in the Microsoft Give Month, which runs from Sept 20 to Nov 3. Through the initiative, staff can choose to volunteer at charities of their choice or local non-profits that Microsoft has partnered with like the Red Cross, Mercy Relief and the Waterways Watch Society.

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