

From Intention to Action

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As organisations and individuals reassess business-as-usual in a post-pandemic world, the new buzzword is “hybrid”. Unlocking social impact through hybrid organisations and thinking out of the box can help create a more efficient and effective world.

The pandemic has accelerated a radical shift in the way we live and work, and many things that might have been difficult to imagine just two years ago have become the norm. For one, organisations everywhere are embracing hybrid work arrangements like never before, where employees toggle between their homes and the office in a manner that best suits their schedule, working style and personal circumstances.

What began as a practical necessity in a time of isolation has since prompted a fundamental rethinking of what we can accomplish by prioritising flexibility and innovation. Cultural inertia and mental barriers that have long sustained institutional silos are now being torn down, and along the way, we find a timely and significant opportunity to incorporate a more hybrid approach – one that goes beyond conventional boxes and labels – in all that we do.

One increasingly urgent priority that could benefit tremendously from this recalibration is social impact. Today, organisations are

spending considerable resources on areas like environmental, social and governance (ESG) reporting as well as investing. ESG investments are now viewed as key growth drivers and many global CEOs have come forward to spotlight social impact as a top success factor.

However, true societal change takes more than a few choice investments, and ESG goals are not mere vanity metrics to be showcased for reporting purposes only. To drive meaningful and enduring social impact, businesses must identify intentional, long-term impact strategies that champion flexibility and innovation, and the answer may well lie in the hybrid model.

Building a hybrid organisation

Beyond hybrid working arrangements, business leaders can also look to incorporate other hybrid approaches in how they create social impact.

There are numerous models of organisations that seek to integrate impact into their DNA. The sheer diversity of approaches (see box, “Types of Hybrid Organisations”) provides

Types of Hybrid Organisations



Socially conscious business

Many companies today are well on their journey as socially conscious or responsible businesses – for-profit enterprises that are setting aside resources to create a positive impact. These businesses seek to improve society and the environment through ethically and responsibly sourced products. They may also run initiatives like corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, philanthropy, and volunteering efforts. The constraint, however, is that such initiatives can easily fall by the wayside when they are not central to the business and are seen as additional cost centres. At worst, they could end up being seen as lip service or even “greenwashing”.



Social business

On the other end of the spectrum, we have social businesses. According to Nobel Peace Prize laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus who coined the term, these can be defined as businesses whose primary aim is to address a social problem, and remain financially self-sufficient without paying any dividends to their owners. Profitability serves only to ensure the continued viability and sustainability of social impact goals, and any money made is recycled back into its operations.



Inclusive business

There are also inclusive businesses, which provide goods, services and livelihoods on a commercially viable basis to people living at the base of the pyramid. These underserved communities are integrated into the value chain as suppliers, distributors, retailers or customers. As a result, such inclusive businesses help to create income opportunities, supply products to meet basic needs and enhance access to critical infrastructure.



Social enterprise

Social enterprises lie somewhere in the middle. By Singapore Centre for Social Enterprise’s (raiSE) definition, social enterprise members are companies set up with clear social goals and management intent, and a distinct allocation of at least 20 per cent of company resources to fulfil social gaps and needs. With a double bottom-line of generating profits and creating sustained social impact, they provide a blended value proposition that serves as a positive catalyst for social change, with most of their revenue being generated by the provision of goods and services, and where shareholders are given the option to reinvest their profits or take dividends from their earnings.

a useful reference point for identifying what manner of operations would work best for each organisation.

All aboard

The reality is that there is no silver bullet for addressing the diverse challenges in our social ecosystem today. Singapore's social enterprise sector has seen a considerable growth over the last few years, currently standing at S\$179 million in sector size. This is only the beginning.

All businesses must be open to exploring a hybrid approach to tap on synergies, where relevant, and seize the opportunity to strengthen the entire social ecosystem. This allows for their collective social impact to be amplified further.

Corporations looking to take that first step to becoming more socially conscious can build and strengthen partnerships with social enterprises. In Singapore, real-estate and hospitality giants like Marina Bay Sands, Capella and Far East Organization have engaged social enterprise Edible Garden City to build urban gardens on their properties. This initiative provides new opportunities for the organisations' staff to be engaged, and at the same time, maintain a sustainable supply of herbs and vegetables for their business, creating a circular economy.

Others can look towards impact investing, by identifying social enterprises whose solutions are in line with the organisation's operations and core values. For example, the strategic acquisition of social enterprise Jaga-Me by SGX-listed Alliance Healthcare Group in January 2020 enabled the healthcare provider to leverage Jaga-Me's mobile medical homecare capabilities and scalable digital platform to support their operations.

The way forward

Embracing a hybrid mode can prove to be a game-changer for businesses looking to create lasting social impact in our world, wherever they may be in their journey.

The social enterprise model presents an achievable, step-by-step process to guide companies in their transition to a hybrid organisation. After all, social enterprises are just like any businesses. They exist to provide meaningful solutions to solve their customers' problems while running in a viable manner.

Small and medium enterprises contribute to nearly half of Singapore's gross domestic product, and employ close to 70 per cent of the local workforce. There is therefore a huge underlying opportunity for more of such local businesses to achieve a win-win situation in terms of boosting profit and amplifying their social impact through the social enterprise model.

Business leaders can start by assessing how their operational models can create sustained impact in their communities. From new areas of innovation to implementing inclusive hiring practices, small building blocks like these can serve as intermediate steps towards a more significant target.

As Singapore charts its way forward in the future of work and adopts hybrid working arrangements, so must organisations look to new business models and ways of working to amplify positive impact in the long run.

It could take two, five, or even 10 years; but the possibility of reaching a stage where every enterprise is a social enterprise is an achievable goal. ■