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How a Hi-Tech Company Can Engage in K-12 Education

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Any hi-tech company worth its mettle has a soft spot for the next generation, the kids in the school education system (“K-12”). Helping these along is a good thing on many levels, from assisting future recruiting to public relations. However, not everything you do in this domain will work out well; you need to be careful how you approach K-12 engagement.

Over the years I’ve been involved in K-12 programs in numerous ways, from when I took charge of creating Intel’s college relations activity in Israel in the early 90’s, through personal action in specific K-12 programs after moving on to IT, and even now as a consultant, through my work with youth science museums on their industry programs. It was, I must say, one of the most gratifying areas I’ve worked in. In this article I share some thoughts on how a hi-tech company can optimize its activity in this tricky space.

Why you might want to engage in K-12

This may seem a rhetorical question, but there are many potential reasons to do a K-12 engagement, and you do need to explicitly articulate why you’re doing this – which reasons matter to your particular organization, and which don’t. Your K-12 program could serve any of the following goals:

- Encourage more kids to study the math and science that so many of them shy away from, thereby nurturing science and engineering literacy in the nation. This will, of course, serve to enlarge your future hiring candidate pool. It will also make the community – or the country at large – a better place for your industry to operate in.
- Give the brightest kids – those who already have a Summa Cum Laude science degree in their future – an extra boost in science beyond what the school normally provides. The long term impact on their mindset and career choices can be significant.
- Expose the public – pupils, parents, and teachers – to what your company makes, how you make it, why it’s good for the community, and any other messages you want to get out there. This is also a future investment – who knows which of these kids may end up the Minister of Industry...
- Be perceived as contributing to the community (“giving back”), in a way that most people strongly resonate with – a.k.a. Public Relations, of course.
- Last but definitely not least – contribute to your employees’ personal development and well-being by involving them in this challenging, enriching, and fun field of activity.

Note that although the cynics may say this is all selfish PR, the truth is that for many companies, the better ones for sure, it goes far beyond the business return; it is a matter of personal and company values, where the company and its people really care about educating and helping children to become better people. This certainly is the case with Intel, and it certainly is so with me.

Guiding principles you should consider adopting

Here are some principles I strongly advocate you consider adopting as you design an education engagement program. In my experience, they lead to better outcomes for everybody.

- **Donate people before donating money.** Whatever educational effort you support, your employees should take part in it in person. Once that is established, giving funding is fine; but disbursing money without the personal involvement is missing a huge opportunity. When your employees are involved, they find fulfillment, acquire new skills and experiences, and become happier, better rounded persons. They can also enrich their education partners by sharing their valuable perspective as hi-tech employees. Your people, whether they're technologists or support people, can engage with schools as coaches, mentors, or assistant teachers; they can guide visiting school groups and lecture at the schools; they can accompany special projects of every kind. Let them do it!
- **Engage the school people,** both teachers and administrators. Talk to them as you design whatever program you're planning, and listen to their suggestions. In addition to learning a lot, you'll create friendships and cement alliances (and believe me, you'll need both).
- **Build for replication.** Prioritize programs that are scalable to wider scope and easily copied and replicated to more schools, to more volunteers within your company, and to other companies. This is one area where, if you have your corporate heart in the right place, you need not fear the competition; the more companies donate time and money, the more kids are served and the better the outcome for everyone. A program you create that others copy is pure leverage!
- **Aim to lead.** Whenever you join existing programs that meet your criteria, don't be a passive follower – work with the program's management to improve, proliferate, and drive it to new heights. Partner with them as equals, and before long you'll find your company influencing the program and increasing its impact.
- **Diversify.** Have a "portfolio" of different K-12 engagement options on hand so that each employee that is willing to volunteer can find something that matches their available time, skills and inclinations.
- **Encourage and reward.** Build the management support that will leave no employee in doubt that investing time and effort in improving education is seen by senior and middle management as a worthy activity. And be sure to reward your volunteers with recognition, including (especially) in their performance reviews.

Things you can do

To get your thinking going, here are some of the things a company can do vis a vis K-12 (and you can do a lot more – [drop me a line](#) if you're doing something particularly interesting!):

- Send your employees to lecture in schools about your technology and your company. Make sure you assign to this people who have the talent to engage a school age audience.
- Give money and resources to large-scale education programs in your community. If you're a sizable company you can start one of your own, but you will find there are many existing programs you can integrate with, run by non-profits, by industry associations and by other

companies. You want to take care to ensure you choose one(s) that are sensible, well-managed, and a good match to your values and to what your employees can add value to.

- Collaborate with youth-oriented science museums in your vicinity. Most of these are adept at creating the sort of exhibits that can showcase your technology (and the science behind it), and will welcome your people's involvement as well as your funding.
- Host visits by school groups at your plant (but see the caveat below – don't do this unless you're set up to make it work!).
- Send your engineers to teach. This was the most audacious program we had at Intel; we sent volunteering engineers to serve as assistant teachers in schools, after giving them a serious training course, approved by the education system, on how to do it.
- Host a "Summer Camp" for talented highschool kids, where they'd get a hands-on experience of what you do in your company. This can be a major effort, and I haven't seen it done with K-12 (though I had done it for college students). The impact on a budding geek can last a lifetime.
- Encourage, fund, and replicate grassroots employee initiatives. This is in addition to initiatives you define top down: employees in the tech sector are usually the kind that will do their own volunteer work in their own children's schools, and you want to know and support some of what they do. Some companies actually match employee initiatives, as in assigning some modest sum to the schools involved; some encourage employees to submit ideas for the company to drive. You could even hold an idea contest and fund the best ideas, replicating them to more schools.
- Involve university students. If you have a college relations program that engages students, you can call on them to work with schools as mentors and tutors for pupils. You could, for example, offer students in your scientific field grants that require recipients to volunteer some time in the K-12 program you support.
- Help teachers. Teachers are incredible people who work very hard in difficult conditions; if you figure how to help them with resources, equipment, and knowledge, they can become your long term partners.
- Work to change the curriculum taught at schools, in order to give better education that is also suited to your future hiring requirements.
- Provide an online resource center for school kids, with content that can help them in their studies – for example, materials for creating science projects. (By now you know I'll say this should be done in addition to, not instead of, actual face to face involvement.)

Challenges and caveats

Here are some tips that will help you navigate safely:

- **Decide which segment of the school population you will target**

You can define programs to help all sorts of pupil populations: low-income, gifted, at-risk, science-oriented, special-needs, etc. etc. Then you can choose to work with all K–12, or with K-8 (elementary school), or with high schools only. You can even decide to focus on teacher colleges, helping train better teachers and leaving the kids to them. You can work at a national or local

level, and with one school, or a few, or many. You need to decide – up front and firmly – and focus your resources accordingly.

- **Learn to work with the education administration**

No matter what you do, you will need the blessing of the state education authorities, as well as of school management. As one who has been there many times, I caution you: be aware that these represent a whole different work culture than what you probably have in your company. To craft a proper collaboration you will need to tread carefully – to learn, with humility, how things work in the education system, and to keep an open mind as you interact with all the stakeholders.

- **Don't host schoolchildren if you can't show them amazing stuff**

Children are a demanding audience. Bringing them into your company will be a let-down if all they see is a PR movie. Before you do it you should have a proper visitor center and a well-designed visitor experience that will give them a *Wow!* (and today's kids aren't easily wowed, with all the flood of stimulation they wade through daily). One solution I recommend is to include a real production line (or equivalent) tour, where [real things](#) not normally seen are witnessed up close. Similarly, try to hand out to visitors interesting things they can cherish and show off to their friends: real mid-production samples are best, since they can't be obtained outside.

- **Train your volunteers how to deal with kids effectively**

Having exhorted you to involve your employees in direct contact with kids, you must make sure they know how to do that. Work with the target schools to develop a short training program that will impart the right classroom or tutoring skills. As a byproduct, your employees will learn valuable human skills!

- **Size doesn't matter**

If you're a giant multinational you probably have millions earmarked for K-12 activity... but what if you aren't? No problem: K-12 programs can come in all sizes, from global competitions to working with a single local school a few hours a week. No matter how small your budget, you can always find something to do, and it will always benefit both the school and your own people. What's more, you can join (or create) consortia and alliances with other companies in your field or in your geography. If funds are scarce, pooling resources will allow you to do a lot more.

- **Tying it all together**

A K-12 program is a serious and complex business, and needs to be managed as such. In a large company you'll have a whole group assigned to this, but in a small one you still need an owner – and this must be a serious person who can innovate, negotiate, inspire, and lead. Meanwhile senior management must charter the program, approve its strategy and review progress regularly.

Concluding thoughts

Perhaps a key thing to keep in mind is that as a hi-tech enterprise, you bring to the table tremendous value. You have smart people, you have mission orientation, you have an entire culture geared to making things happen in the face of challenging problems. You can really help educators and their pupils, to the benefit of society and of your future. Don't be shy, because in this, you really matter!

As to what to do, it's your call, and every little thing helps, but here is my view:

- Giving money to some program and calling it a day – Meh.
- Giving money to an employee to use in a program she'd initiated at her son's school – Good.
- Insisting the employee document what she's done so it can be replicated by others – Better.
- Creating a program where many employees in your company and in others take the documented process and proliferate it to many schools – Best!

And remember: this is not all, perhaps not even primarily, about the technology. You're interacting with young people in their formative years; what you do can and should improve their general critical thinking, their character, and their self-image. Your employees that do the interaction should provide a positive role model and infect the kids with their love for science, technology, and initiative. It's a great responsibility!

If you wish to exchange views on all this, [I'm at your service](#).

Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness for 18 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

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