COGNIZANT OUTREACH:
NETWORKING FOR GOOD

By Pratibha Kurnool, Lead for APAC and Technology Partnerships for Social Impact, Cognizant & Padmasini Dayananda, Global Head of Outreach – ESG, Cognizant

Photo: Cognizant Community Cafe

The unspoken power of corporate volunteering programs is its potential to be a force multiplier of social impact while building strong and meaningful relationships with critical stakeholder networks – both internal and external. Additionally, networks can play a crucial role in bringing in a systems thinking approach to our volunteering programs. The issues we face today, no doubt exacerbated by the pandemic, are better addressed when we go beyond addressing symptoms, to finding the source and innovating for solutions that usher in sustainable system-level changes.

Internal networks include employee interest groups, business units, corporate functions while external networks include clients, vendors, business partners, governments, industry associations, civic society, non-profit partnerships, to name a few.

More than a feel-good factor

Harnessing the power and impact of networks through volunteering is an art to be refined. Many organizations are still hesitant to reach out to get their network involved – beyond the gala fund-raisers or invites to charity golf. From our experience in strategizing for and executing collaborative impact, hesitancy stems from a few key reasons:

▶ Corporate Volunteering still largely considered an employee-engagement initiative, not so much a vehicle for corporate social impact

▶ Volunteer managers fear of acceding control to external stakeholders

▶ Management is wary of the heavy investment of time and effort in aligning stakeholders

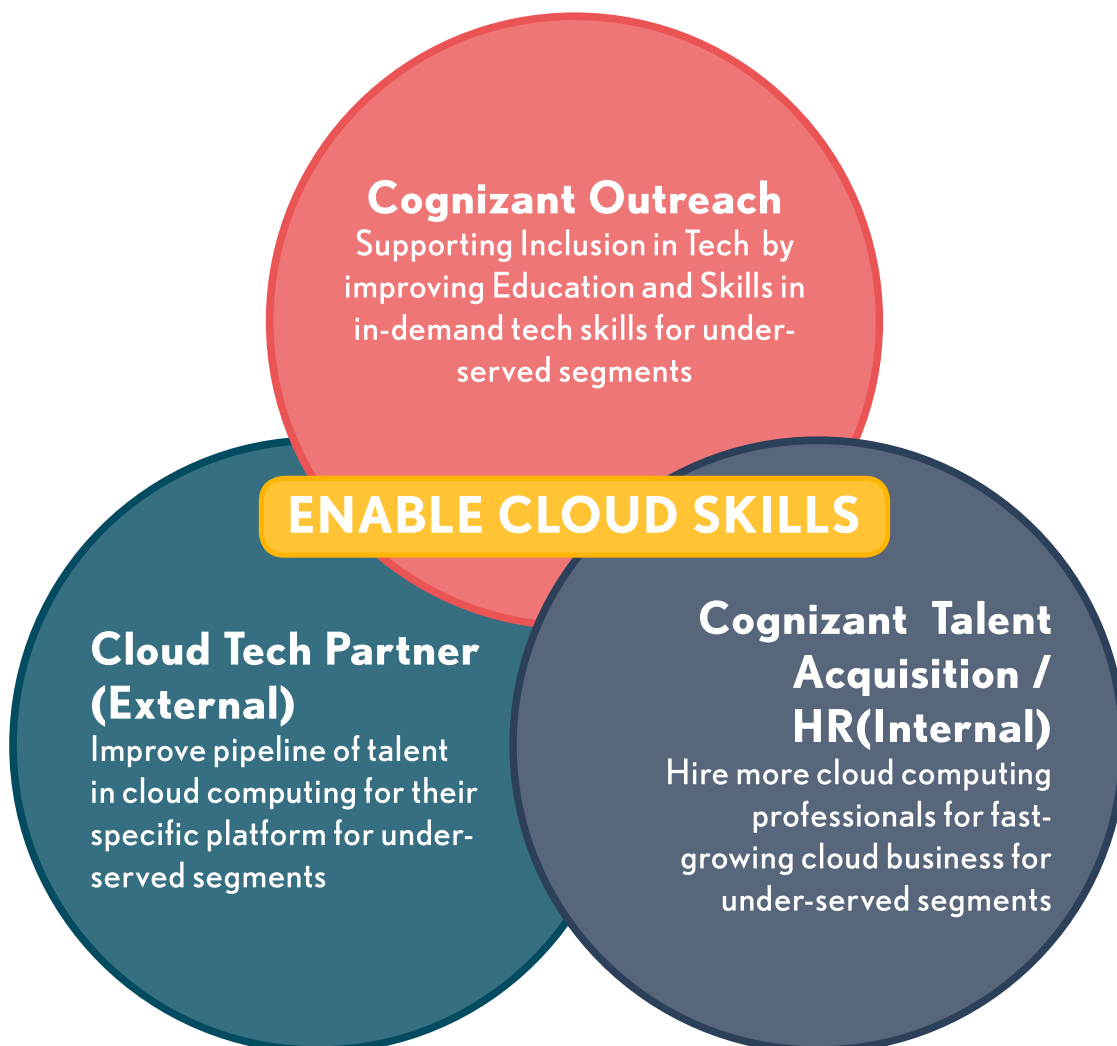Photo: Salesforce Panel on Improving Everyday Life with Salesforce

▶ Fears of a slow and rocky road; need for speed

Indeed, all the above are valid concerns. If one gets serious about collaborative impact, it is important to define the guiding principles driven by the desired outcomes, and to ask a few hard questions:

▶ How can we engage our networks in more meaningful ways?

▶ How can we leverage our networks to address long-term strategic priorities?

▶ How can we adopt a systems thinking approach to create long term value?

▶ Interestingly, collaborating partners need not always share the same goals, but must address complementary constituents of a shared purpose.

For example, at Outreach we collaborate internally (with our Talent Acquisition Teams) and externally (with our strategic technology cloud partners) to volunteer for hackathons which helps youth gain in-demand cloud skills with an added opportunity to be hired by us. Let's see how our shared purpose (enabling cloud skills) is addressed through complementary network goals.

Cognizant Outreach
Supporting Inclusion in Tech by improving Education and Skills in in-demand tech skills for under-served segments

ENABLE CLOUD SKILLS

Cloud Tech Partner (External)
Improve pipeline of talent in cloud computing for their specific platform for under-served segments

Cognizant Talent Acquisition / HR(Internal)
Hire more cloud computing professionals for fast-growing cloud business for under-served segments

The Cognizant Way

At Cognizant, our social strategy stems from our corporate purpose, our "why", which is – **to engineer modern businesses to improve everyday life**. Cognizant Outreach – ESG, has been an enabler of social impact through employee volunteering for the last 13 years, enabling over 200,000 employees to volunteer globally.

Outreach – ESG strategy aims to improve everyday life by supporting inclusion in tech and increasing community impact across five thematic areas that tie-in with organizational purpose – Digital Education, Digital Skilling, Digital Empowerment of Non-profits and charities, Environmental Stewardship, and nurturing employee passion.

Our initial collaborative experiences by including internal networks connected to varied business functions - HR to government affairs, from Sales and Marketing to Learning and Development-showed value and promise. This led us to believe that we could truly harness the power of people from our extended networks to amplify the RoI (return on investment) of time and money.

Our all-powerful **"why"**, had to find and address our networks' shared purpose, while also serving a common social vision.

Impact-led network inclusion strategy

Tapping into our networks also called for establishing strong internal partnerships with departments that own these networks. When there is strong internal alignment on the outcomes from involving the external networks, the benefits of involving a network can be truly and fully tapped.

We looked at each of our external networks as an invaluable opportunity to bring our vision to life. The common denominator that drives all our networks is the connection with purpose. In our experience, volunteering provides the most tangible and meaningful way to involve our networks.

Our volunteering strategy clearly articulates the impact we seek to have, in three defined areas. (Refer Table 1: Network Inclusion Strategy) Impact therefore becomes our North Start to guide us on "why include our networks?". Aligning with impact goals addresses this and further provides clarity on "which" networks we need to invest in.

The table on the following page provides insights into how Cognizant looked at our network inclusion strategy by viewing it from the lens of the network's ability to contribute significantly to our three areas of impact.

Table 1: Network inclusion strategy

	Social	Reputational	Business
Impact	The scale of impact we seek to achieve in each focus area	The extent to which Outreach - ESG can positively influence Cognizant's reputation as a responsible corporate citizen amongst our most critical stakeholders	The extent to which our volunteer programs impact the business positively, in the context of our strategic priorities
Alignment with Networks "Why"	**To complement impact goals, impact communities at scale**	**To further reputation in strategic markets, among business-critical stakeholders**	**To address strategic priorities**
Value from Networks "Which"	Networks that share our social goals and can complement our efforts - by providing resources, tools, or platforms to achieve improved impact at scale	Networks that offer distinct and unique opportunities to significantly influence our reputation favourably among our most critical stakeholders	Networks where collaborative impact is likely to provide us with collateral business benefits by addressing strategic priorities

Articulated impact goals helped us to create a network-wide implementation strategy and execution framework.   Thanks to this framework, we have been able to reach out to specific networks where volunteering collaborations are delivering win-win-win outcomes – for our communities, for our partners and for Cognizant.
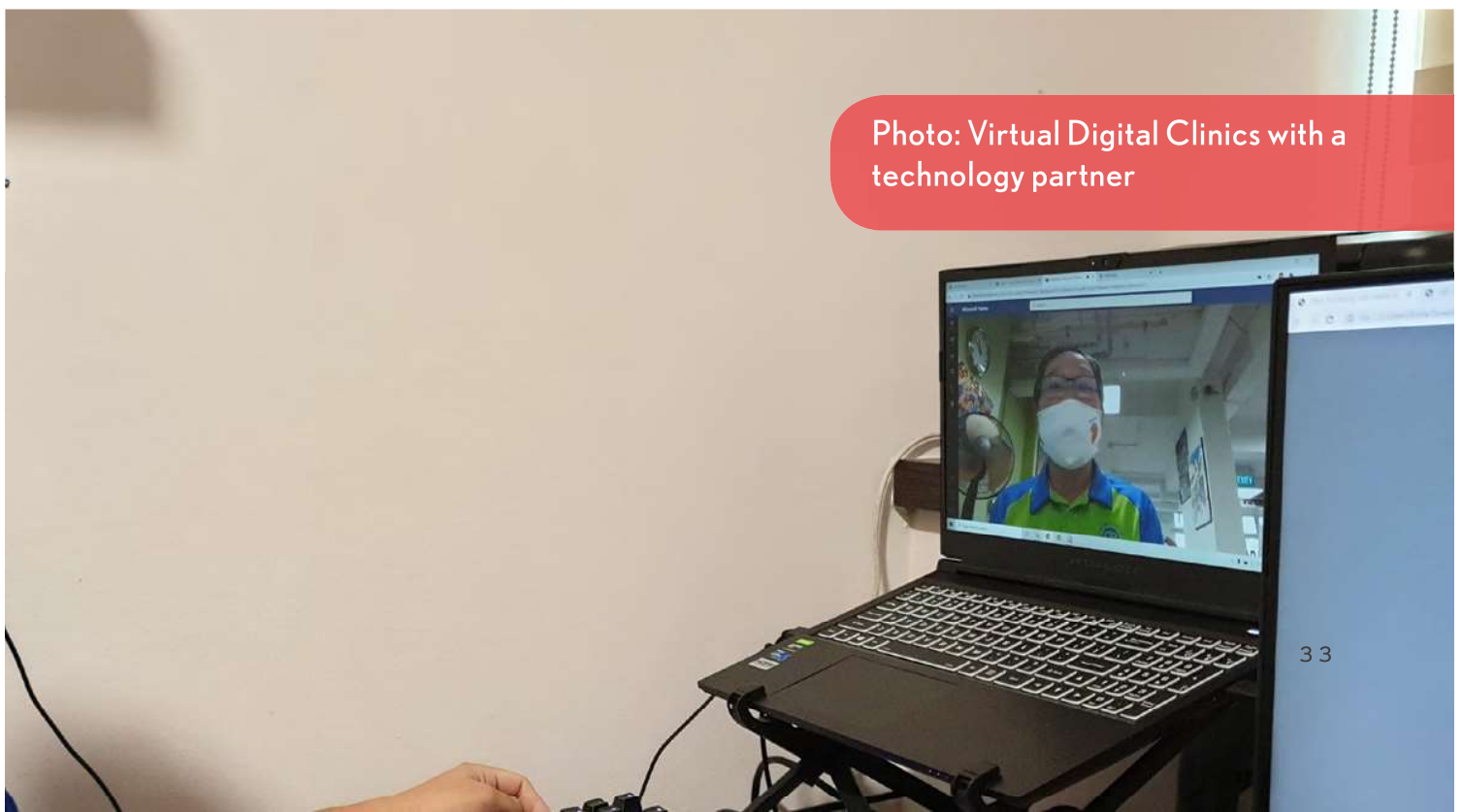

Photo: Virtual Digital Clinics with a technology partner

Table 2: Engaging networks with Outreach - Framework in Action		
Social	**Reputational**	**Business**
Outreach – ESG driven networks that provide us the platform and scale to execute our programs *Which networks can help to engage volunteers, execute programs at scale?*	Where do we need to improve our reputation? Among which stakeholders, in which market? *Which network can give enable positive reputational impact?*	What are my organization's strategic business priorities? Who are the major influencers? *What are the synergies with these networks?*
Beneficiary network for each thematic area: 1. **Schools** 2. **NGOs/Charities** 3. **Cause-based NGO networks** 4. **Colleges, Universities** 5. **Community organizations supporting diversity and inclusion** 6. **Public sector/ government agencies**	**Positive reputation:** 1. **For hiring new talent:** Talent marketplace, especially fresh and diverse talent from universities, learning organizations 2. **For license to operate:** Government agencies, government – corporate affairs in local strategic markets 3. **For business wins:** Current and potential customers (G2000 companies) and our largest strategic partnerships	Clients, strategic technology partners, inorganic growth vehicles (acquisitions) are the networks most critical to business growth. **Synergies:** Commonality of social purpose (cause, beneficiary type, market) 4. Resource augmentation (Additional resources that multiply social impact)
Example for scale *Tapping into a global network of NGOs to execute a globally relevant volunteering program that connects global humanitarian NGOs with skilled volunteers from 35 countries*	*Example for reputation* *Collaborating with universities and youth skilling organizations to improve career readiness of youth through a unique experiential bootcamp, involving clients and technology partners, leading to improved reputation in the youth talent marketplace as an employer of choice*	*Example for business impact* *Collaborating with a major cloud technology partner to run a nation-wide campaign with a national skilling agency to volunteer together for improving digital adoption among senior citizens, leading to business wins enabled by stronger relationships*

When partners come together for good, great things happen!

To summarize, volunteering programs that involve networks - internal and external – have the potential to strengthen partnerships, infuse them with meaning and purpose by driving tangible change in communities. Done correctly, this can only accelerate the good work leading to gains for all and undoubtedly contribute to UN SDG 17 – Partnerships that will drive sustainable development. Indeed, from our experience at Cognizant in driving impact within our networks, we are happy to paraphrase the familiar adage to *"organizations that volunteer together, thrive together!"*. ∎