This is how you make tech inclusive: Interview with Kwaku Dapaah from YSYS

Kwaku Dapaah is a programme manager at YSYS, a startup community connecting diverse people with opportunities in the world of tech. We spoke to Kwaku about the barriers, the solutions - including FoundersDoor, the programme he oversees - and the excuses that just won't float.

Temps de lecture : minute

1 December 2020

It's impossible to deny that tech has a diversity problem – one that it will make ethical and business sense to solve as tech emerges as one of the fastest growing sectors of the UK economy. Only 15% in the industry are from BAME backgrounds, and only 19% are women. An underline early November report underline from Extend Ventures indicated that, while the UK's population is 14% BAME, this group only received 1.7% of venture capital investment in the decade leading up to 2019.

"There's a big pie, but people from diverse backgrounds are only seeing a small slice of it - despite the pie growing year on year," says Kwaku Dapaah, the social mobility expert turned entrepreneur and entrepreneur advisor I'm speaking to. "It's actually growing three to four times more than the UK economy as a whole", he adds. Kwaku works at YSYS, a startup community formed with the explicit purpose of giving underrepresented groups a big slice of that tasty tech pie.

Specifically, YSYS runs accelerator programmes and a jobs board, hosts events, and coaches companies (from LinkedIn to Google to the *Financial*

Times) – all in pursuit of 1. Getting "more diverse people into careers in tech" and 2. Figuring out "how we can give diverse people more support when it comes to creating startups".

Why are people getting left behind by the wider tech community? How are the problems unique from those in other more traditional careers, like law, investment banking and so on? I ask Kwaku.

"One of the key distinctions between the tech sector and other corporate sectors is that [the latter] tend to have quite structured entry routes. You might take part in an internship and then you apply for the grad scheme. Whereas, the tech sector is a lot more informal in how you get involved in it. You have people that may have taught themselves to code, before attending some sort of event and networking and managing to join a company."

"There's less of a clear cut route into that sector - there's a lot more resting on who your network is. When you're from a background that is underrepresented in that sector, there's that disadvantage of not having someone who can get you through the door. Whereas with the other sectors, there's that one entry point. The problem is more to do with the potential lack of soft skills that can get you into that area."

If you teach yourself to code, as many do, or participate in a programme like Code First Girls - which has a community of over 20K and works with 50+ companies - you instantly differentiate yourself within the jobs market. In that sense, digital skills can certainly erode social barriers. But, as Kwaku stresses, things get significantly trickier when it comes to the risk you take on as a founder, and the need for a financially supportive network.

> *"For founders, one of the key barriers is access to capital. One reason being - and I don't want to make a generalisation - I think there's a close intersection between social class or socioeconomic background and race."*

"Typically, if you have a Black founder from Birmingham or something, they're less likely to be able to raise money through a family and friends round, because they're not going to be able to give them £10K to get that first pre-seed funding."

"And again, the way VC works is very much through warm introductions, and if your network doesn't include people from diverse backgrounds, you're less likely to engage with them in the first place."

At YSYS, Kwaku works to recreate that network and those warm introductions for those that want to take the startup plunge. And what YSYS does works: in recent months, it has partnered with Create Jobs and the Mayor Of London to deliver a six-week training programme for young people, and launched the FoundersDoor Investor Lounge with Innovate UK - where diverse founders were able to build relationships with investors including Atomico and Salesforce Ventures. Members of its community have launched a pop-up shop to support diverse creators and one has even published a book.

Kwaku's project FoundersDoor, which started off as a pre-accelerator programme for first-time founders and is now a startup incubator, has now seen around 50 founders graduate - "some of whom have gone on to get further investment".

The participants' "first touchpoint into the world of tech was through us

and now they're making progress and have been onboarded onto our wider community, and have been able to use our network to make further progress and get mentors."

Seeing the tangible success YSYS is having through passion, strategy and a commitment to personal engagement makes it easy to spot 'diversity strategies' orchestrated for PR purposes. These range from "paying lip service, relying on the status quo" to "on the startup side, warm intros for potential startups to invest in" and "on the careers side, not being

proactive in engaging with diverse talent."

"It's about doing more than just writing 'open to all' in the job description," Kwaku says - suggesting that representation in comms and imagery, funding and engaging with the right organisations, and focusing on retention as well as hiring, are crucial.

Not only are half-hearted diversity strategies unacceptable from an equality point of view – they also don't make business sense. As *Maddyness* previously reported, employee-led innovation increases by 83% in organisations that are perceived to committed to diversity – and problems get solved faster. "There's a tendency for corporates in particular to think of diversity as a 'nice to have' or even to some extent a charitable cause. For a lot of people, particularly in a capitalist society, it needs to make business sense to really invest in it," elaborates Kwaku.

"More recently, probably in the last five years, studies have been done showing that if you have a more diverse executive or management team, you see higher revenues… Because when you have more perspectives - female, ethnic minority, different social classes - innovation is more likely to occur because you don't all have the same point of view, like what emerges when you have typically white middle class men working in an organisation and making executive decisions."

> *"Particularly in tech, where growth is fully based on innovation, compared to some other sectors, it makes sense to put the time, money and effort into increasing diversity and inclusion in your workspaces."*

Looking to the future, YSYS's aim is to connect 100K diverse people to opportunities in tech within the next three years. It's "a very, very ambitious goal" - but one that COVID-induced virtual life has actually facilitated. A remote offering from YSYS will mean the organisation can reach 500 rather than 50 people at a time, and Kwaku now spends much of his time about how he can make YSYS programmes scaleable. For example, the FoundersDoor Library, due to launch next year, will see previously generated resources made available to pretty much everyone.

Scalability is hardly a bad thing to be thinking about - many are more concerned with scaling down operations at the moment - and a sure sign that YSYS's network, founders, and impact on the tech ecosystem will proliferate in 2021 and beyond.

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