

Rapido Social democratises technology to support the social good community

1. Summary of Impact

Organisations which support important social causes often rely on limited funding and donations to operate. As such, they have limited financial resources to invest in the technological tools and software which are critical for most enterprises to run efficiently.

UTS Rapido Social was established to deliver hardware and software solutions on a pro-bono basis in order to support these social enterprises and the important work they do.

2. The Problem

Technology and mobile tools are essential for most enterprises operating in Australia today. However, access to people who can provide, develop and maintain such tools is generally dictated by the capital and income of the business.

Unsurprisingly, many social enterprises and not-for-profit organisations who rely on donations as their main source of funding are unable to employ people who have the skills needed to develop technology, and have very limited possibilities to invest in external entities to help them.

Yet, something as simple as a mobile app could be instrumental in increasing efficiency and productivity, and they could also better support analytics which can improve reporting to funders and donors.

Despite the pressing need for technology development in this sector, the many existing tech companies are often driven by commercial interests and are unable to provide pro-bono work as part of their business model.

3. Beneficiaries

Rapido Social is dedicated to assisting and supporting social enterprises in Australia. Their pro-bono work benefits companies who have a social impact vision and are dedicated to community services.

By serving these organisations, Rapido Social is ultimately helping those people who are in need of these support services.

4. Approach to impact

UTS Rapido Social was proposed as a sub-unit of its head company, UTS Rapido, in response to the lack of technology support for social enterprises.

Rapido was first established as a rapid prototyping unit in the UTS Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT) to help a range of external partners in industry, government and not-for-profit translate ideas and problems into viable products and solutions. Since its inception, it has grown into an advanced technology development unit focused on supporting organisations to deliver hardware and software solutions.

Within its first year of operation, Rapido was approached by a number of social enterprises who were in need of technology support, including Fast Track Confidence, the Thomas Kelly Youth Foundation and Ability Mate & Northcott Innovation. Most of these enterprises were in need of simple solutions like mobile apps, however some issues required more complex solutions as well.

Rapido Director, Hervé Harvard, realised that although addressing the needs of social enterprises has always been a key vision for his unit, it was difficult to help organisations with no funds to spare.

The desire to continue and expand pro-bono technology development services for social enterprises sparked the creation of sub-unit Rapido Social, which is now entirely dedicated to social enterprises, regardless of their financial standing.

All Rapido Social activities are delivered on a pro-bono basis. This was particularly important to Mr Harvard who wanted his software engineering team to simply be able to help organisations who contribute to the public good, even if they had no funding to pay.

After an almost year-long process to get financial support and staff, Rapido Social is now actively engaging with the social good community from UTS and externally. The team is currently providing end-to-end technology development services, including maintenance, and simple but vital technology solutions such as apps.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

The first major outcome of Mr Harvard's social impact work is the creation Rapido Social itself as an expansion of the Rapido unit. This process took almost a year, and has only recently been finalised. Mr Harvard is now in the process of staffing this sub-unit with dedicated engineers and someone to manage the day-to-day engagement with the social good community.

However, even prior the establishment of the new unit, the existing Rapido team has been able to assist social enterprises over the past year. One of the key outcomes is the delivery a number of mobile apps to the social enterprises that have approached the team, at no cost to the organisations.

5.2. Impact

Mr Harvard considers Rapido's role as the key link between the technology industry and the organisations which support important public causes.

The services which have already been provided are the first steps towards the bigger desired impact, which is democratising the access to technology especially for those community organisations who may not have the financial means to develop it. He firmly believes that better tools and technology can enable Rapido's partner social enterprises to make a greater impact in the cause they are supporting.

Mr Harvard would also like to be able to expand the unit's engineering services beyond apps and simpler solutions, and include more advanced services such as analytics or research projects. For instance, research into the use of data science for detecting the risk of suicide combined with the commercialisation skills of Rapido Social could allow organisations such as the Thomas Kelly Youth Foundation to make a greater impact in the area of suicide prevention and harmful behaviour associated with alcohol abuse.

A goal is also to be able to provide ongoing maintenance to those companies because technology is constantly evolving and adjusting.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

The unit leverages the contributions of UTS Rapido staff, FEIT students and the UTS IT infrastructure to make this work possible. According to Mr Harvard, it is important that qualified and experienced staff work alongside students to provide a high-quality service.

With almost two decades' experience in computer science and software engineering, Mr Harvard is well-placed to provide technical and strategic guidance within the unit. Most importantly, he is driven by underlying social values which have directed him away from commercial entities and towards more socially-oriented endeavours.

He believes that this culture and vision runs through his team, who are all motivated by the desire to give back to society through their skills in IT and engineering.

6.2. External enabling factors

Rapido Social is supported through funding from UTS and its head unit Rapido. Mr Harvard is now looking for additional industry sponsors and philanthropic organisations that will support its ongoing operations and growth.

7. Challenges

According to Mr Harvard, no company or unit can successfully run with a vision of decline, and even a pro-bono operation inevitably needs funding and growth to operate and pay its staff.

Striking the balance between commercial viability and pro-bono work is thus a key priority to continue this important work.

A critical strategy to achieve this is to keep staff separate when it comes to working on commercial and pro-bono projects. Mr Harvard explains that blurring these lines can lead to an increased focus on commercial projects that yield income, and as such undermine and delay projects that benefit social enterprises who are receiving pro-bono services.

As such, although the team collaborates, staff are discouraged from working across both entities at the same time to ensure that every client gets the same amount of attention and resources.

8. References

<https://rapido.uts.edu.au/>