How Can We Build MENA's Next Generation Classrooms?

The Middle East and Africa is undergoing a massive digital transformation journey. Both public and private sectors across the region are exploring ways of doing more with less; of diversifying oil-rich economies; and taking advantage of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to build the next generation of workforce.

But while impressive progress has been made, skills gaps remain in key areas. Cloud, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things and other technologies have a shortage of professionals trained to exploit them properly. And so, we look to the field of education for answers. We call upon educators to supply us with the next generation of technological innovators.

Technology companies also have a part to play. We must support educators as they shape our future workforce. In recent years, we have seen how softer skills are in demand, and how millennials and other digital natives need more social, collaborative methods of study to be able to master these requirements and gain the much-needed skills required in future-jobs. Technology can help to create collaborative learning environments in order to achieve such ends.

As the economies that young people will join become more and more digital, it makes more sense than ever to bring the right technologies into the classroom and drive better learning outcomes. Educators need to be given the ability to make lessons come to life – to inspire students to develop not only STEM and language skills, but to guide them towards honing leadership qualities, collaboration attributes, empathic tendencies and other subtle arts that will be vital for the future workplace.

Building a change culture has been identified as the biggest challenge by education leaders in the MEA region in recent surveys; and providing students with the skills they require for the unknown future of the labor market was seen as a major determinant for success. The importance of social learning cannot be overstated. It continually emerges as a source of concern among teachers and employers. And those institutions and technology companies that have introduced more social interaction in the classroom have discovered that it can go a long way towards deepening students' understanding of concepts being taught, as well as helping to build their own soft skills.

In March this year, Microsoft and The Economist Intelligence Unit released new data exploring how education professionals prioritized and approached student well-being. When surveying more than 750 education professionals across 15 countries, we found that 80% of educators believe positive emotions are critical for academic success, while 70% say that emotional well-being has grown to be more important for K-12 students since they began their careers in education.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution poses challenges to societies everywhere. At the heart of

these issues lies one burning question: how do we prepare the next generation to live, work and lead in a global digital economy? Various regional initiatives such as One Million Arab Coders, MADRASA, P@SHA, ANDESA, Hour Of code and AI Summer camps, are empowering today's students and youth to achieve more, tomorrow.

Accessibility and inclusion in technology is also an area to focus on, because we believe there are no limits to what people can achieve when technology reflects the diversity of everyone who uses it. Transparency, accountability and inclusion aren't just built into our culture at Microsoft. They're reflected in products and services designed for people of all abilities.

Each month, one million new devices are being used by students in K-12 and higher education. This is true digital transformation in education, where school leaders and educators are playing a critical role in this journey.

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