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Information communications technologies e-capacity building for small to medium enterprises

It is a great honour to be here with you today, and I am especially humbled to be asked to speak when I am among such an impressive collection of women on this stage and indeed out there in the audience.

I was actually approached to do this about a week after I was appointed into the role of CEO of Microsoft, and I thought to myself, does a light go off somewhere when they make a woman a boss, that the invitations start to roll in and people will assume that I know something about women in leadership and all kinds of other issues?

So I want to apologise at the very beginning, because my experience as a CEO is very limited. What I am going to share with you today about some of the things surrounding technology in business are really very few pearls of wisdom that I have to cast, given my only five months on the job.

But since the theme of this conference is about enabling women to become leaders in business and ensuring equality across business and social environments, I am happy to share my thoughts on how women can play a role.

The title of this forum is E-capacity Building for SMEs, or small and medium-sized enterprises. I have taken a rather broad scope and will spend the next couple of minutes outlining what I think are some of the inhibitors to women in business, and how that impacts our aspirations to lead or start our own businesses. I then want to discuss some areas where technology can be an enabler of opportunity for everyone, both in business and in seeking better equality.

Advances in technology have allowed for even greater social interaction and entrepreneurship, enabling individuals to interconnect and collaborate like never before, and ultimately levelling the playing field of influence and information in a world where women are still under-represented in business. Finally, since once salesperson always a salesperson, I would like you to indulge me as I [outline what] Microsoft [is] doing as a leading technology company to enable us to sustain social and economic opportunities for those who have not yet shared in the benefits that technology can bring.

As I said, I am relatively new to the role of CEO, but I have spent 20 years as a sales and marketing executive so if there is one thing I know, it is numbers. I am all too acutely aware of numbers because my year end has four days to go, so numbers are front and centre to my mind as I stand before you today. But business is, at its crudest definition, a numbers game, and so too is the challenge we face as women in business. I do not need to tell you the glaring gender misrepresentation in business, at senior levels of business and government. And while those numbers are changing and improving, the sense of being

outnumbered can strike at the confidence of women to stick their necks out and go for leadership positions, or indeed start their own businesses.

I know from my own experience that you can easily develop a lack of confidence in your own abilities, because there is a distinct lack of role models or mentors who can increase your confidence and guide you to success.

Even in industries such as IT, which one may expect to be perhaps a little less conservative than the more traditional industries, it is a male-centric world, albeit changing. If I were to look at Microsoft as an example, we are approximately 30 per cent women across Australia. In my leadership team, including myself, we are 11 people, four of whom are women. It is unusual that the mix of our team represents the mix of our company, and I think that is in some way reflected by the fact that it is a woman leading the organisation. For better or for worse, I am erring on the side of my gender.

Since I have been in this job I have had the privilege of being invited to a number of CEO events, and as I look across those rooms, which are anywhere from 50 to 100 people, I would be lucky to find four other females. That does send a message to people, as the women in the room tend to seek each other out. So it is something of a pleasure today to be speaking to a room of only women, since I am not typically in that situation.

But why is this the case? What is inhibiting or limiting our success in business, or in starting out on our own? One observation I have is that we do not really start with the networks men have—and I hesitate to stereotype our gender—whether that is because we do not develop them on our own, or whether it is because of time. Typically women are very busy—those of us who have children are juggling multiple things—so the ability to find time to invest in a network is challenging. I believe this something that can inhibit some of our opportunities, and that is why I think forums like this are so important and need to be encouraged. They are great opportunities for us to develop and build our networks.

What role does technology play in encouraging women in business, or women who aspire to be in business, gain confidence and create a network of shared interests for their future success? I think it has a vital role to play. By its very nature, technology is the ultimate equaliser. It does not respect the existing social and gender boundaries, it abhors convention and prejudice and it is surprisingly organic—in fact, one would almost say ‘viral’.

In most cases, gender can be unclear or even unknown when we collaborate online. By this I mean technology is always seeking to better connect and share information more efficiently, more intimately and more quickly. For women, I think this can provide unlimited opportunities to create and maintain a network, and with the web and other advances, even the playing field for information.

The use of the web to unlock information is well chronicled so I will not dwell on that. But the ability to network with people—that is something that really offers us

opportunity. For a moment, imagine everyone here—all 400 of us at this conference—we are not just connected by email but we could use a tool I am familiar with, ‘Instant Messenger’. So any time one of you has a question about something we are doing in Australia or something that women CEOs are doing, suddenly there can be a real-time response. That is a very powerful and time-efficient way for women to network, and I think increasingly, a very effective way for us to network.

In emerging markets, the use of technology as an information resource and as a way to connect with the wider world to a broader marketplace for goods and services is, quite simply, phenomenal. We have all heard inspirational stories about people who start up businesses in remote parts of the world—whether that is selling pickles from Peru or jewellery from Java. But I did hear an amazing story a few months ago that I want to share, which shows the power of connection and the impact it can have on individuals in some of the most remote and removed parts of the planet.

In a small Indian village, three women have a turkey farm. It is not large, and is pretty much a subsistence business. One day, one of their turkeys came down with a cold, which started to spread to their entire flock. Like many of us, I am sure you are thinking of the avian flu epidemic, but no, these women were much more worried about losing their livelihoods. To them, the concept of avian flu was not in their sphere of concern.

In a nearby village there was a community technology learning centre, which Microsoft and a number of our partners had established some time previously. As luck would have it, one of the women farmers had attended a skills training program at the learning centre, and had a spark of inspiration to use those facilities to see if she could find out more about what was wrong with her turkeys. After some initial searching and discussion forums, she went on to take images of the sick birds and upload them in an email, which was then sent to a researcher at the University of Delhi. The researcher immediately noted that this strain of flu was not the avian flu, and it was indeed treatable. The farmers received the information, the turkeys got better and now the women have a thriving business again.

The moral of the story is not about saving turkeys. It is not even about the use of digital photography to assist in avian flu diagnosis. The moral of the story is that these women farmers were able to connect and collaborate in ways that were simply not possible 10 years ago. Their understanding of the potential of technology to help them save their flock is what is inspiring. In short, technology levelled the playing field of information. I suppose you could call this one of those Thomas Friedman ‘*The World is Flat*’ moments.

As I mentioned before, technology does not always respect orthodoxy and convention. In many subtle ways, the use of technology by women in business is really about meshing some of our more traditional roles and responsibilities with the needs and expectations of modern commerce. What do I mean by this? The needs and desires of many women to manage a family and work have never been very apparent. To me, the mother of a three-year-old, I struggle with the balance between work and home, and I know this is a common tension among all working mothers. On any given day, I want to be a good

CEO, a good mother and a good wife. On any given day, I may fail at one or all of these things.

But technology is providing ways to reduce the tension caused by having to make a choice between home and career. At the very least it provides alternatives to existing options for women looking for a balance of work and life equilibrium. I am not just talking about spending more time at home, which is a big step forward—but not everyone can do telecommuting.

In many circumstances what we are experiencing is really a more innovative use of technology—to remain connected to family. I know of many mothers who help their children do homework online while they are on the road, or even instant message their kids when the mother is in a meeting and the kids are in a spare period. I also know of many who use web cams. I do myself when I am travelling. It is a lot easier for me to have a conversation with my son when he is looking at me and I am looking at him, instead of the normal one-word response I can get on the telephone. This certainly makes the trade-offs between working and home a lot easier to manage.

Even the mobile phone that lets us be in touch anytime and anywhere is a great example of how to reduce the barriers between work and family. While it also presents challenges in balance, it does provide us with flexibility.

But beyond giving us the opportunity to stay connected with our families, women all over the world are starting to build entire businesses from home, thanks to the possibilities of technology in providing information, access and the option to create new business models to respond to their personal needs around family, and still achieve their creative, community or commercial aspirations. Small businesses may aspire to grow into larger businesses, or may be very happy to stay small, producing one niche product or service.

What have we seen technology do in being a capacity builder for businesses large and small? It does abhor convention orthodoxy. It has the ability to widen the scope and networks of women and reduce the barriers to information, and in effect, level the playing field for women's influence in business. Paradoxically, technology is also providing a way for us to marry some of the conventional expectations and needs of women around home and family, with the realities of our modern working life.

In short, technology is increasingly the fulcrum around which women can and will balance their working lives.

I have spent enough time talking about what can be done and the possibilities technology can provide to create opportunities for women in business, build inclusion and equality. I want to take a minute now to tell you about some of the things Microsoft has done, both for individuals and businesses.

At our very core, Microsoft's mission is to enable people in business to realise their full potential. We fundamentally believe that technology is a powerful force for change. We

have built our entire company on this, through innovative software and services, to help people do more with technology. But this commitment to our mission and values goes far beyond that. We believe every successful company has the responsibility to use its resources and influence to make a positive impact. In short, being a good corporate citizen is not just about how you spend your money, but the way you operate and what you do with your resources to assist those communities in which you do business.

When Microsoft began 30 years ago, our company's dream was a personal computer on every desk and in every home. Back then that was a pretty big aspiration, and it did seem almost impossible. Today, for more than a billion people, that dream has been reached. Life has changed profoundly—information is more readily accessible, connections are more easily made and maintained, and commerce and business is more efficient, although as I said, sometimes more intrusive.

But for more than five billion people on the planet, many of whom live in the APEC region, the opportunity to learn, connect, create and succeed remains elusive. In order to address this disparity, in April 2007 our Chairman, Bill Gates, announced a new ambition and aspiration for Microsoft. We committed ourselves to helping all people benefit from information and technology that is accessible, affordable and relevant to their needs. Really it says why is technology such an important facet in creating economic and social inclusion?

The World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Index* considered a number of factors that are crucial to promoting productivity and supporting national growth and prosperity. First among these are what you might expect—basic requirements such as functioning public institutions, primary education systems, health, infrastructure such as roads, and basic telecommunications infrastructure. But once these basics are in place, growth is essentially driven by factors that enhance productivity, such as secondary and tertiary education, market efficiency, and technology readiness, together with a business climate that promotes growth and encourages new ideas. Look at us here in Australia—we struggle with improving our levels of productivity. Our economy today is experiencing skills shortages, an ageing workforce and capacity constraints in some of our most important sectors. A predictable level of infrastructure, an education system producing innovative and diverse talent—diverse both in terms of gender and the degrees and skills produced—is all part of building our productivity.

Why is technology important? Because it can help to promote productivity, market efficiency and increase the availability of education. But of course, technology is not a silver bullet. Someone like myself who has been in the industry for 20 years is not naïve enough to think that technology can provide all the answers.

Let me touch on education briefly before I wrap up. This is something that I believe passionately about and that we have heard a lot about today, certainly with the speakers this morning. Again, this is where technology is the great enabler. If we have a level of educational equality, that will be an incredibly powerful leveller for women. Most of all,

it will have a positive impact on productivity and the economy. As I think one of the earlier speakers said, this makes it a business issue.

This is where I believe technology's ability to bring education to people who may not be able to access it easily is important, because we know education has the most significant impact on the future of a country. Arguably, after the basic infrastructure, it is our most important investment. Technology can bring opportunities for those who cannot go to school, be that because of distance, children or whatever bias may exist. It helps people to complete secondary school, learn a trade or attend university. We know that doing all of these things is a significant contributor to a country's growth and prosperity.

Equally it is an important leveller for women. For many, however, digital skills are a basic obstacle in the 21st century. For whatever reason, many people in developing and emerging economies simply do not have the skills to use computers or related technology. With social inclusion and digital inclusion becoming increasingly synonymous, we want to see technology as an enabler of opportunity, not as a barrier.

In closing, thank you for letting me share some of my thoughts about the role of technology in providing opportunities for women in business. As I said, technology has a powerful levelling impact. It is blind to many of the economic and social barriers that confront and challenge our communities, and for women there has never been a better time to exploit the possibilities that technology can provide in terms of connecting and calibrating information sharing and resourcing, and challenging existing hierarchies in both commercial and social environments.

For me, as someone who has spent her entire life in the technology industry, I am passionate about the opportunities and possibilities that technology can bring to individuals and to business. For my organisation Microsoft has both the expectation and obligation to do what it can to drive greater social and economic inclusion through our thinking, our products and our business practices, to unleash the potential of people—whatever their dreams and whatever their backgrounds.

Thank you very much.