This Little World

A How-To Guide for Social Innovators

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Acknowledgments

We're delighted you selected *This Little World* to learn more about social innovation. When we began this book, we had an ambitious goal. We wanted to study and share the best practices of social entrepreneurs, innovators, educators, and industry leaders with deep experience in social impact innovation.

We didn't anticipate the depth or quality of responses we would receive! Over the past three years, we have interviewed hundreds of people, visited numerous agencies and places of business, traveled to conferences and research libraries, and spent a lot of time on email and conference calls. It has been a great pleasure learning from innovators, working with students, hearing stories of success and failure, and comparing notes about best practices.

We can't list everyone, but we'd like to thank the following people who made a real impact on our thinking and shared their hearts and souls with us: Heven Ambachew, Alexander Andino, Erik Arnold, Akhtar Badshah, Shanti Benoit-Boyce, Erik Benson, Sara Boyd, Charlie Bresler, Jeff Calkins, Mary Campbell, Matt Cherry, Erica Cole, Jean-Philippe Courtois, Mattia Curmá, Dusty Davidson, Chris Emura, Nadia Fischer, Taylor Frerichs, Heidi Funston, Alex Gounares, Morgan Grimm, Felix Halvorson, Charles Hammerman, Teres Huizar, Ben Jackson, Sara Jacobsen, Marcus Knight, Susan Koehler, Brennan LaBrie, Ying Li, Frank McCosker, Gary Officer, Tina Patel, Sasha Rabkin, Jeff Raikes, Tricia Raikes, Willa Rector, Helen Chong Rekers, Julia Roberts, Ana Salazar, Luis Salazar, Rita Santelli, Jackie Schaffer, Shelly Smelser, Annette Smith, Sara Smolley, Ali Spain, Justin Spelhaug, Karen Spierling, Kate Steele, Kentaro Toyama, Cameron Turner, Sam Ushio, Victoria Vrana, Valérie Vuillerat, Ed Weber, Danny Weissberg, Christi Wilkins, Vitalii Zakhozhyi, and George Zeno.

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1 Think Big, Start Small

This book is written to build excitement for social innovation in organizations and communities that want to create a more sustainable, just, and equitable future for our planet.

Whether you do this work now or are considering a future career, this roadmap is for you!

Our inspiration for *This Little World* came from conversations with hundreds of employees who are working in social impact organizations or who are preparing to do so. Many are Millennials or members of so-called Generation Z. Others have been part of the wave of Big Tech layoffs that hit the industry in 2023 and 2024. In conversation after conversation, we've learned the same fundamental lesson: Workers are ready for something *new*. They want purpose-driven jobs in our economy that offer financial stability *and* contribute to just and sustainable communities. Employees want to be creative *and* pursue careers that support their values.

When we looked into these goals a little deeper, we recognized that purpose-driven employment is really an aspiration for *every* demographic of the workforce. By "purpose-driven," we mean labor or business activity that is defined as *socially beneficial* or which *contributes to the greater good of society*. This value-based expectation is now articulated by the world's largest corporations. Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, speaks to meaning and purpose in this way: "The purpose of a corporation is to create profitable solutions to the challenges of people and planet—in every community and every country. This is what our customers, partners, and colleagues expect, and it's what the world demands from today's corporations."[1]

As technologists and entrepreneurs, our vision is also to create viable and sustainable solutions to the world's most pressing problems. We seek to empower students, social innovators, impact investors, philanthropists, engineers, and community partners to create technology for the public interest that addresses urgent social and environmental needs. The time has never been better to pursue purpose-driven work through creative partnerships, businesses, and social impact organizations.

This Little World

The title of our book comes from a well-known passage of William Shakespeare's play *Richard II*:

> This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
> This earth of majesty…
> This happy breed of men, *this little world*,
> This precious stone set in the silver sea…[2]

The speaker of these words is an aging statesman who expresses love for his country and its people. But he's also worried about clouds he sees on the horizon. Although the realm is buzzing with potential, it's also threatened by internal and external forces. Under siege, his world feels small, precious, and fragile.

We understand the sentiment. Despite daily reports of innovation and achievement in our own time, planet Earth feels *smaller* not larger.

Cloud-based communication systems span the globe, connecting people and markets in the blink of an eye. Remote workers interact daily via virtual teams. Telehealth specialists provide support to the residents of secluded villages.

Each new advancement compresses time and space, making our world more immediate and interconnected. A compelling digital product or campaign can now achieve worldwide distribution in a matter of weeks—or less.

But the shrinking world is not without its challenges. Population growth, industrialization, and war have made the Earth more fragile. Climate change, food shortages, and pollution are persistent headwinds.

Our little, precious world needs strategies that promote stability and growth. We need technological innovation that is inclusive, trusted, and focused on community goals. Each action or intent, however small, can have immense impact.

Embrace a Changemaking Mindset

This Little World explores an emerging consensus about how social innovation practices and technological innovation can improve lives, protect the Earth, and promote prosperity. We want to think big, start small, and scale for impact. The future of our planet is at stake.

Embedding purpose into products has moved from the margins of corporate activity to be an urgent *expectation* for employees,

managers, customers, and stakeholders. The social impact sector is built around this vision for changemaking, where *social and environmental issues are creatively addressed, economic growth is inclusive*, *technical systems are trusted*, and *the fundamental rights of people are unequivocally supported*.[3] This focus on change seeks to upset the status quo by recognizing that traditional business activity has often supported favored or select groups, producing goods and services that are expensive, unsustainable, and designed primarily for the benefit of one group of people.

What types of social innovation projects fit this description, and what skills are necessary for the employees that design and implement them? Which emerging technologies can be harnessed to do this work? What are the creative mindsets that shape successful nonprofit, for-profit, and government-affiliated social impact organizations? And on the economic front: What types of investments will *really* help your organization address practical problems and achieve a positive return on investment (ROI)?

We wrote this book to address these questions because we've noticed a lack of resources designed to support new social impact projects and teams, especially in the tech sector. Despite a period of rapid growth and investment in the industry, much of the learning that takes place in social innovation is still through paid consultants, high-priced workshops, and specialty websites. Few universities or postsecondary institutions offer curriculum to support social impact training. Within the industry, an emphasis on "digital transformation" has raised awareness about the need for new technology, but not on which systems to select or how to integrate them.

Moreover, the core business activities in a social enterprise are typically structured *differently* than in traditional corporations. For example, tech for good startups are often determined to create value *rapidly*, moving from design to prototype to scaling in a progression that seems bewildering to conventional administrators. In terms of work style, tech for good companies often prefer remote work and virtual interaction, developing learning pathways around social media networks, webinars, and professional tools like Zoom or LinkedIn.

Measurement and teaming have also taken the spotlight in social impact organizations. Social entrepreneurs use key performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate core business activities, and they curate rich data sources to identify trends and make decisions. They seek regular input from social impact partners, foundations, and community members. Equity and inclusion have also gained

urgency in social impact work, a welcome transformation that is strengthening all sectors of the industry. When social entrepreneurs search for employees to do innovation work, it's just as important to recruit for moral fiber, empathy, and cross-cultural experiences as it is for traditional business or technology skills.

This Little World explores each of these social innovation roles and mindsets through rich case studies taken from local, regional, and global social impact organizations. Each chapter aims to teach tangible skills to changemakers who aspire to deliver social impact, particularly those who are curious about how digital transformation and tech for good strategies are revolutionizing the field. We're optimistic about the future and see each opportunity for social innovation as a chance to learn and build community solutions with fascinating partners. We hope that you agree!

Who We Are

Michael Halvorson and Shelly Cano Kurtz are two experienced social impact practitioners with a passion for social innovation and many years of experience in the tech for good landscape. We both live in the Pacific Northwest and are alumni of the same school, Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) in Tacoma, Washington. Our interest in impact work grew out of our early grounding in Lutheran higher education and the belief that creative social engagement and service are essential parts of citizenship and professional life. Although we have both spent time in technology-oriented companies, our personal and professional experiences are unique, and we hope that this mixture serves you well.

Shelly Cano Kurtz is a social entrepreneur and consultant who has founded numerous social innovation organizations, including a social impact incubator, an evidence management solution, and a data insights platform for entrepreneurs. Shelly is also an advisor for Concordia, a bipartisan organization dedicated to building cross-sector partnerships, and the Center for Workforce Inclusion, a nonprofit focused on workforce development for older Americans. She has been involved in over 200 go-to-market campaigns and regularly serves as a mentor for social innovators in the U.S.

Michael Halvorson, Ph.D., is a professor of business history and innovation who writes and teaches about digital transformation and public interest technology. He was an early employee at Microsoft, contributing to the development of Microsoft Press, Visual Studio, and Microsoft Office. He is currently director of Innovation Studies at PLU, an interdisciplinary program that

emphasizes collaborative problem solving, human-centered design, and social entrepreneurship. He is the author of 40 books about history and technology, and served for ten years as an executive leader at Compass Housing Alliance, a social impact organization in Seattle.

Together, the authors are able to share industry experience and insider knowledge about a sector of the U.S. economy that currently receives over $2.8 trillion of annual revenue in the U.S. They present insights and case studies from many of the organizations that they have worked with, including Microsoft, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Guardify (formerly VidaNyx), the City of Tacoma, and Pacific Lutheran University. They draw research data from over 500 academic studies and more than 3,000 tech for good organizations that are using emerging technology to address social and environmental challenges.

Defining Social Impact

As we get started, let's begin with a definition of what social impact is and who is invited to do this work. (Hint: The answer to the second question is "Everyone!")

At its core, the term "social impact" refers to improving the well-being of individuals and communities by addressing social and economic issues such as poverty, inequality, access to education, and healthcare. This type of work can be done by individuals, nonprofit organizations, government entities, and for-profit corporations. Social impact work can also take a range of forms, including community development initiatives, advocacy, philanthropy, entrepreneurship, social innovation projects, and other activities. In each of these contexts, the goal of social impact is to create positive change in society through actions that address the root causes of social problems.

Social impact practitioners are people who are committed to enacting these changes through jobs or other roles in the social impact sector. These positions include policy analyst, community organizer, program manager, social impact investor, software engineer, scientist, designer, technical worker, data analyst, corporate social responsibility officer, digital marketing specialist, and a range of employees who perform traditional business functions.

Although social impact practitioners have traditionally been associated with the *nonprofit sector* (organizations such as food banks, homeless shelters, or the Special Olympics), today all manner of educational institutions, for-profit corporations, nonprofits, and

government entities have staff members that are actively engaged in social impact activity. In some cases, these changemakers break away from existing organizations and create something entirely *new*. When this happens, we often refer to them as *social innovators*, *social entrepreneurs*, or *impact entrepreneurs*, especially when their work leads to systemic social change or new social movements.[4] (On LinkedIn, Michael and Shelly are both members of the group *Impact Entrepreneurs*, which currently has over 38,000 members interested in systemic changemaking.) Social impact work does not just feature new enterprises or grassroots initiatives that are connected to current events. The agents for social change can also work from *within* an existing organization to rejuvenate its mission or its goals. This type of innovator is often referred to as an *intrapreneur* (or corporate entrepreneur), to highlight their creative role inside an existing corporation or entity.

Since the widespread deployment of computing and technology infrastructures, many social impact advocates have placed big bets on *technological innovation* as a catalyst to promote meaningful change in society. A belief in the promise of scalable technology for the public good is often referred to as *tech for good* or the *tech for good movement*, because it envisions the constructive, amplifying effect of technology for all people when digital systems are thoughtfully designed and equitably distributed. Shelly co-founded X4i.org as a tech directory and learning lab to nourish this type of thinking, because tech for good businesses often take similar approaches to digital transformation and emerging technology.

This Little World evaluates numerous tech for good organizations because they approach social challenges through community building, knowledge sharing, and collective impact models. But the authors of this book are also aware of the unintended consequences of technological innovation. The recent book *Geek Heresy: Rescuing Social Change from the Cult of Technology*, by Kentaro Toyama, soberly discusses the ways that technological innovation has often fallen short in addressing social ills.[5] We appreciate the lessons in this publication. Like Toyama, we hope to offer a balanced approach to digital transformation that is guided by recent research, clear objectives, and results that can be measured. As part of the preparation for this book, we met with hundreds of social impact practitioners to compare notes about digital transformation and social innovation. Several chapters in this book have their roots in the curriculum that Michael uses when he teaches social innovation to college students and community members.

Clearly, curriculum and technology alone can't address every social ill or human shortcoming. But it is reasonable to believe that compassionate people working together can genuinely advance the public good by using innovative thinking, education, and appropriate technical systems. The core commitments of this work should include expanding human agency, fostering accountability, working for justice, and protecting the planet.

Said a different way, *we believe that working to improve the lives of others is not just a vocation for teachers, do-gooders, or idealists*. Doing good for the planet is a way to lead an extraordinary life, where you take your personal story, resources, and sense of vocation and share them with others to build a legacy for the future.

This moment calls for change and renewal. If you aspire to a purpose-driven career, know this: This little world needs *you*. There are thousands of opportunities in the for-profit, nonprofit, and social impact sector for a wide range of workers who want to tackle the world's most challenging problems. A large talent pool is shifting to the social impact sector now, and we expect to see thousands of startups in the coming years that promote meaningful change and work to improve the lives of others. The time is *now*!

Forestmatic and Sustainable Climate Action

To share our excitement about the social impact movement, we conclude this chapter with a case study about Forestmatic (www.forestmatic.com), a purpose-driven organization that Shelly consulted with as they were developing their go-to-market strategy in the U.S. Forestmatic exemplifies how a small team of relatively inexperienced innovators has been able to take their passion for sustainable climate action and turn it into a social enterprise that uses technology in a creative way. This is their story, and it provides a sample of the rich case studies that will be featured in this book.

In 2020, Tarek Ayoub, Mattia Curmà, and Alexander Verresen became interested in tree planting as a way to address global climate change.

Relatively inexperienced in the tactics of social innovation, the three graduate students met in a capstone course in Madrid to study social and environmental problems. Like most advanced college courses, the class had a solid analytical framework and encouraged students to pick a global challenge and study its underlying causes and potential solutions. The team selected climate change and began to research *reforestation* as a strategy to engage both businesses and communities in sustainability. Not only did

reforestation help to trap carbon dioxide (CO_2) in trees, but it had been proven to unite neighborhoods and restore biodiversity to natural landscapes.

When Tarek, Mattia, and Alexander studied reforestation, they learned that most of the work done to plant trees was relatively haphazard when looked at globally. Despite the proliferation of technical tools that enabled the collection, storage, and analysis of data, no one had applied this technology to reforestation campaigns. When local businesses advertised that they were supporting reforestation to offset CO_2, there was no way to verify that this work had been accomplished, or for consumers to track the progress of individual tree-planting campaigns. Reforestation seemed remote and disconnected from everyday life.

Although they were not prepared to start a social impact organization, Tarek, Mattia, and Alexander used their capstone to explore the benefits of tree planting, and they started discussing the issue with reforestation experts. Moving beyond the constraints of a typical grad school project, they also sought input from both technologists and members of the communities that were hardest hit by forest removal. During the process, Mattia also connected with Shelly and her team, who had recently started an incubator project to track and support new tech for good companies. Forestmatic was invited to be featured in the X4i.org tech directory because they had used innovative data related to reforestation, and they utilized a cloud-based solution that displayed "live" data about tree planting from around the globe.

Within a few months, the team expanded to include additional advisors with the skills necessary to build tracking tools that could aggregate and display reforestation data. Additional research helped the students discover that over 50 regional and international agencies were engaged with tree-planting efforts, and that the United Nations had addressed reforestation in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG #13: Climate Action and SDG #15: Life on Land. By connecting to existing initiatives and discovering the role that they could play in a collaborative solution, the team learned how to complement the work of others. Tarek, Mattia, and Alexander believed that regular citizens *and* the leaders of local businesses would support tree planting as a "green solution" if it seemed more tangible and verifiable.

By late 2020, the students' professor, Marcos Eguillor, recognized the progress that they were making, and advised the team to consider founding a for-profit social impact organization to bring to market the tool that they had designed. As an expression of

confidence in their prototype, Professor Eguillor also became a financial investor and promoted their work through his personal and professional networks.

In November 2020, the group officially founded Forestmatic, a digital platform that allowed global tree-planting projects to be trackable, traceable, and transparent with up-to-the-minute data worldwide. Using a graphical website and tree-planting "dashboard," any user could follow the progress of reforestation initiatives, down to the individual tree. Businesses that supported tree planting to offset their carbon footprint could also prove to their stakeholders that planting actions were *actually* taking place, because the information was available on a published website with graphical tools and visualizers.

Within a year, Forestmatic announced that over four million trees had been planted by partner organizations, and each tree could be tracked using their digital tracking technology. The reforestation data was available for five continents, and it demonstrated that over 500,000 tons of carbon had been sequestered, mitigating global warming in a tangible way. It was only the beginning, but just two years after brainstorming in a college seminar, the Forestmatic team had released a successful purpose-driven product. The social business reflected their values and commitments, and engaged with a community of like-minded partners. Later that year, they received recognition from the United Nations as a top "green solution" provider, contributing tangibly to the SDGs.

Working with a Shared Sense of Purpose

Forestmatic is just one of many social impact organizations that have used scalable digital tools to promote environmentally beneficial interventions in our world. Their journey from idea to product was not overly complex from an engineering point of view, but it did involve new ways of creating value that deserve careful study. We'll introduce the strategies needed to achieve this type of impact in future chapters, but at this point it is useful to comment on a few of the leadership principles that the Forestmatic team followed when they began.

The first is that the Forestmatic organization remains small. As they complete their second year of business activity in 2023, the company still lists just six employees on their website. The three founders (Tarek, Mattia, and Alexander) continue to focus on day-to-day operations, building their business and interacting with potential customers and partners. The main objectives for the

team are enhancing the Forestmatic application and raising funds for expansion. Like any for-profit business, they need to produce a viable product and cover their operating expenses with venture capital until sufficient revenues arrive to pay operational costs and other bills. But it is important to see how they have already *scaled their ideas*, rather than the footprint of their organization. Forestmatic was committed to *changemaking*, not simply profitability. They have added employees only when they believed it would enhance their *impact*.

Second, the training and background of each employee is fascinating. Their international training and experience has made global collaboration possible, and each worker brought the skills to manage a range of complex tasks.

Alexander Verresen had a background in entrepreneurship and digital transformation, and he took the role of CEO for the company. Alexander lives in Portugal and maintains overall responsibility for the company's business operations. But Alexander is also a jack-of-all-trades, writing in a recent profile that he learned the HTML and CSS coding protocols so that he could enhance the company's website.

Mattia Curmà also has a broad, interdisciplinary background in business development, art and design, video production, and media writing. He lives in Italy and learned the Python programming language to improve Forestmatic's core software product. When needed, he is also a regular blogger for the company.

Tarek Ayoub is fluent in Arabic, French, and English and lives in Mexico City, although he completed his first entrepreneurial work in Lebanon. Tarek focuses on attracting new business partners and establishing global relationships, a task he is especially well prepared for.

Rounding out the staff positions, Forestmatic employs a marketing and digital content specialist (who lives in Portugal), a part-time technology advisor (who lives in Brazil), and an unpaid mentor/investor (who lives in Spain). The team works 100 percent remotely, with a corporate address in Brussels.

In this tech for good company, each of the job descriptions is "fuzzy" and overlaps considerably with others. The employees pitch in as needed to meet company goals. In management-speak, we would describe this arrangement as a "flat" hierarchy, where everyone contributes and works daily on the company mission.

Most of Forestmatic's employees are new to social impact work, so there is little experience on the team with sustainability initiatives or so-called "green solutions." The founders' desire to do

purpose-driven work motivated them to study a global challenge and build professional relationships to address it. Gradually, they have learned more about sustainability as they have interacted with partners who share similar goals.

Another noteworthy trend is that each member of the team has contributed to digital content creation in some way, often learning new skills to do the work. A familiarity with data collection and analysis permeates the organization, and most team members are willing to assist with software or media creation. They work remotely and seem to like doing so. If anything, a virtual office arrangement seems to fuel their curiosity for learning and problem solving. It also reduces costs, because they don't have a large corporate office to pay for.

Finally, it is obvious that the Forestmatic team has been strongly influenced by a seminar in social innovation principles and the inspiration of several thoughtful mentors. They learned key social entrepreneurship techniques, which helped them design a purpose-driven product using the appropriate cloud-based technology. This process inspired trust with their customers and helped them address new and untapped markets. A shared sense of purpose continually drives the team forward.

The social impact sector is large and growing rapidly, with innovative companies like Forestmatic coming to market on a weekly basis. In the U.S. alone, spending on social impact-related projects has reached an estimated $2.8 trillion per year and involves over 1.9 million social impact organizations. Large technology companies like Microsoft are sensing the opportunity, and they are designing platforms and services specifically for social impact organizations. As tech companies prepare services for social impact groups, they also provide technical training programs or "skilling" curricula, so that a new wave of workers can enter the social impact field. Globally, the market opportunity to address the UN SDGs has reached approximately $12 trillion per year.

As large as this social impact opportunity is, there are relatively few software tools to analyze and coordinate activities in the sector. Moreover, there are few training pathways into social innovation careers, especially the tech for good jobs that involve social innovation strategies and emerging technology like artificial intelligence (AI). This leads us back to our core question: *What are the skills and mindsets needed to be a changemaker?*

Social innovators need essential business and communication skills, a desire to collaborate with partners and community members, and a willingness to experiment with data and technical

systems. A hybrid set of skills seems to be the common denominator in most tech for good organizations. Social innovators also need to understand the problems and worldviews of others, and meet their clients where they are. From empathy and compassion come the best insights to critique existing systems and design initiatives that truly support human flourishing.

In *This Little World*, we offer numerous pathways into this way of thinking, including step-by-step materials that explore how successful organizations inspire innovation and foster creativity. As part of our journey, we'll explore effective digital transformation strategies, how to embed purpose into projects, and the power of inclusive, human-centered design. We'll also discuss best practices for managing data, how to develop a theory of change, and how to design projects so that they can deliver social impact at scale. When you need to develop specific skills, such as data management techniques, we'll point you in the right direction. In the next chapter, we begin by discussing how social innovators can use the UN SDGs to identify needs and create solutions that address social and environmental challenges.

Notes

1 For Satya Nadella's quote and more about Microsoft's vision for purpose-driven work, see Microsoft Corporation, "Embrace a Changemaking Culture: Where Purpose Meets Impact" (Redmond: WA, 2020), 2.
2 William Shakespeare, *Richard II: The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.1.40.
3 The term "changemaking" has been popularized by Ashoka, a nonprofit organization that has spent decades working with social enterprises. To learn more about their creative programming and materials, visit www.ashoka.org.
4 For helpful definitions of social entrepreneurship and how the phenomenon is being studied in academic circles, see Paul C. Light, *The Search for Social Entrepreneurship* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 1–29.
5 Kentaro Toyama, *Geek Heresy: Rescuing Social Change from the Cult of Technology* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015).