

Make things do stuff: helping young people become the creators as well as the consumers of digital technology

Partnerships Team, Cabinet Office

1. What was the problem you were faced with?

The government recognised that the “digital native” generation in were increasingly consumers and not creators of digital technology. There had been a decline in the number of young people taking qualifications in IT and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and industry had highlighted this skills gap. It was clear that greater digital literacy was crucial to the competitiveness of the UK’s digital economy. There would need to be a strong supply of people capable of creating and manipulating the technology of the future.

2. What’s distinctive about the way you did this?

In this context in November 2012, No10 commissioned the Cabinet Office’s Partnerships Team to run a summer campaign to promote coding skills for young people. The working title was ‘Summer of Code’.

The team discovered quickly that someone was already doing something. Mozilla, Nesta and the Nominet Trust were developing a campaign and website designed to mobilise the next generation of digital makers, ‘Make Things Do Stuff’ (MTDS). Rather than create a competing Government led initiative, the team secured agreement from No10 to work with Make Things Do Stuff and make it even better.

The team’s philosophy was that everyone should do what they were good at. They got operators such as CodeClub (now active in over 1000 primary Schools) and Freeformers to create the right type of opportunities to get kids interested in and inspired by coding. In turn, the Partnerships team got the Chancellor to back the campaign, made links to other parts of government and business, and secured media coverage.

3. How did this new approach make the outcome better?

Around 150,000 young people took part in the “summer of code”. By partnering iwth industry and young people’s organisations, the government was able to speak with a more credible voice to young people.

The partnerships team was able to use its links to business to add value to an existing project, successfully brokering commitments from O2 / Telefonica, Facebook, Microsoft, Virgin Media, Caffè Nero, Blackberry and Samsung, giving the campaign greater impact and credibility. They were also able to bring in new delivery partners such as KANO, Jagex, Codecademy to expand the diversity and scale of delivery.

The small businesses that the partnerships team connected with Make Things Do Stuff went from running workshops for 50 kids to an ambition to run them for 10,000, and secured extra investment to make it work.

The team was also able to make connections with other Cabinet Office initiatives including the National Citizen Service and the [Plotr](#) careers website. MTDS provided a different space / audience to promote other Government messages such as tax reform, curriculum changes (from IT to computer science), diversifying Government supply chain, open data and the growth of the (digital) economy.

The project received positive and different press coverage, including an [Observer](#) editorial, [video](#), and the first ever [published selfie of the Chancellor](#).

4. What lessons did you learn?

As with a start-up, the team relied on small contributions from several individuals and organisations to help get this project off the ground.

As the campaign grew, the message changed, audiences shifted and requirements of partners were at times competing. This was challenging for the team and they had to rely on the strong relationships they had established with all partners to keep the momentum.

It would have been better to have one single project manager, and the team could have done with more up-to-date IT to keep up with the young people!

5. Further information

Contact PartnershipsTeam@cabinet-office.gsi.gov.uk, or visit the [Make Things Do Stuff](#) website.