

# A siren call of hope: tech for social change

However often we see the unanswered issues in the structure of society, be it homelessness; the plight of refugees seeking safety; providing support for those suffering from mental illness; connecting communities of those deemed less 'able-bodied' than the societal norm; even reigniting the hopes of the disenfranchised, it takes true visionaries to seek solutions. And smart solutions, too.

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Tech for Good is a subsection of the tech umbrella. Is that because the latter furnishes a capitalist model that we ought to be wary of: Tech for Not Good? It speaks to the narrative of modern tech that issues of data privacy and tech politics makes us unable to promise the category as a force for positive social change more generally.

No one's putting their hands up as a Tech for Bad entrepreneur, of course, but if we renamed Tech for Good, Tech for Social Change, then perhaps we could widen the market for more overtly capitalist models that look to serve themselves *and* others, and who would then inherit the accountability Tech for Social Change would espouse, rather than using CSR as a brand-driven approach. Make social change part of the fabric of business.

*'I think we have a collective responsibility as a sector, whether you are doing something that's for good, like Beam, or whether you have a much less obviously 'for good' business. You still have an obligation to ask, 'Are we, as a technology organisation, a positive force in our communities and the world at large?''*

Enough of this quixotism. At the vanguard for social change are companies that are getting noticed for their innovations and for their humanitarian endeavours, stymying the demands of under-resourced governmental support systems: showing that where there's a will there's always a way. Maddyness explores some of the impressive initiatives that are making a marked difference in the world.

## Asking for change, please

First up is Change Please, the barista training and employment scheme for people without permanent housing. Change Please position the issue as a skills shortage: they work to get the capital's caffeine desperados the coffee they need: 'The average Londoner treats themselves to two cups every single day. Demand is rising - by the end of the decade, the number of UK coffee outlets is set to hit 21,000, creating over 100,000 jobs. Despite this, the industry is facing a huge skills shortage, not just in the UK, but around the world.' The real issue they're confronting, however, is the mounting homelessness crisis. With over 4,000 people sleeping rough in the UK every year, they work to train and employ people without permanent accommodation as baristas *and so getting us the coffee we want — no: need*. Happy to do our bit, one caffeine-charged slurp at a time.

[Discover Change Please](#)

# Crowdfunding opportunities

On a similar bent, and for those mistrustful of the destination of their donated change, is Beam, who crowdfund futures of their pledged participants: they have crowdfunded employment training for more than 150 homeless men and women and are winning awards left, right and centre. Perhaps you're new mum, Stacey, who would like to train as a nursery assistant in order to secure a steady income and, so, permanent accommodation for your young family... Beam will work to crowdfund your training. This way, donors can be patrons of hope for those who are fortunate enough to have the wherewithal to learn and work for it, but for whom misfortune has dealt a difficult hand. And for the year ahead, Beam's founder, Alex Stephany, says 'we're hoping that 2020 will be a big year for donations. So far, we've crowdfunded more than £600k, all of which goes directly towards supporting a homeless person into work. Next year, we're hoping to grow our impact even further by exceeding the £1m mark.'

[Discover Beam](#)

## Good begets good

Clean Slate provides digital content to empower, educate and upskill prisoners and those leaving prison. With a clear link between crime and poverty, it follows that lack of educational and public health support finds it harder to reach those at risk of perpetuating and being victim to crime. A tablet is provided to select prisoners with the Clean Slate app downloaded. Through this, they get access to motivational content, help with employment and life planning, practical English and maths skills as well as mental health-related content.

[Discover Clean Slate](#)

## HIV AI

Positive East have applied for funding so they can provide specialist support to even more people living with HIV. Karl is the AI-enabled chatbot that will help those with HIV get access to information, support and services. If you have HIV

you are twice as likely to suffer from depression; PTSD following diagnosis is rife; and being stigmatised on account of others' lack of understanding...well, to renew your resilience just when you are trying to cope/manage/flourish in your health isn't something you should do without support. Karl might be the fortifying first step.

*Discover Positive East*

## Medical aids levelling up

Compact Cane is in development to provide the blind and visually impaired a discrete alternative to the support cane (the so-called white cane). The digital cane uses ultrasound technology to communicate the surrounding environment with vibrations in real-time. Billed as 'the first discrete mobility aid that challenges what visual impairment looks like', the Maddy team are looking forward to charting the company's success in the coming year.

*Discover Compact Cane*

*Read also*

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5 low-cost digital techniques to promote your startup

## Let's go!

Orthotics are often expensive and can take months in production. Not only does this affect the daily lives of those in need of them — for some, without this support it can make sitting up an impossible task — but for fast-growing children, this can mean that by the time their device is ready they have already outgrown it. Andiamo provides medically effective orthoses within two weeks, lessening the cost and with improved fit for the patient. And where would a Tech for Good round-up be without a 3D-printed solution? It's the dawn of a new century, so it is, and we're positively on the pulse here.

## AR can connect us IRL

*Where is the Bird?* launched last Summer from VIKA Books in partnership with Elmfield School for Deaf Children and is ‘the first augmented reality storybook to promote British Sign Language as a language for deaf and hearing children alike.’ Available to buy [here](#), though we recommend doubling-down on web-based exercise by visiting their site which outlines why early-stage BSL can help all children communicate and can strengthen your connections with your baby.

[Discover Baby BSL](#)

## Taught to do good

Maddyness was *originellement* a French site. Happily, because of bilinguists and technology, we’ve been able to launch in the UK. Okay, so some of the team can’t *hablar* foreign languages fluently, but that’s okay with Chatterbox here to help. Another company with a solution at its heart that changes the lives of those it employs, all the while offering an in-demand and award-winning service to its clients: Chatterbox employs refugees as language tutors. So you can, as they put it, ‘Master a language, change a life’. And they incorporate AI into their learning platform to provide the most relevant fit for student-teacher tuition. *Va bene*, Chatterbox. شكرا.

[Discover Chatterbox](#)

## So, Tech for Good 2020?

When we spoke with Alex from Beam, he gave us this heartening wisdom:

‘We’ve just scratched the surface of using technology for good. We’re at this stage where the technology industry is in a fight for its soul. We’ve been far too focused on using technology to extract financial value, rather than try and create social and economic good. As a result, the technology sector as a whole

is in grave risk of being discredited and losing all moral authority that it has — which is tragic and unnecessary.

‘I think we have a collective responsibility as a sector, whether you are doing something that’s for good, like Beam, or whether you have a much less obviously ‘for good’ business. You still have an obligation to ask, ‘Are we, as a technology organisation, a positive force in our communities and the world at large?’

And from Maddyness, a redoubled rallying cry: the companies that have impressed us above are all founded on elegant if simple ideas that improve the lives of all involved. So, do support interesting startups that are driving social change, first of all, but also (don’t accuse us of being quixotic again) do something yourself. See the issue, rise to its challenge: go from being a thinker to a maker. Whether that’s volunteering, learning, voting with your money, or starting up an initiative bent on helping others, the animal kingdom or the planet: 2020 is about clearing snow from your neighbour’s path, too, since you’re already out there with the shovel.

*Read also*

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[Most innovative wearable tech of 2019](#)

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Article by ELLA BOWMAN