

SOCIAL NETWORK

As the digital economy grows at breakneck speed, are too many people being left behind? **Martha Lane Fox** talks to Seb Whale about her new mission to harness the capability of the internet for everyone in Britain

Words: Sebastian Whale Photos: Paul Heartfield

Many of the world's most recognisable companies started life in humble beginnings. Rumour has it giants Amazon, Apple, Google and Hewitt-Packard were all founded in a garage.

An office on the first floor of an iconic central London building is hardly comparable, but the low-key operation of newly formed tech charity, Doteveryone, resplendent with colourful post-it notes and cramped conditions, is seemingly off to an auspicious start.

Though small in presence its aims are far-reaching. Doteveryone seeks to ensure all British adults are using the internet, create products to improve societal well-being and see equal representation of

women in an industry currently dominated by men. Should these objectives see some cut through, its effect on the UK's economy would stand tall. Great oaks from little acorns grow, as the proverb goes.

Its founder, Martha Lane Fox, is no stranger to such ventures. The 43-year-old, who co-created travel company lastminute.com in 1998, appears as enthused by her latest project as any before, with all its stresses, optimism and uncertainty.

We meet in the foyer of the south entrance to Somerset House, glaring over the Thames from its sedentary position. Any feelings of grandeur derived from the surroundings are tempered by an off-centre piece of A4 paper blu-tacked to a door, with 'Doteveryone' scribed in luminous colours, depicting its headquarters. >





Peering round one of four doors, employees draped in casual clothing are holding an informal, town hall meeting. It's launch week, and you can sense the tension in the air. To avoid interrupting, we move to a well-lit conference room.

"Is this the masterplan?" I ask, pointing to the diagrams and annotations that don the walls. "It's the mistressplan," she quips back, before giving a reassuring look so as to play down my patriarchal slip.

I begin with the daunting task of asking Lane Fox to define herself. She was recently appointed to the board at Twitter having completed nine years on the equivalent at Marks and Spencer. She also owns a karaoke company, Lucky Voice, and is a patron of numerous charities, while simultaneously sitting as the youngest peer in the House of Lords.

Given this litany of achievements it would be no surprise if some of it had gone to her head. For Lane Fox, however, self-deprecation outweighs any semblance of boastfulness, as she recoils at "grandiose" terms such as "pioneer" or "philanthropist".

"I really increasingly rebel against being put in a box," she says. "I like starting things, I like the energy that comes with innovation, I like building a team, making sure that the vision and the plans are beginning to match and getting that excitement and energy going. I think I'm probably not so good in larger structures where the pace slows down and things inevitably become slightly more quietened, perhaps."

Lane Fox read ancient and modern history at Magdalen College, Oxford, where her father Robin, was a fellow. She created lastminute.com with another former BT employee Brent Hoberman at the age of 25, before selling her stake in 2005 for around £13m.

In 2004, she was involved in a terrible car accident in Morocco, one whose consequences she lives with every day. She uses a cane and recognises how fortunate she is to be alive, but leaves it to others to

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ascribe the event, which left her with nearly 30 broken bones and an extensive period in emergency care, as a motivating factor behind her success. Lane Fox's stoicism (she would perhaps loathe to see it as such) and antipathy to going back over the incident aligns with her determination to face the challenges in front of her.

With nearly 20-years working in the tech industry, she is now focussed on harnessing the capability of the internet to make it a force for good, for everyone across Britain. While a benefactor of the online boom, she recognises that "it would be very hard to deny that at exactly the same time as the internet's growth, inequality in pretty much every country in the world has grown as well."

Doteveryone has three central targets: ensuring the 23% of British adults who do not use the internet are brought up to speed, to improve end of life care and other essentials through products and services, and to achieve equal representation of women and men in the tech industry by 2026.

Though the aims are wide-ranging, there is an inherent link. Mentoring and training women in technology will arguably improve demographical representation in the industry. And while we may picture elderly people struggling to understand the technology created to assist with end of life care, Doteveryone's digital skills initiative could help plug the gaps.

"This is a huge, enormous challenge for us as a society," she says. "When I first started looking at the digital inclusion world, it was 1.5 million people over 65 who don't see anybody in a week. That's a really big number. And of course having a social media connection or having a ping from an email is not as good as sitting here having a chat, but it's a hell of a lot better than sitting by yourself, I believe."

The charity is funded through private donations and has no current government involvement, which has encouraged an entrepreneurial culture, she says. The company has also teamed up on

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initiatives with the BBC, Lloyds Banking Group, Age UK, among others.

Doteveryone builds on her work as the UK’s digital champion, a post she was given in 2009 by Gordon Brown before continuing under David Cameron, helping to promote digital inclusion. In 2012, her focus turned towards Go ON UK, the feeder charity to Doteveryone, which sought to bolster the level of tech skills among Britain’s adults, an objective she has held for a number of years. Has she seen progress on the ground? It is difficult to measure, she concedes, but remains adamant that improving uptake is essential to break “horrible cycles of disadvantage”. A failure to do so would have significant consequences for the UK, she argues.

“I think we will be a less effective and empowered economy,” she says. “So the fact that 12 million adults don’t use the internet, I think the last number we worked out was £76bn of value to the economy, that’s not insignificant. I’m just determined

that we use it as a building block, because I believe then we can get better healthcare to more people, we can have a more effective set of public services for more people – not less – and that’s the key part. There’s a universality to the internet that I think is absolutely essential. And that’s what is in danger if we don’t keep putting it at the heart of things.”

She adds: “If you don’t have the ability to use the internet or either advertise yourself or look for things then you really are constrained. So I think it’s a huge enormous piece of the puzzle in terms of helping the UK grow and helping individuals be more robust.”

Doteveryone will also work with public sector bodies and elected representatives to improve their tech savviness. ‘Digital mentors’ have been sent to shadow four MPs, Yvette Cooper (Labour), Matt Warman (Conservative), Calum Kerr (SNP) and Norman Lamb (Lib Dem), to help review how they use the internet, be it

through maintaining constituency casework or studying legislation, and how they can better take advantage of it.

After a series of surveys and interviews, MPs current grasp of the internet and the opportunities it brings is “mixed”, Lane Fox says. “A lot of them are using social media... but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are able to say when looking at a piece of health and social care legislation ‘hold on a minute maybe if the internet was a bit more embedded in this we could think about this a bit differently’.

“So I think as you would expect, it’s a broad spectrum and what we want to do is just try and shade in some of the blank bits.”

Outside of Doteveryone, as a new member on Twitter’s board, Lane Fox is determined to be a “noisy, female” voice informing the team of the abuse experienced by many women on the platform. Though she downgrades her own experience as akin >

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the EU, the subject of the day. Lane Fox is adamant that leaving the bloc after the referendum on 23 June would have negative implications for the tech industry.

“I am fervently pro-Europe and I think it would be really a shame if we decided to come out,” she says. “And it would feel like a massively retrograde step to me in a world which is becoming more connected, not less, to actually disconnect ourselves. I know the other side says ‘it’s not a disconnection’ – it is a disconnection. And so that’s why I think it’s from any angle a no brainer, but particularly with a tech hat on.”

Lane Fox entered the House of Lords in 2013. She concedes that squaring her business life and role as a peer is a difficult balancing act, but relishes the “curiosity and appetite for knowledge” on the red benches. For a keen reformer, she is diplomatic on her views regarding appointing peers, simply championing the process she went through in becoming a crossbencher.

Wrapping up, I feel compelled to ask what the multi-faceted entrepreneur has planned next and whether she will consolidate her endeavours. Even Lane Fox concedes she has more than enough to crack on with.

“No more please! I really want to cool things down, I’m doubling down not doubling up. I really want to contribute to Twitter, I really want to get DotEveryone right, I think this is a huge opportunity. To me there are not really any independent organisations who are thinking about the future for the UK from a completely a political non-partisan, non-commercial point of view.

“And there’s some big things we should be wrestling with, gender balance is one, skills another, but other big ethical questions as well. So it feels like the moment is now and I’m absolutely determined that we can work with some of the incredible things going on in this country to have a bigger impact on more people.”

to being cat called on the street, the issue is rife in the UK and Australia, perhaps explaining why the top brass in California were slow off the mark to take action.

Regarding the wider tech industry, the entrepreneur is somewhat despondent at the continuing underrepresentation of women, who comprise just 17% of the global workforce. On the reasons for the disparity, the considered, erudite peer is scathing.

“It starts at school with traditional computer science... and then women doing different things at university and then not going into the deep tech roles. But it also comes I think a bit from some subconscious bias and latent sexism in the industry, from a very, very kind of monoculture in some ways, that’s spread quite quickly from Silicon Valley,” she says.

“Again, not because everybody is a bad

person, just because if you see a bunch of people that look like you, you would probably hire more people that look like you.”

This is a running theme throughout Lane Fox’s career; challenging accepted truths. Having spent nearly four years overhauling Whitehall’s IT services and working on the gov.uk website, does she understand why Tony Blair complained of “scars on his back” from trying to reform public services?

“The only scars I have are these,” she says, rolling up her sleeve to expose an injury to her upper arm from the car accident. It is a rare glimpse into her inner steel and I blush, regretful at my choice of words. Lane Fox beams a salvaging smile, registering my embarrassment.

Looking to redeem myself, I turn to