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BIRAC, Social Alpha and Mphasis announce Quest for Assistive Technologies

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BIRAC, Mphasis and Tata Trustsâ?? funded Social Alpha Quest for AT to provide â??Lab to Marketâ?? support including optimal product design, market access and customized assistance to each start-up



BIRAC, Social Alpha and Mphasis announced the launch of the 'BIRAC-Social Alpha Quest for Assistive Technologies – supported by Mphasis', a search for start-ups in the Assistive Technology sector to support innovations focussed on enabling and empowering solutions for persons-with-disabilities.

The Quest will identify and select up to 10 innovations that enhance the learning, working and independent living for persons-with-disabilities. These winning innovations will also be provided up to INR 20 lakhs each to facilitate their market access journey, for implementation of work orders.

Dr. Renu Swarup, Secretary DBT & Chairperson, BIRAC said, "BIRAC is promoting development of innovative biotech solutions to address unmet needs. A number of initiatives rolled out in last few years have positively impacted the Biotech Startup ecosystem which has now grown to 2500+ across the country. This includes products and technologies focused for persons-with-disabilities. BIRAC - Social alpha launch of "Quest for Assistive Technologies" intends to identify, handhold and deploy Assistive Technology solutions for the deserving ones. This partnership could prove instrumental in building a pipeline of innovative and affordable solutions. I hope that this initiative will encourage national & international stakeholders to join hands in delivering assistive technologies at scale."

Addressing the audience at the launch event, Dr. Mohd. Aslam, MD, BIRAC said, "BIRAC promotes entrepreneurs, start-ups and SMEs to undertake strategic translational research to develop innovative products and technologies. Technology driven solutions can steer the change for societal well-being and impact billions of lives. I hope that BIRAC-Social alpha Quest for Assistive Technologies would provide a platform for start-ups to leverage this engagement for creating and deploying innovative assistive technologies across the country."

Speaking at the launch event, Manoj Kumar, CEO and Co-founder, Social Alpha, and Head of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Tata Trusts said, "There is a huge shortage of quality solutions that cater to and empower persons-with-disabilities at a price point they can afford. Sometimes we come across innovators who have built the right prototypes, but find them struggling with the end user acceptance, design for manufacturing and market access. Affordability and user experience are the key to large scale adoption of such solutions and our program is designed to validate the product-market fit, help with clinical trials where required and bridge the gaps that exist in the distribution and service channels. We have already incubated four innovative companies in this sector—Bionic Yantra, Blee Technologies, Innaumation, and Tactopus, and through this Quest we are deepening our commitment the sector."

Meenu Bhambhani, Vice President & Head- Corporate Social Responsibility, Mphasis, addressed the event, and said, "At Mphasis we have a strong focus on improving the lives of persons-with-disability. We have partnered with Social Alpha to support the curation, design and implementation of the Quest. This initiative is aimed at introducing game changing innovations to the market; building this cohesive ecosystem with critical organizations will significantly fast-track the lab-to-market journey for innovators. We believe this can really move the needle for disability inclusion in India and through this partnership we are committed to further the cause" Mphasis, through its CSR initiatives, has been doing pioneering and cutting edge work to promote disability inclusion in the mainstream. This partnership with Social Alpha resonates with our focus on providing solutions that enhance equal participation and dignity for people with disabilities in all spheres of life especially through inclusive solutions."

Upon selection, the winners of the Quest will be enrolled into the Accelerator for Inclusive Solutions — a game-changing 3-month accelerator program where they will be given the chance to work with selected implementation agencies within the Social Alpha, BIRAC and Tata Trusts network, interact directly with potential users of their product, and gain exposure to other funders, buyers and CSR initiatives.

As a unique feature, these winning start-ups will also be provided up to 20 lakhs each to kick-start their market access journey, for implementation of work orders, and further support for clinical validation and product engineering. In addition, the start-ups will also have the opportunity to work closely with experts on price discovery, cost optimization, market validation, and marketing and sales.

Multiple estimates suggest that there are anywhere between 4 to 8 crore disabled people in India—i.e. one in twelve households has a family member with a disability. Moreover, due to low literacy levels, social stigma and lack of opportunities, people with disabilities remain the most excluded and unidentified members of Indian society. Large number of children with disabilities stay out of school, disabled adults are likely to be unemployed, and families with a disabled member tend to be economically weaker. While there are several players working to improve the situation, currently, there is no concerted industry effort.

To address this gap, Social Alpha also announced that it would be launching a unique Open Innovation Platform which will serve three key purposes: first, identification of key problems and the critical areas where technological interventions are necessary, second, collaboration of innovators and entrepreneurs to develop the technology to serve identified problem, and third, facilitation of market access for these innovations by aggregating end users and inviting funders, eventually reducing the cost to the end consumer.

“We envisage this platform to include organisations working with persons-with-disabilities, experts and thought leaders, start-ups, channel partners, CSRs arms of companies, family offices and foundations that focus on disabilities, as well as Central and State governments. This platform will bring together the innovation and investment ecosystems; map problems with potential solutions and help capital allocation decision of both philanthropic and commercial capital providers” said Manoj Kumar.

Presently, Social Alpha has partnered with several leading organizations working for inclusivity including Enable India, Artilab, Jaipur Foot, Saksham Trust, Xavier’s Resource Center for the Visually Challenged, National Institute of Speech and Hearing, and AssisTech at IIT-Delhi.

The Quest for Assistive Technologies is open for applicants starting today, June 27, 2019 and will be accepting applications till August 15, 2019.