



Photo: HopeLab

Pam Omidyar and the Science of Giving

Philanthropist Pam Omidyar has long aimed to solve big problems—in high school, her ambitious goal was to cure cancer. The scientific training she pursued in college and a PhD program bring a unique strength to her equally ambitious philanthropic work.

www.GiveSmart.org


The Bridgespan Group
GiveSmart

Pam Omidyar is not one to shy away from big problems. “I initially wanted to find a cure for cancer,” she says of her early start as a biologist. Over time, her focus evolved, but not her ambition. “I was working toward a PhD in plant molecular genetics with the idea that I could maybe improve crop yield and help feed more people.”

This is trademark Omidyar, who has made a career out of experimentation—coming up with new ideas, building teams to implement them, testing and evaluating solutions, then changing course as necessary to ensure maximum results. The ideas are linked by a common goal: improving humanity. In 1995, Omidyar’s college sweetheart (now husband) Pierre Omidyar founded eBay. When the company went public in 1998, Pam’s means of improving humanity changed dramatically—from lab work to a very different kind of legwork. “We really thought there was a great responsibility to take this wealth and do something meaningful with it,” she says.



Pam and Pierre Omidyar

Omidyar, who once clocked long hours in fruit fly and immunology labs, has remained true to this mission as a philanthropist. Over the last 10-plus years, she has founded, or co-founded with her husband, all four of the couple’s philanthropic organizations, starting with a foundation in 2000, which later morphed to become the Omidyar Network in 2004—each one unique in its approach, but all focusing on creating opportunities and changing systems in order to improve humanity. The result has been a thoughtful, determined brand of philanthropy, tackling complicated problems with the patience of a methodical cancer researcher.

Using their skills

When the Omidyars embarked on their first philanthropic journey, they knew they wanted to bring their personal experiences to bear on their philanthropy. With eBay, Pierre had created a community and a platform that gave everyone equal access to information, opportunity, and the tools to pursue their goals. As philanthropists, these ideals guided Pam toward microfinance, which they supported, beginning in 2004, through their newly minted Omidyar Network.

When the Omidyars embarked on their first philanthropic journey, they knew they wanted to bring their personal experiences to bear.

Microfinance makes small loans available to low-income people, enabling them to start businesses and improve their families' quality of life. To date, the Omidyars have invested more than \$100 million in 28 microfinance organizations. In addition to loans, Omidyar grants have supported infrastructure, providing technical assistance to early stage microfinance institutions and helping to create an information clearinghouse called the Microfinance Information Exchange, or MIX—now frequently referred to as the “Bloomberg of the Microfinance Industry.” Omidyar Network soon expanded its focus to a range of areas, from helping people secure property rights to facilitating more government transparency.

As effective as they'd been, she could see the limits of microfinance: Many people would never be able to access microfinance programs because they did not have basic rights.

While building the microfinance portfolio, Pam was continually assessing the success of their work. As effective as they'd been, she could see the limits of microfinance: Many people would never be able to access microfinance programs because they did not have basic rights. “A woman's not going

to get access to microfinance loans if she is enslaved,” she explains. Meanwhile, as the world remembered the 10-year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide and as Omidyar was starting to wrap her mind around the atrocities in Sudan, she found herself at a breaking point. “Mass violence and enslavement—two of the worst things man could do to man—were just not acceptable,” she says. Omidyar felt strongly that she wanted to use her philanthropy to try to “change human behavior for the better.” This belief led Omidyar to embark on her riskiest experiment yet, a new organization called Humanity United.

Learning and improving in Liberia

With a mission to build peace and advance human freedom, Humanity United (HU) seeks to address some of the world's toughest problems—finding long-term solutions to human rights abuses stemming from crimes against humanity and modern-day slavery.

Specifically in Liberia, HU is taking an innovative approach to building peace and preventing a return to conflict. Liberia emerged from a decades-long civil war in 2003. In 2004, the outlook was bright for the small African nation with ambitious new leadership. But with little infrastructure and a weak economy, the risk of returning to conflict was omnipresent.

“It's difficult not to fall in love with Liberia, and the potential, the opportunity that exists there,”



Omidyar with Liberian President
Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
Photo: Humanity United

explains Humanity United President and CEO Randy Newcomb. Donor money flowed quickly into the country, but the funds were poorly coordinated and, in some cases, completely untracked. Philanthropists were not achieving as much as they could.

Ultimately, the goal is to both make the most of current funding and attract even more support to Liberia.

In response, Omidyar set out to bring donors together. The result? Humanity United became the first and largest supporter of a privately funded, government-run Philanthropy Secretariat in the office of the country's president, which encourages coordination between the government and philanthropists. Backed by Humanity United together with a heady group of partners—including the Liberian government, the Global Philanthropy Forum, the Open Society Institute, as well as the NoVo, Daphne, and McCall McBain Foundations—the secretariat facilitates information sharing and increases alignment of efforts focused on reducing poverty. Ultimately,

the goal is to both make the most of current funding and attract even more support to Liberia.

Newcomb calls it “the team sport approach,” and so far, the approach is working. “It’s been one of the more successful efforts to...multiply and aggregate the efforts of private donors.”

Others agree. Jane Wales, President and CEO of the World Affairs Council and Foundation of the Global Philanthropy Forum, calls the strategy in Liberia “a blueprint that has persuaded...private philanthropists

and investors to work in close coordination with each other—and with a government they feel they can trust.”

Over the past two years, through financial support and an active and engaged staff, Humanity United has helped the Secretariat become more influential and achieve results:

- For the first time in its history, the Liberian government now collects information about private donor activity and reports the activities in its national budgeting documents.
- The Secretariat has hosted two visits to the country for new donors, introducing philanthropists to the country and opportunities for change. The work has

Key Takeaways

- **Accept learning as part of the process:** Rather than fear failure, plan on learning as you go along.
- **Consider giving as a “team sport”:** If there are other players in your philanthropic field, coordinate efforts for maximum results.
- **Bring your own skill set to bear on your philanthropy:** Scientist, doctor, lawyer, writer—use your professional training to enrich your approach.

resulted in engagement by a dozen new donors. Collectively, donors have committed nearly \$1 million to date, including nine direct grants to local NGOs.

- Recently, the Secretariat helped the Monrovia Mayor's office rework an application to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, ensuring the Liberian government put its best foot forward. This collaboration resulted in a pivotal \$5 million grant to improve critical city services.

It is still early, but with stories like this continuing to emerge from new donors and new partnerships, Humanity United believes that the Secretariat may be a model for increased donor coordination in other post-conflict environments.



Omidyar volunteering

A perpetual and steep learning curve

Despite the praise, Omidyar still considers Humanity United to be on a steep learning curve. “We actually have to put ourselves in the places where the ideals of peace and freedom are challenged the most—and then we have to figure it out.” In her view, there is no replacement for an on-the-ground, in-the-thick-of-it presence to learn what is needed and to form relationships with partners who can deliver.

Hearing Omidyar speak, one can't help but wonder if this is where she is most content—on a steep slope, a big problem always in front of her. “With Humanity United, I think I bring a scientist's ambition to tackle big problems together with a willingness to engage in experimentation, risk, and testing,” she says. “And then, using what you've learned, to guide your next series of hypotheses is really important.”

“With Humanity United, I think I bring a scientist's ambition to tackle big problems together with a willingness to engage in experimentation, risk, and testing.”

In 2010, the Omidyars were named #2 on *Barron's* list of most effective philanthropists—down from #1 in 2009. But Pam would tell you she's much less interested in the praise than she is in the problem. “I think someone once asked me, ‘How do you want Humanity United to be known in 50 years?’ And I remember thinking, if Humanity United is never actually known or acknowledged, but the world no longer accepts atrocious human rights

abuses such as genocide and slavery as inevitable byproducts of our modern society, then I'll be pretty happy.”

HopeLab: Science with Heart, Play with Purpose

Back in the days when Pam Omidyar was working in an immunology lab, watching cancer cells multiply under a microscope, she would unwind at night by playing video games with Pierre. In time, she began to wonder if giving young cancer patients a chance to blast their cancer in a video game might improve their health. In 2001, she founded HopeLab to develop and test this concept.

The most literal expression of Omidyar's scientific background in her philanthropic work, HopeLab researches and develops technology-based products that promote positive health behavior in young people. Chief among these products is Re-Mission, a video game for young cancer patients. After creating the game, HopeLab conducted a large-scale randomized control study, similar to a drug-evaluation research trial, to evaluate its results on patients. The results were positive, showing Re-Mission significantly improved the likelihood that young cancer patients would stick to their prescribed medication, increasing the chances of successful treatment.

The data, published in 2008 in the medical journal *Pediatrics*, has given rise to increased collaboration between the gaming and health industries. Next up from HopeLab is Zamzee, a product focused on boosting physical activity in teens—work that has already been recognized by the White House as a leading example of successful social innovation. As HopeLab board chair, Omidyar continues to guide the organization's work to harness the power and appeal of technology to improve kids' health.

SOURCES INCLUDE:

- Bridgespan interview with Pam Omidyar and correspondence with Omidyar Network, Humanity United, and HopeLab staff members.
- "From the Shadows: Wife of eBay's founder shines a spotlight on human rights," Trust Africa in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, December 11, 2008.
- Government of Liberia [Philanthropy Secretariat](#) website.
- [HopeLab](#) website.
- [Humanity United](#) website.
- [Omidyar Network](#) website.
- "The Radical Philanthropist," *Forbes*, May 1, 2000.
- Rahim Kanani, "A New Kind of Investing: The Philanthropy Secretariat in Liberia," *Huffington Post*, May 6, 2010.
- Thomas J. Tierney and Joel L. Fleishman, *Give Smart: Philanthropy That Gets Results* (Public Affairs, 2011).
- Jane Wales, "Strengthening Governing Capacity in Post-Conflict Liberia," February 25, 2010, Global Philanthropy Forum "President's Corner."