

PRESS RELEASE

Less than 14% of world's major tech companies deliver on digital inclusion

- *The World Benchmarking Alliance's (WBA) Digital Inclusion Benchmark assessed 200 companies, with only 27 scoring a passing score of at least 50 out of 100.*
- *With far too few tech companies using their power for good, WBA urges digital companies to help ensure a better digital system that is fair for people everywhere.*
- *The best performing companies are Telefonica, Orange, Deutsche Telekom, Apple and Microsoft.*

Geneva, 13 March 2023 – The World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA)'s latest Digital Inclusion Benchmark, published today, during the World Summit on the Information Society Forum, finds that the digital divide is widening. The research assessed 200 tech companies from around the world, looking at whether they are enabling greater access to digital technologies, improving digital skills, reducing usage risks, and ensuring inclusive and ethical innovation.

The findings show that far too few tech companies are using their power for good. Only 27 out of 200 businesses achieved a score of at least 50% on key criteria. With tech companies holding huge influence, WBA is urging digital companies – and the policymakers and investors who can shape their behaviour – to take rapid action that ensures a fair and safe digital system for people around the world.

Since the first Digital Inclusion Benchmark was published three years ago, there are clear signs that holding companies accountable through benchmarking and stakeholder influence – alongside practical support – is helping to drive progress. Of the 150 companies included in previous benchmark iterations who were also assessed this year, the average score increased by 6.8%.

In addition, 13 of the 100 companies included in the first benchmark made commitments to ethical Artificial Intelligence (AI) principles, following collaboration with WBA's Collective Impact Coalition for digital systems – a group of investors, civil society leaders and other stakeholders providing practical support to businesses wanting to improve their digital inclusivity.

Yet worrying gaps in company action and accountability remain. As a result, many people across society are at risk of missing out on the positive power of digital access. This includes people in developing countries, individuals on low incomes, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and rural communities. While 95% of the world has the theoretical potential to access the internet, almost half the global population is offline due to limited digital skills or affordability issues.

Pauliina Murphy, World Benchmarking Alliance's Engagement & Communications Director, said:

“As the global community increasingly relies on digital access for work, education, health and finances, the consequences of digital exclusion are starker than ever. The digital divide is a huge problem, and we need tech companies around the world to step up to address it. Tech companies have the potential to make a profound positive difference – from helping communities to connect and cooperate to ensuring safe access – and we need every business to act on this responsibility. With the pace of change across the sector currently too slow, policymakers and investors must help to raise the bar.”

The best performing companies across the benchmark were Telefonica, Orange, Deutsche Telekom, Apple and Microsoft. Examples of their leading practices include running skills programs for women and girls, and making clear commitments to data privacy and child protection.

Across all companies, Alibaba, the Chinese multinational e-commerce business, showed the highest increase in score (from 16/100 to 41/100 this year, a 150% increase), due to improved transparency through a dedicated ESG report, engagement with the Digital Inclusion Benchmark this year, and initiatives to provide online and offline classes on digital literacy for the elderly in China, and a partnership with an African non-profit to teach computer programming to 1 million women across the globe.

The World Benchmarking Alliance's research suggests that, concerningly, some companies are still disguising the truth behind their data. Many companies use vague text to describe their commitment to cybersecurity, AI ethics, child online safety and data privacy. In addition, some suggest they are providing a Global Reporting Initiative disclosure – an independent standards organisation that aims to increase transparent reporting – yet their response does not meet the requirement.

Encouraging companies to commit to protect human rights and assess their digital risks could help tackle some of the tech industry's biggest problems. Many challenges for the sector – such as children's digital rights, ethical AI and data privacy – are human rights issues.

As the digital sector is largely unregulated, high-level social commitments to human rights, decent work and acting ethically are critical to help hold companies accountable and increase progress. Indicators from WBA's Social Transformation Framework which cover these commitments were integrated into this year's Digital Inclusion Benchmark to ensure a comprehensive picture of company performance.

ENDS

Notes to editors

For more information, please contact Emily Cooper: emily@forster.co.uk / 0203 833 4774 or Maggie Hiu Tsun Leung: maggie@forster.co.uk / 0207 403 2230

About the Digital Inclusion Benchmark

Please see the full Digital Inclusion Benchmark available here:

<https://www.worldbenchmarkingalliance.org/digital-inclusion-benchmark/>

To see the full methodology, visit:

<https://www.worldbenchmarkingalliance.org/research/methodology-digital-inclusion-benchmark-covers-four-critical-themes/>

About the World Benchmarking Alliance

- *Founded in 2018, the World Benchmarking Alliance is a non-profit organisation holding 2,000 of the world's most influential companies accountable for their part in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.*
- *It does this by publishing free and publicly available benchmarks on their performance and showing what good corporate practice looks like.*
- *The benchmarks provide companies with a clear roadmap of what commitments and changes they must make to put our planet, society and economy on a more sustainable and resilient path.*
- *They also equip everyone – from governments and financial institutions to civil society organisations and individuals – with the insights that they need to collectively incentivise leading companies to keep going and pressure the laggards to catch up.*
- *Visit www.worldbenchmarkingalliance.org and follow @SDGBenchmarks.*