

Tom Ryan
Jeff Skinner

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Eight19 (A): A Social Enterprise?

In spring 2012, Simon Bransfield-Garth, CEO of Eight19, prepared for possibly his most important board meeting since joining the company at the end of 2010. Eight19 had been established to develop leading-edge photovoltaic (PV) cells for the global market, addressing both product and production technology. The market testing he had undertaken to demonstrate the market for off-grid uses in developing economies had demonstrated a real opportunity for pay-as-you-go (PAYG) solar power. It could have a significant impact on the lives of people in sub-Saharan Africa and other markets who currently lived without electricity. It could also be hugely profitable.

He reflected on the key strategic decisions facing the Board and the impact this would have on the future direction of the company.

Introduction

Eight19 was founded in September 2010 by a group of eminent physicists from Cambridge University to develop and manufacture third-generation solar cells based on printed plastic technology. These could be used to fabricate inexpensive, flexible, robust, lightweight solar modules. The company, based on the Cambridge Science Park, takes its name from the time it takes sunlight to reach the earth: eight minutes and 19 seconds.

The opportunities and challenges of solar power

The world has become increasingly addicted to electricity since the development of electric-powered devices such as the telegraph and lighting in the 1800s, and in particular since Thomas Edison switched on the world's first large-scale electric power network in New York City in 1882. Today, electrical power is typically generated at large facilities, transmitted at high voltages (which reduces losses during transmission) across a grid to sub-stations, where the power is stepped down, and finally distributed to homes and businesses. Large industrial users may run their own generating stations which are often linked to the grid to sell their excess electricity.

Tom Ryan is a graduate of London Business School. Jeff Skinner is the Executive Director of the Deloitte Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at London Business School.

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