



As the global social impact sector continues to grapple with questions of scale, sustainability, and meaningful engagement, few initiatives have reshaped Ashoka's ecosystem as profoundly as the Ashoka Support Network (ASN). In this interview, Yuliya Koroleva, ASN Global Communication Manager, speaks with Olivier Kayser, former Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company, founding force behind Ashoka in France and founder of Hystra, an impact strategy consulting firm. Olivier reflects on the personal turning point that led him from corporate leadership to social entrepreneurship, the radical philosophy that shaped ASN's creation, and two decades of lessons on community, risk, and system change. From redefining philanthropy as engagement rather than fundraising to envisioning ASN as a global knowledge-driven force, he offers a holistic, experience-based perspective on the past, present, and future of the Ashoka Support Network (ASN), a community that has quietly reshaped how Ashoka engages talent, capital, and commitment.

You were directly involved in shaping the Ashoka Support Network (ASN). How did this community come into being?

The idea emerged when I was tasked with founding Ashoka in France. I was sent to Arlington and told my objective was to raise enough funding to cover three years of operations. The standard approach was to go to foundations or high-net-worth individuals, make the case, and ask for money. I did that in France: I listed the wealthiest people, reached many of them through networks; —maybe 20–30% of the top forty. People were interested, but they all said they already had their foundation or priorities. I got no commitments. Then my daughter, who was about twelve, asked what I did. I explained I was going to wealthy people to ask them for money to start Ashoka in France. She said, “So now you’re begging?” I didn’t like that. It pushed me to rethink the relationship with our funders.

What did that moment change for you?

It made me realize the dynamic felt wrong. At McKinsey, when I invoiced clients and they paid large fees, they were the ones saying thank you; —because they felt they got more value than what they paid for. In philanthropy, it was the opposite: when someone gave to Ashoka, I was the one saying thank you. I wanted to reverse that; so that people would thank Ashoka for giving them the opportunity to contribute, rather than Ashoka thanking them for their money. I also realized there were many people who had successful careers, didn’t necessarily have millions, but had capabilities and networks that could be extremely helpful to social entrepreneurs; — who often don’t have connections to the business world.

How did you turn that into a concrete model?

I came up with a value proposition focused on engagement, not fundraising. The first time I tried it was with a lawyer. I told him: if you want social impact, you can donate to an NGO or advise someone you know in a charity. But what I can offer is mentoring and helping the best social entrepreneurs; —starting with the best in France. You won’t be alone: you’ll be with others bringing different skills and networks. And the fellows will also have support; —legal, IT, pro bono partners; —so you’re not giving advice that can’t be implemented. I told him that for a few hours a month, this would be the best impact return on his time. He replied: “And for €10,000 a year, it’s a great deal.” That’s when I

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thought: yes, this works. And I said: you'll be interviewed by other members. We want to ensure fit both ways; —capabilities, ethics, and that fellows will benefit and feel comfortable. From that day, I swore I would never ask for money and never say thank you; —not out of arrogance, but because it sets the relationship correctly.

Why was it important to remove money from the center of the relationship?

Because if people feel you are after their money, they behave accordingly. I once brought in someone mainly because of his checkbook. Within half an hour, a fellow asked me, "Who is this person?" Others felt his behaviour was inappropriate; —he acted as if he had the biggest checkbook in the room and therefore the biggest right to speak. That was my fault. If the first impression is that we value the person; —their insights, knowledge, and networks; —and money is secondary, then the relationship starts well and stays healthy.

You also insisted everyone pays the same. Why?

Because it protects the community. No one is valued more because they pay more. People are valued for engagement and contribution, not financial power. Also, it becomes easy for ASN members to invite friends. It doesn't feel like a pitch, so there's no awkward moment where someone feels pressured. If the friend is interested, we say: great; —let's go through the interview process. It creates a safer, more comfortable relationship from the start.

You've said ASN was designed to be structurally more sustainable than Ashoka's traditional funding model. How?

Historically, Ashoka's model was linked to fellows under stipend. —Ashoka took a markup on stipends. But the number of fellows under stipend is relatively stable in a country. As the number of fellows increases, the financial resources don't grow proportionally. Fellowship services remain underinvested, and fellows can lose touch. ASN was designed to grow with the total number of fellows; —the stock, not just the flow. Engagement opportunities depend on all fellows, not only new ones. That means revenue can scale with the full community, making it much more sustainable.

What impact did you see beyond funding and support?

What I didn't anticipate to that extent was how much fellows and ASN members would transform each other. They come from different worlds, with misconceptions on both sides. By working together, ASN members became more like social entrepreneurs, and social entrepreneurs became more open to business approaches. Sometimes you walk into a room with ASN members and fellows and you can't tell who is who; —that's the beauty. It breaks down cultural and ideological barriers and builds real relationships and bonds. That personal transformation may be the greatest impact of the program.

Did ASN also change internal dynamics within Ashoka?

Yes. It created a form of informal governance. In France, when the head of Ashoka France left, ASN members didn't accept a prolonged leadership vacuum. They looked for candidates, interviewed them, and drove the process; —then it was approved by Arlington, but they didn't wait passively. Some ASN members took operational roles too; —one

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became interim CFO for a long time. They were proactive without being disrespectful or overstepping. They supported very actively, and in a friendly way.

Why is that important for a decentralized organization like Ashoka?

Because if one foundation stops funding, you can blame it or say they don't understand. But if 50 ASN members stop renewing, stop inviting friends; —these are capable, smart, well-intentioned people. If they disengage, it's a signal: we must be doing something wrong. They become a collective voice; —a kind of rubber band that forces you to pay attention. In a dispersed organization, that is powerful.

Stepping back: how did you personally come to Ashoka?

I was a senior partner at McKinsey and decided to leave when I was 45; —midlife crisis, perhaps. I thought: what would I think of myself the day I die? Being a senior partner at McKinsey wasn't going to be enough for me. I decided to do something in philanthropy, but I had no clue how. A friend told me about Ashoka; —I had never heard of it. I met Fernande Raine, who was tasked with starting Ashoka in Europe. I liked that it was multinational, cross-sector, entrepreneurial; —and that I could help start something new. Then Bill Drayton came through Paris. We spent half a day together. He shared his vision, and I barely spoke. From that day, I didn't see the world the same way.

What was the highlight of your conversation with Bill Drayton?

The notion of system change. Not giving fish, not teaching how to fish; —reinventing the fishing industry. I loved that. It was strategic. Social entrepreneurship isn't complicated because it's social; —it's complicated because it's entrepreneurship. Jean-Baptiste Say in 1803 identified the critical role of entrepreneurs – the scarcest resource- in economic growth as they take capital from areas of low productivity to areas of high productivity. You remain an entrepreneur as long as you disrupt the system; once you just manage and grow, you lose that entrepreneurial quality. After 18 years advising large corporations that capture value rather than create it, listening to Ashoka fellows focus on creating value was rejuvenating. I probably learned about strategy with fellows more than at McKinsey.

Over the last twenty years, what have you learned that should inform Ashoka and ASN today?

The core problem limiting progress is risk aversion. People in corporations and institutions are not ready to take the risk needed. They might give money away and accept losing it, but investing in risky ventures is much harder for them. They are not entrepreneurs. Many have never failed, and that's why they got to the top. When you ask them at 50 or 60 years old to take real risk, they panic. I probably overestimated the potential of corporations to scale innovations. Social entrepreneurs often struggle to scale, and the last 20 years have largely confirmed that. But corporations haven't reliably solved it either. We're still stuck with the scaling challenge.

So, what is your vision for the future of ASN?

I see two major opportunities to further strengthen ASN's impact.

- 1. Accelerating the growth of the community by enriching the member experience.**

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In France as in other countries, we have the potential to bring together a much larger network. To achieve this, we need to further structure our approach to community engagement: proactively tracking participation, understanding what motivates our members, and intervening early when signs of disengagement appear. Offering more meaningful opportunities to contribute, providing constructive feedback to mentors, and supporting them in building new skills can significantly enhance the ASN experience. When members feel valued and empowered, they naturally become our most effective ambassadors to attract new talent.

2. Transforming ASN into a true platform for shared knowledge.

We have an extraordinary wealth of collective expertise that could be organised more systematically, globally. By developing thematic practices—such as corporate partnerships, fundraising, governance, or financial strategy—and by structuring our learnings, we would enable any ASN member, anywhere in the world, to access reliable, actionable expertise.

Over time, these thematic leaders would gain both depth and perspective thanks to the variety of cases they encounter. This would not only amplify our collective impact but also significantly enhance the perceived value for members.

What kind of help does ASN need to scale this—communication, education, something else?

Communication should come through the experience itself. If an ASN member tells friends about what they personally experienced; —not what they were told; —their friends will be convinced. Our job is to ensure ASN members have a great, rewarding experience. Then word of mouth will do the rest. We must avoid mistakes: respect the rules, interview candidates, don't ask for money, don't negotiate upwards, don't get in the way. Not getting in the way also means measuring engagement, interviewing systematically anyone who leaves or stops paying, ensuring people get what they expected; —or not bringing in someone who isn't a good fit.

In your view, who is the “right fit” for ASN?

We aim to engage individuals who have succeeded professionally, not necessarily as entrepreneurs. They bring useful skills, networks, and a genuine desire to contribute. ASN does not attract people seeking prestige; there is no status attached to giving more, and that's an important strength. Recruitment works best through word of mouth. When members refer people they trust, and candidates are endorsed by two ASN members, the fit is almost always strong. These profiles are not scarce—we simply need the right conduit, and personal referrals remain the most effective. It's also essential to position ASN correctly: it is a fellowship program, not a fundraising one. Placing it under fundraising encourages the wrong mindset. ASN belongs alongside venture and fellowship, ideally under unified leadership to maximise alignment and impact.

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