



WHY "ANT"?

How did one of China's biggest tech companies land on such a small namesake? On their website, Ant Financial, which helps facilitate payments and loans of all sizes – some less than \$1 – explains: "The ant is a symbol of a small but tenacious force in the natural world. Ants may be small, but they have limitless strength when they work together. The ant also symbolizes our trust in and reliance on small- and micro-enterprises."

THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED 26,000 TREES IN New York's Central Park. Ant Financial, an affiliate company of Alibaba Group that's been valued at \$60 billion, helps plant roughly 10,000 more trees than that every day, on average, in a desert in Inner Mongolia. Or, more accurately, 220 million of its users do, through the company's "Ant Forest" initiative.

Through Ant Financial's mobile and online payment platform, Alipay – China's equivalent to Apple Pay or PayPal – users can join "Ant Forest." Once signed up, they accumulate "green energy" through their Alipay accounts by recording activities that have reduced their carbon footprint, like taking public transport, paying utility bills or booking tickets online.

When their accumulated green energy reaches a certain level, it can be converted into a virtual tree. Then, in collaboration with the Society of Entrepreneurs and Ecology (SEE) Foundation, Ant Financial converts these virtual trees into real ones, planting a saxaul tree in the Alashan Desert in Inner Mongolia. Saxauls are native to middle and central Asia, can withstand long periods of drought and, in desert conditions, tend to be relatively small, not much larger than a shrub.

The Ant Forest app launched in late August 2016. By April 2017, Ant Forest had 220 million users – roughly 3 percent of the world's population – and had planted almost 8.5 million trees. According to estimates, these efforts are collectively reducing carbon emission levels by more than 2,500 tons of CO₂ per day.

It's one of the signature initiatives that helped land Ant Financial at No. 6 on *Fortune's* latest "Change the World" rankings, the highest of any company headquartered in Asia. Another initiative, announced at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017, saw Ant Financial and the

United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) launch the world's first "Green Digital Finance Alliance" to promote the use of green finance throughout the global financial system.

The emphasis on using financial technology for social good starts from the very top. Eric Jing, CEO of Ant Financial, wrote last year that Ant Forest was one of the company's products he was "most satisfied with" in 2016, as it demonstrated one of the company's core beliefs that "science and technology are the greatest drivers of public welfare in our age."

But the belief that fintech can champion sustainable development also emanates from the ground up, so to speak.

Wang Zu, the Manager of Ant Forest, received an email last year from his boss. It was a sunny afternoon, Zu remembers. And the email asked Zu to lead a large-scale green finance initiative at Ant Financial.

What's distinctive about Ant Financial is what Zu's boss *didn't* say in the email: what the initiative needed to look like, what its KPIs were, and when a deadline for delivery was.

That's because Ant Financial places a real emphasis on employees driving initiatives themselves, and then tries to give its people the freedom to be creative.

It's a win-win for the company. No industry relies on innovation more heavily than tech, and empowering employees makes them more motivated and engaged – and can lead to breakthrough innovations, in both business and social initiatives.

Zu cites this culture as an essential component of Ant Forest's creation. He brainstormed with colleagues of all levels and from a number of different departments. It was from one of these exchanges that the idea for Ant Forest was born.

The FOREST from the

Ant Financial, China's most valuable fintech company, allows users to help plant a forest via smartphone.

DR LU JIANZHONG and **ISOBEL BROWN** report



SCREENS

At an invitation-only seminar on public welfare innovation, we spoke with Hong Jun Zhu, Director of Brand & Communications at Ant Financial, about the company's culture. What difference does it really make?

He told us a story about Ant Financial's engineering teams who, unasked, created an initiative that allowed visually impaired people to use Ant Financial's mobile payment services. It's this blend of business innovation, social good and individual ownership, Zhu says, that they see as invaluable; staying ahead of competition, and yet connected to society.

Along with the rest of Alibaba, Ant Financial encourages employees to tackle problems outside of the office. "Alibaba's 'Three Hours of Community Service' program requires all employees to take part in a minimum of three hours of community service every year," Zhu told us. "Jack Ma [Alibaba's founder and executive chairman] recently disclosed to internal employees the amount of service hours he has accrued thus far for the 2017 fiscal year, reporting 45.5 hours of community service."

The effects of these initiatives reach beyond Ant Financial's employees – some have a surprisingly powerful influence on customers and users.

Take Ant Forest. Among the hundreds of millions of "gardeners," most of whom are Millennials, is a postgraduate student at Peking University, majoring in botany. His research focuses on saxaul trees, though he has never seen a real saxaul forest. In order to plant his own saxaul tree, he commuted by subway and bicycle every day, and paid his daily expenses with Alipay. His research team also began growing virtual trees via their smartphones, hoping to eventually help create a genuine saxaul forest.

Jiang, a native of Fujian province, is another Millennial "gardener." During his wife's pregnancy, he accompanied her during her daily walks. All the footsteps they took were recorded and converted to green energy on Ant Forest. By the time their baby was born, they had accumulated enough energy to grow one saxaul tree.

They want to tell their child, as he or she grows, about how this tree came to be, and explain that even the smallest choices we make can help create something lasting and beautiful.

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