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Boris Johnson urges top UK tech firms to join coronavirus fight

The UK's leading tech companies and artificial intelligence researchers queued up to offer staff and technical support to fight coronavirus at a Downing Street summit on Wednesday night, in what one attendee called a "digital Dunkirk".

The meeting, which was attended by about 30 different companies from across the UK online and science sectors, was personally addressed by the prime minister who gave a "rousing" speech urging companies to provide relevant resources to contain the outbreak.

In a sign of the importance placed on the tech response, the audience was addressed by the government's chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, and attended by the NHS chief executive officer, Simon Stevens. Each company was asked to volunteer resources. "They went around the table, laid out what they were dealing with, what they were looking for, and asked: 'What do you have to offer?'" according to one attendee.

Companies who confirmed their attendance included Google's London-based DeepMind artificial intelligence research unit, while sources said Peter Thiel's secretive data analytics company Palantir pledged to commit its engineering staff to help the government effort.

Other tech companies lacking in engineering or data tool capabilities pledged other resources. Uber offered to provide free taxi rides to medical staff, while the likes of food delivery service Deliveroo offered to keep hospital workers fed. Amazon said it would provide its video conferencing tools and other aspects of its cloud computing services to the health service for free.

The prime minister's lead adviser Dominic Cummings asked each business to offer what they could towards the effort, before passing the details on to representatives of NHSX – the health service's digital transformation arm – to work out how best to deploy them. Other support came from London artificial intelligence company Faculty, while the likes of Microsoft and Apple were also in attendance.

The importance placed on the meeting is a recognition that tech platforms – often facing a tough time from the government – can reach the population with accurate information in a way that many traditional media outlets cannot.

It is not the first time the government has turned to tech firms for help over the virus, but so far the response has largely focused on asking major social networks to improve the quality of messaging and reducing the level of online disinformation about the illness.

The meeting on Wednesday night suggests that some of the offers of assistance were either too ambitious to succeed in immediately delaying the spread of the pandemic, or they required data that is not necessarily available, given the unsatisfactory state of the National Health Service's computer systems.

Other concerns include ensuring appropriate control of sensitive information, and the long-term impact of allowing a large number of private companies to work with the healthcare system's data.