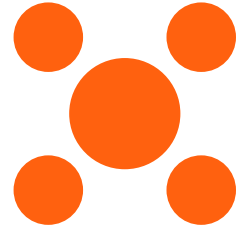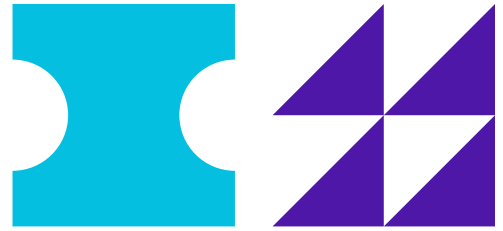![PMI logo] Project Management Institute

Megatrends 2021

Tomorrow Starts Now

Sunil Prashara
President & CEO, PMI

COVID upended almost every aspect of our lives last year—disrupting the very nature of how we live, work, and play. We now find ourselves at a unique moment in history. And as we look forward, we can see glimmers of how humanity is finding opportunities to not just recover, but transform.

This is not to diminish the economic and social challenges ahead. They are profound. But as we've seen since the pandemic first began, there is a new ecosystem of change-makers who are turning bold new strategies into reality.

This requires project leaders with a balance of technical know-how, business acumen and what we call power skills—like empathy, creativity, and inspirational leadership. Yet they must also have an understanding of the major trends reshaping the world and how those trends amplify and accelerate one another. Only then can they create a multiplier effect for powerful change.

To help with that, PMI conducted an assessment of the most pressing, long-term trends around the globe—from COVID to climate change, equality movements to artificial intelligence. We evaluated research, news reports and industry data, and conducted interviews with project leaders—then synthesized those findings into one concise guide designed to benefit our stakeholders around the world.

I hope you enjoy and find useful this summary of the five megatrends we see driving the business world. As this year made clear, change is inevitable. But by understanding the drivers behind the volatility, organizations and their leaders can thrive in The Project Economy, delivering positive social impact at a time when it's needed most.

As we've seen since the pandemic first began, there is a new ecosystem of change-makers who are turning bold new strategies into reality.
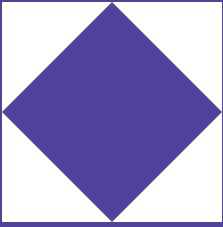
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Five megatrends dominate the project economy, and all share a common thread: they are exacerbating exclusion, disruption, and discontent.
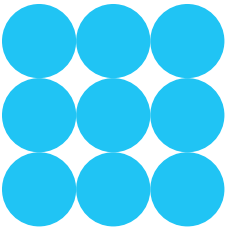
MEGATREND MULTIPLIERS

Three ways organizations can target all the megatrends, through the types of projects they focus on, and their approach to those projects, creating a multiplier effect for good.

Healing Fractures, Building Bridges

Fraught with uncertainty, 2020 was a year that tested even the most exceptional organizations. There was no escaping the pandemic and the tremendous toll it took on communities and industries across the globe. But leaders also had to contend with political upheaval, civil rights protests, and stark social inequalities—all while navigating new ways of working. The result? Severe socioeconomic and technological shockwaves that were impossible to escape.

To deepen project leaders' understanding of the major developments reshaping our world, PMI has identified five megatrends, which all share a common thread: they are exacerbating the endemic exclusion, disruption, and discontent that have crept into our society.

Amid the chaos, executives and project leaders have been forced to make difficult decisions on how to move forward and what projects they pursue (or not). The best of these leaders have used these times as a catalyst for change—delivering solutions at the intersection of multiple megatrends.

The world is only beginning to ponder the postpandemic reality. The changes—and challenges—will be monumental, but the project management community—and all change-makers who can turn ideas into reality—stands ready to help build a better world.

Five megatrends dominate The Project Economy. Here's how a new ecosystem of change-makers is finding business opportunities with positive social impact.

GETTY IMAGES

MEGATREND

COVID-19

The health impact cannot be overstated—but it's everything else the pandemic laid bare that's forcing companies to rethink business as usual.

The pandemic fundamentally altered the business, geopolitical, technological, and economic landscape in 2020. There were the devastating health impacts, with more than 1.7 million people dead by year's end.[1] And there were the very real fears of a global recession worse than any experienced since World War II.[2] At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis exposed—and exacerbated—systemic inequalities in income, wealth, employment, and access to healthcare for marginalized groups.

Data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows communities of color in the United States experienced higher rates of infection and death than their white counterparts (see figure 1). Lower-income earners and those without higher education faced similar inequities. On the economic side,

the UN predicted the pandemic (and the accompanying economic slowdown, job losses, and lack of social protection) would push 96 million people into extreme poverty this year, with women bearing the largest brunt, particularly in South Asia.[3]

COVID-19 also transformed the pace and scale of digitalization, with a huge impact on how people work and learn. "The world of education got knocked 30 years ahead overnight," said Mac Glovinsky, program manager, UNICEF.[4] With schools in more than 190 countries closed, he and his team worked with Microsoft, the University of Cambridge, and Dubai Cares to quickly expand an existing digital platform that would meet pandemic-fueled demands of stuck-at-home students in underprivileged areas.

The UN predicted the pandemic would push **96 million people** into extreme poverty.

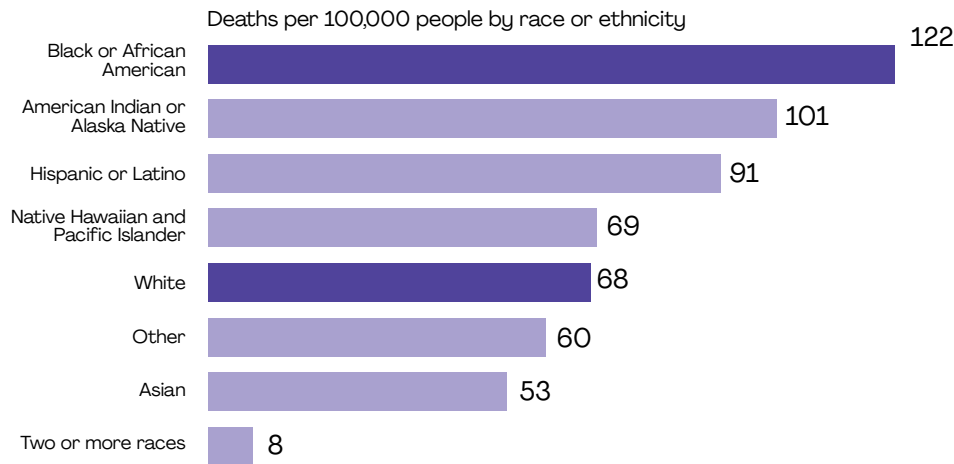> **"The world of education got knocked 30 years ahead overnight."**
>
> —Mac Glovinsky, program manager, UNICEF

Yet for youth and adults alike, such mass digitalization has reduced the sense of belonging, and increased anxiety, depression, and disengagement. And in the business world, it created a divide between digital knowledge workers who could shelter in place and those in at-risk jobs or who lacked access to high-speed internet—almost all of whom were economically disadvantaged.
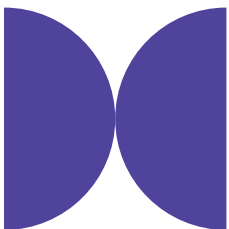
For project leaders, it's been a time to build bridges. "COVID-19 has disrupted our normal way of life," said Hugh Lawson, project director, Sydney Metro City & Southwest in Australia.[5] "The challenges of working remotely and physical distancing have been difficult, but we've also seen greater collaboration and creativity. It's allowed us to do things differently." With much of Sydney closed down, for example, his team had an unanticipated and unprecedented opportunity to accelerate its schedules—working on some sites for longer hours and even shutting down some roads in the city center.

Figure 1. 2020 COVID-19 US Deaths by Race or Ethnicity

Deaths per 100,000 people by race or ethnicity

Race or Ethnicity	Deaths per 100,000
Black or African American	122
American Indian or Alaska Native	101
Hispanic or Latino	91
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	69
White	68
Other	60
Asian	53
Two or more races	8

Source: COVID Tracking Project, December 2020

MEGATREND

Climate Crisis

Perhaps the biggest existential threat humanity has ever faced, the climate crisis can be mitigated only with ambitious, innovative initiatives—and the project talent to make those plans reality.

Research from an array of organizations all points in the same direction: there will be more climate change—and it will happen faster. Humanity is at a crossroads. If we take the full range of measures needed to keep temperatures from rising less than 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above the 1981–2010 mean, the effects will still be manageable. If we do nothing, much of Earth could become uninhabitable.

Like the coronavirus, climate change also compounds social inequalities, with disadvantaged populations suffering disproportionately from its effects. Left unchecked, it will continue to exacerbate inequalities

between the poor and the rich, dividing communities and nations.

The pressure to act is increasing—particularly from younger generations. Greta Thunberg and three other young climate change activists called on political leaders in July 2020 to stop talking and actually do something: "Our current system is not 'broken'—the system is doing exactly what it's supposed and designed to be doing. It can no longer be 'fixed.' We need a new system."[6]

To truly make an impact, companies can't focus on isolated problems within their operations, like where

Organizations that want to be leaders in addressing climate risk must consider the **entire project life cycle**.

they source a material or manufacture a product. "This may simply shift the impact further downstream," said Dame Clare Moriarty, London-based chair of the UK Health Foundation's COVID-19 impact inquiry. Organizations that want to be leaders in addressing climate risk must consider the entire project life cycle, and establish tools and metrics to mitigate negative effects throughout the process. "It requires taking a holistic view and using that to shape how you address climate issues in ways that are relevant to your business."

Case in point: Ecoluxe designer Stella McCartney began testing out a new tool from Google Cloud that uses data analytics and machine learning to give brands a more comprehensive view of their supply chain. For sustainability-driven McCartney, the project is an opportunity to lead the notoriously wasteful fashion industry in better measuring the impacts of its raw material sourcing on air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, land use, and water scarcity.[7]

150 million

Global extreme poverty was expected to rise in 2020 for the first time in over 20 years as the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic compounds the forces of conflict and climate change. That could mean an additional 88 million to 115 million people moving into extreme poverty, with the total rising to as many as 150 million in 2021.

Source: World Bank

Climate change is increasing the gap between rich and poor. The ratio between the incomes of the richest and the poorest 10% of the global population is

25% larger

than it would be in a world without global warming.

Source: UN World Social Report

MEGATREND

Civil, Civic, and Equality Movements

There was a time when organizations taking a stand on social issues was considered taboo or bad business. The massive global protests of 2020 underscored that silence is no longer an option—and change is a question of when, not if.

Even amid the pandemic, mass demonstrations roiled the streets in a number of countries, as people protested police violence and systemic racism. The 2020 protests are part of a wider trend spanning the past decade—covering nearly every continent and a whole host of societal issues.

Such issues pose serious risks for organizations in terms of business disruption and loss of trust. But silence—and avoiding the calls for equality—is now more likely to backfire. Nasdaq, for example, has proposed new listing rules that would require all companies listed on Nasdaq's US exchange to publicly disclose consistent, transparent diversity statistics regarding their board of directors and have (or explain why they do not have) at least two diverse directors, including one who self-identifies as female and one who self-identifies as either an underrepresented minority or LGBTQ+. At the same time, consumers and

citizens are increasingly turning a spotlight on organizations big and small, scrutinizing everything from hiring practices to marketing campaigns to stakeholder relations.

Years of data also show that diverse leadership leads to increased profitability, greater innovation, and more effective governance. Yet companies have made little progress in truly diversifying their ranks. According to one survey, just 1 in 25 C-suite executives in the United States is a woman of color,[8] and 1 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are Black. PMI's own research shows just 33 percent of respondents say their organization has a culturally diverse senior leadership team.[9] COVID may be adding to the problem: more than a quarter of organizations reported putting all or most diversity and inclusion initiatives on hold because of the pandemic, according to a study by the Institute for Corporate Productivity. [10] That's a mistake.

For Black architect Pascale Sablan, moving the needle on diversity is about attacking injustices from within through design justice—an understanding that architecture isn't a positive thing to all people.

"Architecture, city planning, and urban planning can be very oppressive to certain demographics and from an economical standpoint. Understanding that architecture has injustices embedded means you have to activate and create projects that change the narrative and right those wrongs," said Sablan, senior associate at S9Architecture and founder and executive director at Beyond the Built Environment LLC, New York, New York, United States. "There's architecture that hurts and architecture that kills and architecture that damages. We need to identify those components, eradicate them from our built environment and replace them with architecture that heals. Justice in the built environment will allow for diversity and inclusion to occur. It's not enough to just have diverse designers. You need to make the built environment respond to a diverse community."

For example, Sablan is currently working on The Bronx Point, which aims to flip affordable urban housing on its head with a resident-first design that elevates community spaces with amenities like the first brick-and-mortar hip-hop museum. But it was one of the smallest features that turned out to be the biggest wins: when future residents requested barbecue grills be added to the scope, Sablan persuaded the project leadership to expand the scope and accommodate the request. "The capacities of our homes can be so small that the ability to gather as a community and share a meal is often difficult."
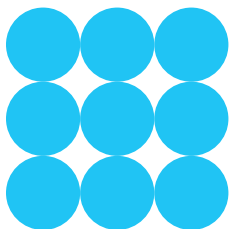
Mass protests have increased annually by an average of **11.5%** from 2009 to 2019.

Source: *The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend*

MEGATREND

Shifting Globalization Dynamics

Emerging markets may have rocketed onto the global stage, but serious infrastructure and education investments are needed to help them move beyond middle-income status.

The global economic axis has been tilting toward promising emerging and developing markets for some time. But their early embrace of the services sector has led to a slowing of the rapid industrialization needed to achieve gains in standards of living. As a result, these countries may be condemned to permanent middle-income status and become less attractive to global multinationals.

To break through, these countries require invest-ment in infrastructure and education, said Farhad Abdollahyan, head of the project management office, UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), Niamey, Niger. To that end, the organization invests in a range of projects, from improving irrigation in drought-stricken countries to improving access to the internet. "Every project is different but they all follow the same logic: create sustainable opportunities in the community to generate revenue and reduce poverty."

In 2020, millennials and Gen Zers staked their claim as the majority of the global workforce, with more than one-third living in just two countries: **India and China**.

Demographic shifts in emerging economies are also cause for concern. In 2020, millennials and Gen Zers staked their claim as the majority of the global workforce, with more than one-third living in just two countries: India and China. Those two countries also represent more than 75 percent of the nearly 88 million individuals needed in project management-oriented roles by 2027.[11] Yet while large, young populations in emerging markets may sound good, the reality is high unemployment and rising poverty levels, both worsened by the pandemic. There's also often a disconnect between organizations and young talent in understanding needs, aspirations, and ways of working.

Project leaders can help bridge that gap. At Ericsson, new trainees spend three to six months in a CEO-led program where they move among different areas of the company to see how each team works. "The company believes that they will be the next generation that will rule the company," said Nelson Rosamilha, PMI-ACP, PMP, regional head of project management, Ericsson, São Paulo, Brazil.[12] "So we are forming a new generation of leaders."

FRÉDÉRIC SOLTAN/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

361 million
Number of youth in Central and Southern Asia in 2019—the world's largest cohort

Source: UN

19.92%
Youth unemployment rate in South Asia in 2019
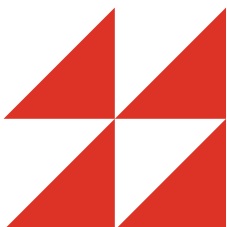
Source: World Bank (via Macrotrends)

211 million
Youth population in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019—the third largest in the world

Source: UN

11.58%
Youth unemployment rate in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019

Source: World Bank (via Macrotrends)

ISTOCK

Mainstream Artificial Intelligence

AI is now table stakes for many companies. What's still desperately needed are hard conversations around the ethical implications of AI.

AI has surged well beyond the realm of automating routine tasks. It's now making decisions for us based on our behaviors and using adaptive algorithms to help us navigate unfamiliar environments. The implications are enormous, fueling innovation in everything from fully autonomous transport to AI-powered knowledge and creative work.

"We are seeing every industry adopt AI, with the biggest-value projects occurring in large enterprise financial and insurance companies," said Steven As-

torino, VP of development, data and AI at IBM, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

However, the usage and benefits of AI are unevenly spread (see figure 2). And innovation brings risk: the seamless integration of algorithms into our daily lives means encoded opinions and biases don't get noticed, let alone questioned. One emerging area gaining traction is the field of emotion AI, which enables machines to read and respond to our emotional states. This could help organizations gain a

"Every conversation about technologies should consider, 'Okay, what are the ethical implications? What are the unintended consequences?'"

—Rana el Kaliouby, CEO, Affectiva

much better understanding of their customers and employees. But, here, too, there are risks—and murky ethical areas.

"Every conversation about technologies should consider, 'Okay, what are the ethical implications? What are the unintended consequences?'" said Rana el Kaliouby, author and CEO of emotion AI pioneer Affectiva, based in Boston, Massachusetts, United States.[13]
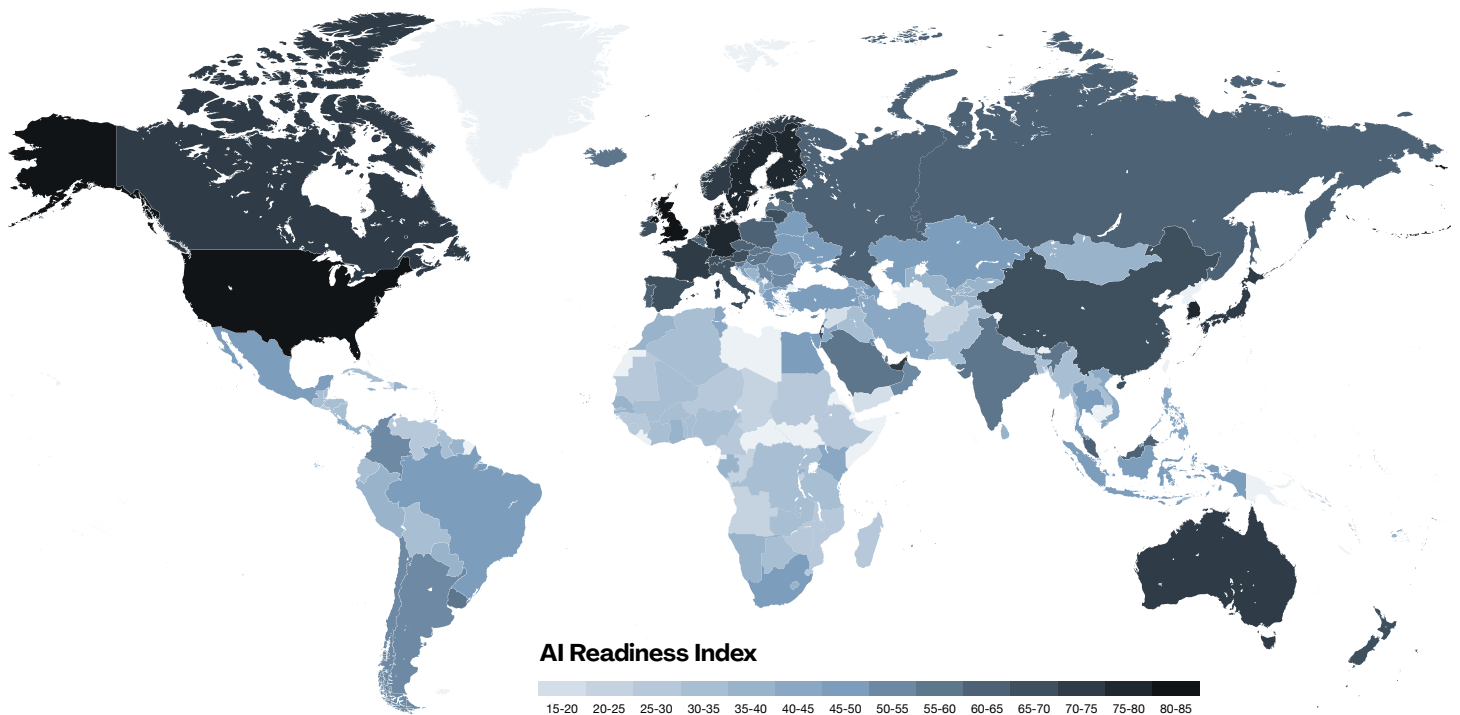
The effects aren't always what they would appear on the surface. "My biggest concern is not that robots are going to take over—it's that we're accidentally building in bias in unintended ways," she said. To combat that, project leaders must double down on building diverse teams, so this powerful technology is harnessed by people with different points of view and perspectives.
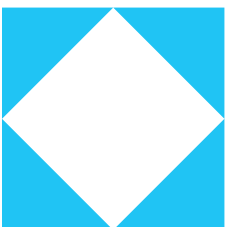
UK global creative agency AnalogFolk has gone a step further. It saw how language could affect how people are perceived—and that women often choose wording that makes them sound passive. So the agency developed a tool, called BigUp.AI, that uses natural language processing and machine learning to analyze blocks of text and offer users more powerful wording.[14]

Figure 2. AI Readiness Index 2020

Governments of higher-income countries are better placed to take advantage of AI than governments of middle- and lower-income countries.

AI Readiness Index

| 15-20 | 20-25 | 25-30 | 30-35 | 35-40 | 40-45 | 45-50 | 50-55 | 55-60 | 60-65 | 65-70 | 70-75 | 75-80 | 80-85 |

Source: *Government AI Readiness Index 2020*, Oxford Insights

Megatrend Multipliers

Each of these megatrends will no doubt have enormous repercussions on its own. But they're not happening in a bubble. Nor are projects. There are three ways organizations can target all the megatrends, through the types of projects they focus on and their approach to those projects, creating a multiplier effect for good—and a powerful magnitude of change:

1. **Make social impact projects a strategic priority.**
   The societal impact of each megatrend is large and growing. Ensuring that more projects achieve net-positive social impact—particularly in the areas of sustainability and diversity, equity, and inclusion—isn't a nice-to-have; it's a question of business survival.

2. **Foster open and innovative partnership ecosystems.**
   To successfully pursue social impact projects, organizations can't go it alone. A much more diverse range of partners and partnership models can help achieve significantly better outcomes. And local/regional partnerships can mitigate the negative impact of some of the megatrends.

3. **Rethink relationships with customers and wider stakeholders.**
   Whether social impact projects rise or fall also depends on engaging a much wider audience. Organizations that employ a broader definition of customers and stakeholders, and adapt their value proposition accordingly, can better harness the power of many.

ISTOCK

1

Making Social Impact Projects a Strategic Priority

Creating positive social impact is rising to the top of many corporate agendas—driving broad executive priorities and permeating every project. PMI research shows 87 percent of project professionals say social impact is a concern for their organization.[15]

"Companies need to serve more than just their shareholders. They need to be driven by purpose," said Kamil Mroz, director, program management lead, early patient value missions team at global biopharma UCB, Brussels, Belgium.[16] Customers and communities are increasingly demanding proof of social investment as a condition of loyalty and future business. "Companies need to show how their product or service impacts their broader community and brings value to society," he said.

London-based design and engineering giant Arup, for example, embeds environmental and social sustainability goals into every project plan. "The metrics for project success are leveling up," said Richard de Cani, global planning leader. It's no longer enough to look at how many vehicles a road can carry or how many commuters fit on a train. A project also has to contribute to efforts to reduce carbon emissions, improve access for socially disadvantaged communities, and drive economic growth.

UNOPS' Abdollahyan notes that many of the projects his team supports help small communities gain economic growth while also addressing climate change. Building solar water pumps and irrigation systems increases production, creates secondary markets for maintenance, and provides clean energy. "We can combat climate change and increase GDP through sustainable investments that make these countries more resilient," he said.

One unexpected boost to climate control efforts came from COVID. With the world at a virtual standstill, greenhouse gas emissions plummeted, air quality shot up, and ecosystems thrived sans intervention. The progress proved temporary: as Asian cities emerged from The Great Lockdown, the BBC reported that traffic—and accompanying air pollution—started spiking.[16] But some government leaders took it as a call to action, with urban planners in Italy, Kenya, Greece, France, Argentina, and the UK carving out huge swaths of their cities for areas dedicated to pedestrians and cyclists.

Making social impact projects a strategic priority also helps companies create a more agile and resilient business. At global engineering and construction firm Black & Veatch, teams routinely analyze how the company can align its business strategy to address emerging developments. Out of that work came the company's November 2020 announcement of new pledges to support environmental, social, and governance goals in the company's sustainability strategy, which is aligned to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These include achieving carbon neutrality by 2025, reducing water usage across projects and operations, improving diversity and inclusion on teams, and reprioritizing anticorruption efforts. "[The pledges] will also inform solutions that Black & Veatch will offer to customers," said Rob Wilhite, SVP and director of global distributed energy, Black & Veatch, Charlotte, North Carolina, United States. "The demand is growing for those kinds of services."

AI is proving to be a key tool in climate change mitigation efforts. "Clients are transitioning from thinking about short-term reliability to longer-term resiliency," Wilhite said. "AI has become an important part of adapting to known and unknown threats." A number of clients now require the building of digital replicas of real-world energy assets to model how the systems will react to big environmental events under various resiliency enhancements. "If a hurricane knocks out power to a large part of a US state or region for several days, each day you're talking about almost a billion US dollars or more in total economic losses," he said.

We've seen how tools like AnalogFolk's BigUp.AI can bolster equality efforts. Poorly designed AI, in contrast, can perpetuate social inequalities, particularly when it relies on biased historical data to inform future decisions. In 2020, the UK government was forced to ditch its AI grading system after it spurred nationwide protests; roughly 40 percent of the grades awarded fell below teacher predictions—with the biggest victims being students with high grades from less-advantaged schools.[16]

IBM's Astorino acknowledged the difficult road ahead. "There is still a lot the industry needs to do to detect bias and make sure algorithms can be trusted," he said. Stronger governance of AI applications and building "explainability" of the model into the design can help mitigate the risks. "If you can explain why a decision is made, or why someone is accepted or rejected, it brings trust to the process." Astorino pointed to IBM's Watson OpenScale—an open platform that helps remove barriers to enterprise-scale AI—as one such tool that's designed to help developers mitigate bias in models as well as explain their outcomes in natural language.

"Companies need to serve more than just their shareholders. They need to be driven by purpose."

—Kamil Mroz, UCB, Brussels, Belgium

2 Fostering Open and Innovative Partnership Ecosystems

By investing in education, internet access, and basic infrastructure, companies can bolster the economy, while creating a more prosperous and competitive marketplace.

One of the most powerful ways to drive change is by looking outside the traditional circle of collaborators and pursuing a more diverse range of partners and partnership models—including those with suppliers, customers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and even rivals. And the COVID crisis is sparking some serious speed-dating: 70 percent of respondents in the *Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey* said the pandemic is fostering formation of new partnerships and alliances.[17]

There is perhaps no better example of innovative partnerships than the efforts to create and test COVID-19 vaccines and treatment protocols: AstraZeneca teaming up with Oxford University; Upstart Moderna working with the US government's Operation Warp Speed program; Pfizer and BioNTech joining forces. The pharma industry's ability to select, develop, and test multiple vaccines and treatments in less than a year—a process that typically takes a decade or more—was made possible through groundbreaking collaborations between industry, academia, regulators, NGOs, and tech.

One prime case study in this new partnership model is the number-one pick on PMI's list of Most Influential Projects: the US$125 million COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator.[18] Backed by major players ranging from Mastercard to The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to Wellcome, the project is laser-focused on scaling potential COVID-19 treatments through fierce collaboration with the World Health Organization, the global research community, governments, private-sector organizations, and regulators around the world.

Organizations are following a similar partnership strategy in amping up the global response to climate change, discovering that public-private partnerships and alliances with other organizations that have expertise in a target area can amplify the scale of projects—and the ROI. After the outbreak of wildfires in Australia consumed almost half of Kangaroo Island, an all-star team of government agencies and NGOs swooped in to rescue the area's iconic ecosystem and help save kangaroos, koalas, and other species.[19] On another front, the World Economic Forum teamed up with Salesforce, Deloitte, and LinkedIn to create UpLink, a platform connecting social entrepreneurs with actionable resources to attack the UN SDGs.[20]

Partnering on positive social impact initiatives like the UN Global Compact offers opportunities for organizations to think more broadly about their project choices, and boost progress by pooling resources and the deep knowledge of markets required in a multipolar world.

Abdollahyan's UNOPS team works with local partners and NGOs as well as private-sector companies interested in investing in the economy. Companies that commit to collaborating with, and investing in, local communities to provide societal benefits will help sustain those markets—and build trust. In particular, engaging with youth in developing nations in innovative ways that address societal needs will help to open up these markets, which make up for lack of spending power with sheer size and growth potential.

In Niger, for example, nearly 60 percent of the population is under 18 and most young people have limited education and job opportunities. By investing in education, internet access, and basic infrastructure, companies can bolster the economy, while creating a more prosperous and competitive marketplace. "If we create a dynamic economic ecosystem, investments will be sustainable," Abdollahyan said.

Coca-Cola HBC is another organization tackling the issue of youth unemployment through partnerships. The beverage giant produces, distributes, and sells its products in 28 markets, including many developing and emerging ones. The company began its flagship #YouthEmpowered program in 2017 to address "one of the most relevant societal issues in many of our markets: the employability of young people." The company pledged to train 1 million young people across the globe by 2025. And then COVID-19 hit.

"At the beginning of the lockdown, our assumption was that we wouldn't be able to achieve our annual target," said Michael Dickstein, the company's group sustainability and community director in Vienna, Austria. But by working closely with local communities and NGOs and rethinking its approach, he said, the team shifted to virtual learning and "we were able to reach a lot more young people." In October, the company reached an important milestone, counting 300,000 participants.

Such projects to engage and upskill young people not only help to alleviate the job losses, inequalities, and other risks of the pandemic, but they also build a talent pipeline that companies can mine for future growth.

3 Rethinking Relationships with Customers and Wider Stakeholders

Tackling societal issues on a large scale also requires a radical reimagining of customer and stakeholder relationships, including exactly who it is that organizations are trying to reach. Only then can businesses ensure they're solving the right problems for the right people with the right projects.

Consider Coca-Cola HBC's Mission 2025 Team, which conducts an annual materiality survey of roughly 1,000 internal and external stakeholders to identify social and environmental topics that impact the company's value drivers. "This is not just a one-off exercise," Dickstein said. "It is the starting point for engagement activities that occur throughout the year."

The survey results helped Coca-Cola HBC define its 2025 sustainability commitments, which, in turn, align to the UN SDGs. With that, the company is ready to take action on a wide range of issues, ranging from reducing water use by 20 percent in water-risk areas to increasing its management ranks to 50 percent female.

"We are engaging with our stakeholders to determine climate action in the new normal and what the whole global pandemic means for us as a business," he said of the company's 2020 stakeholder forum. "Listening to and learning from them is a fantastic best-practice platform and necessary to move the agenda forward."

A customer-centric mindset, meanwhile, can yield more innovative ways of thinking that continue to deliver value to customers even in times of crisis. Take urban development: in London—as in other cities—there's a "big conversation" about "equality in public infrastructure, and how access to healthcare, parks, and neighborhood centers disproportionately benefits some communities more than others," Arup's de Cani said. As leaders around the world contemplate a postpandemic future, such discussions may spark more equitable project investments. And de Cani said more of Arup's clients want to play an active role in developing those solutions. They want to understand the impact of projects in much broader terms and expect guidance on how to improve them to benefit more people through access to cities, data, and economic opportunities. "At a meta level, these measures now affect whether a project is approved or not," he said.

It's also important, as the UN SDG Fund stresses, for businesses not only to implement reactive measures but also to enable the right conditions for social inclusion to flourish. This includes engaging in a true dialogue with customers.

"We've seen in several projects that the cultural connection, the language, whatever it might be, is a real value," said Gabrielle Bullock, principal and director of global diversity at architecture and design firm Perkins and Will, Los Angeles, California, United States. "Our clients' values are not only focused on fee, schedule, and budget. It really is about the human connection, the cultural connection, and shared values."[21]

In one instance, Bullock said Perkins and Will almost lost an opportunity because its commitment to the LGBTQ+ community wasn't clearly demonstrated. "We hadn't really promoted it like we should," she said. Once the firm showed its team's understanding and commitment to the community, it won the project.

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>
> —Gabrielle Bullock, Perkins and Will, Los Angeles, California, United States
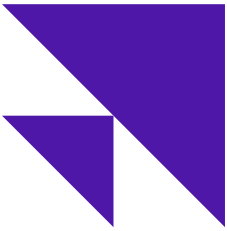
An Ecosystem of Change-makers

Driving systemic change depends on collaboration and inclusion, both within and outside the business: employees, partners, customers, and communities at local, national, and global levels. More specifically, it relies on an ecosystem of change-makers—all those who can turn ideas into reality, whether through transformational change or contribution to value delivery.

Change-makers rely on key capabilities to succeed:

- **New ways of working,** including agile, waterfall, and hybrid methodologies, and digital project management approaches such as problem-solving tools, AI-driven tools, and microlearning apps
- **Power skills**, such as collaborative leadership, innovative mindset, empathy for the voice of the customer, empathy for the voice of the employee, and the ability to build trusting relationships
- **Business acumen**, encompassing a well-rounded set of capabilities that enables people to understand not only their own roles, but how their work relates to business strategy and to other parts of the business

First, however, change-makers must have the means to acquire these capabilities. Continuous learning is the only way to thrive in today's disruption-driven environment. Some of that can come through virtual education, which, especially since the pandemic began, is seemingly everywhere. But organizations that raise the bar by using AI to facilitate continuous, agile, and innovative learning—collaborative human-machine learning—are the ones that excel at driving change. Or, as a 2020 *MIT Sloan Management Review* report put it: "They don't just use AI; they learn with AI."[22]

It doesn't matter what sector an organization is in, where it's located, or even what is driving its strategic mission. It must be ready to adapt to whatever megatrend comes its way. And this is where the ecosystem of employees, partners, customers, and stakeholders committed to change truly proves its value.

"Rome wasn't built in a day, nor was climate action or the diversity and inclusion agenda," Coca-Cola HBC's Dickstein said. "If you want change that is in itself sustainable, you need to do that together with the communities."
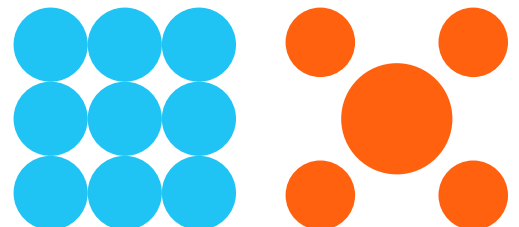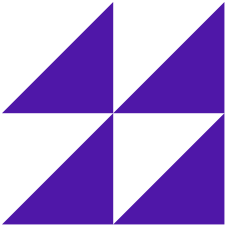
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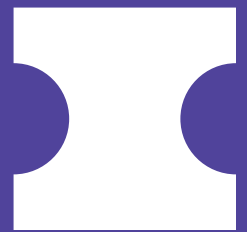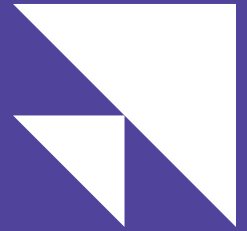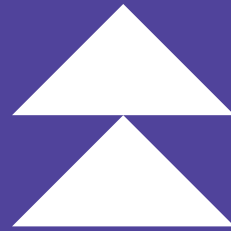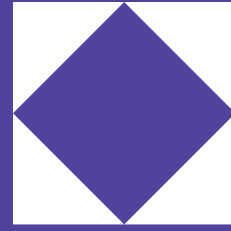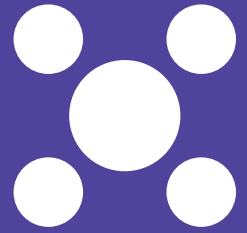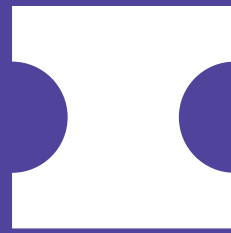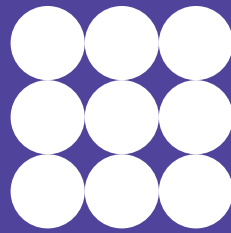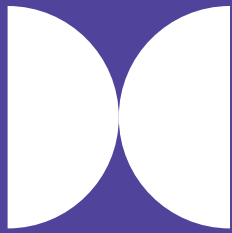
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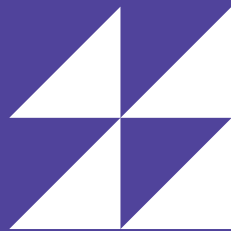
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