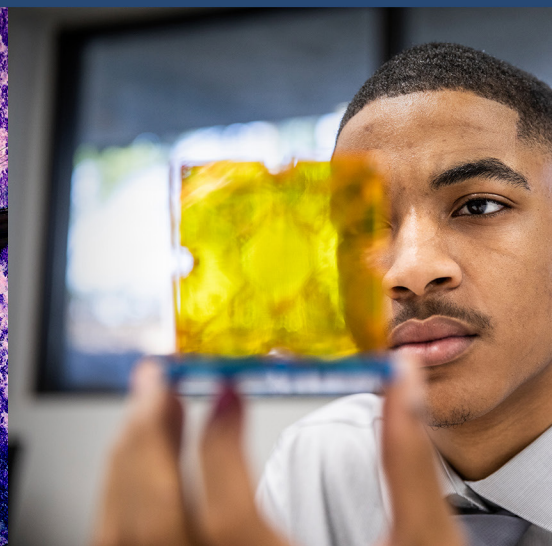




# Becoming an innovative organization

Prioritizing innovation to remain competitive, evolve, and thrive despite disruptions



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## Business continuity relies on innovation

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Across nearly every industry, today's leaders share a common understanding: businesses need to be agile to weather inevitable disruption and cement a competitive future. While a global pandemic has put this understanding into sharp focus, the reality is that disruption has always forced change, especially where technology is involved.

Just look at industries like transportation, entertainment, and lodging. Each of these had companies that harnessed innovative technologies to change how global consumers interact with products and services. But these businesses didn't merely react to disruption. They *became* the disruption. They flipped the script on how people consume entertainment, navigate cities, and enjoy new locales—forcing competitors to follow suit or get left behind.

Whether it's the release of competitive technology or the sudden onset of an unforeseen global event, disruption can change the landscape overnight. It affects businesses, industries, and economies—leaving an impact on society that lives far beyond the disruption itself.

None of this means businesses are doomed to fail every time disruption occurs. Instead, there are tools, strategies, and processes they can leverage to become more agile and responsive. But perhaps most importantly, businesses must also create a culture rooted in transparency and trust—one in which employees feel empowered to collaborate and take risk without fear of failure. Businesses that prioritize these cultural elements are better positioned to unlock the ingenuity needed to meet disruption head-on. In essence, they're prepared to innovate to stay competitive.

Throughout this paper we'll discuss how business leaders can leverage innovation to improve business outcomes, even through disruption. This discussion is timely, as businesses everywhere have felt the monumental impacts of recent global change. Whether you're considering new ways of working today or planning for the challenges of tomorrow, reading this whitepaper will help you understand how innovation impacts your organizational success and contributes to societal progress.

## Can innovation be planned?

Although many businesses have established innovation functions, it's a commonly held belief that innovation is accidental or serendipitous—or maybe just a reaction to disruption. But it doesn't have to be. In fact, it *shouldn't* be. Too many business leaders recognize that innovation is important for long-term viability, but it's often deprioritized to focus on short-term challenges. In reality, organizations across every industry can reap enormous gains from a proactive approach to innovation. But even more critical is the recognition that planned innovation is a must for navigating future crises.

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More than 75 percent of executives agree the pandemic will continue to create more new opportunities for growth.

— McKinsey

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Let's put this in the context of a recent crisis that has arguably impacted nearly every business across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic launched innovative efforts all over the world—and research shows more than 75 percent of executives agree the pandemic will continue to create more new opportunities for growth ([McKinsey](#), 2020).

But many of the most influential players that emerged during the pandemic will tell you they've been steadily experiencing innovative growth for years—and their solutions were no accident. Manufacturers of widely used COVID-19 vaccines became household names with the release of their messenger RNA vaccines. But their formulas were far from an innovative roll of the dice. They were born from a repeatable process, years in the making, devised to produce breakthrough innovations in otherwise unexplored domains of the life sciences.

Harvard Business Review says the vaccine success stories are examples of emergent discovery, an approach based on the basic principles that drive evolution in nature. Emergent discovery is characterized by a structured process of intellectual leaps, iterative experimentation, and selection ([2021](#)). This and similar approaches are widely used in the life sciences arena with the understanding that intentional innovation is the foundation for breakthroughs.

There's a lot to be learned here. Like many forms of innovation, emergent discovery has to be built on a culture that supports it. Harvard Business Review says it "requires a culture in which people, particularly leaders, in an organization are comfortable broaching seemingly infeasible ideas and challenging dogma—a culture that views 'flawed' ideas not as dead ends but as building blocks and considers the evolution of ideas to be a collectively shared responsibility" (2021). Embracing this approach means grounding your business in its expertise while maintaining the courage to take risk and build upon failures.

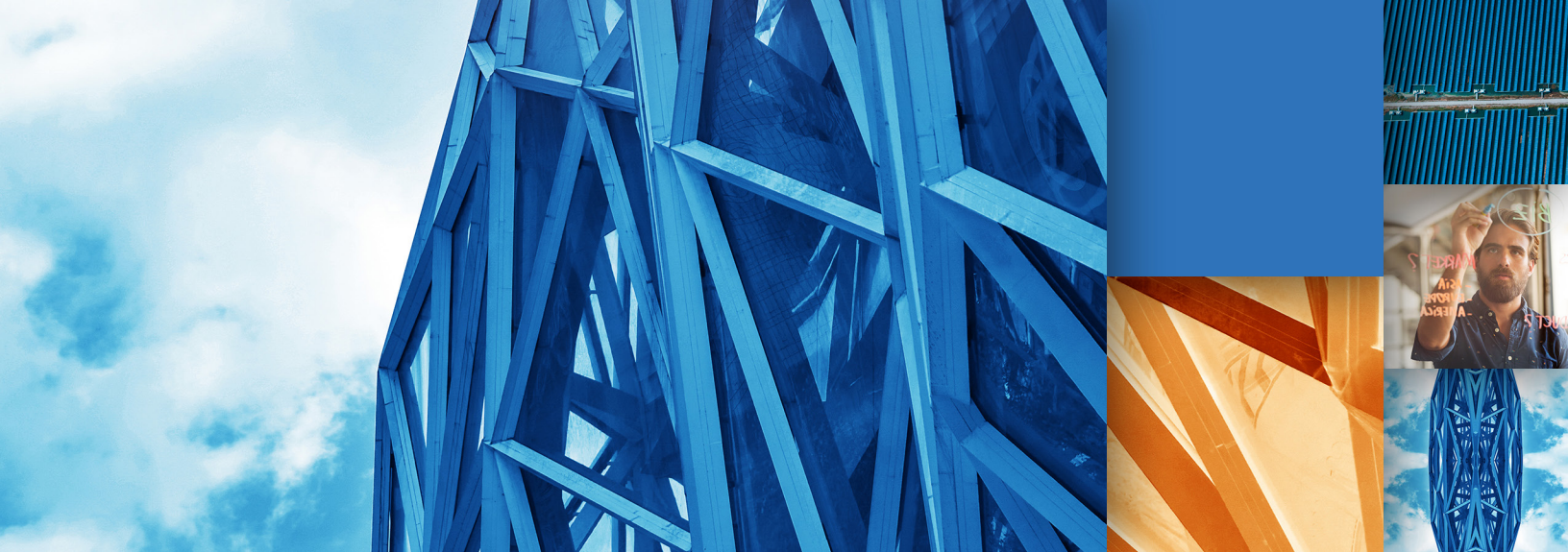
## Continuity, innovation, and resilience are inherently connected

Integrating innovation into the fabric of your organizational culture prepares your business for the unknown. But it has to be done with the mindset that you're planning for more than just a single breakthrough. Innovation is also about the ability—and more importantly, the intentionality—to build and maintain resilience before, during, and after a crisis so your organization is prepared to remain competitive.

We learned earlier how the status quo often changes in the midst of disruption. When these changes occur, not every business will come out the other side unscathed. But the ones that show the most resilience are ultimately those that adapt to change in real time, leveraging an innovative foundation to maintain business continuity and build a competitive edge. They're the ones that go beyond just surviving disruption—they thrive *despite* it.

If this sounds like a big undertaking, it doesn't have to be. There are tools and guidance available that can embolden your organization to continually reinvent and unlock the ultimate staying power and resilience needed to weather inevitable business disruptions. This whitepaper will help bring that guidance to the forefront by examining the actions needed to fuel a competitive future through innovation: organizing for adaptability; cultivating an innovative mindset; and embracing co-innovation. With these learnings, you will be better prepared to define a strategic vision for innovation that delivers real business value to your organization, customers, and communities.





## Organizing for adaptability

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As a business leader, you know that developing competitive solutions keeps you at the top of your industry. But this doesn't come easily to those who fail to embrace change and adapt to evolving market needs. In a fast-paced global market, organizations that remain agile and innovative when solving business challenges are the ones who get ahead—and stay there.

To that end, there are several core components that top the list when preparing your organization for a competitive future. Three of the most important are the right technological capabilities, a thoughtful internal structure, and an openness to reinventing business models. Each plays a different role, but none can work alone. Together, technology, internal structure, and business model innovation form the basis of your organization's capacity to solidify a competitive future. In fact, they're inextricably connected when it comes to business success: only by transforming structural systems can technology help build the capacity needed to adapt and remain competitive through innovation.

Let's take a closer look at the first part of this equation: the technology. We'll examine how technology enables and disrupts markets, as well as how it forms the basis of greater transformation efforts.

### Technology as a competitive driver

Technology amplifies an organization's ability to get business done. But for organizations to make the most effective use of technology, they must understand how it enables and disrupts their industry's progress, their customers' needs, and their own day-to-day operations. They must also actively plan for a long-term transformation strategy that digitizes each area of the business, making creative use of data-driven tools and processes.

Let's break these ideas down and look at some examples of how they might play out in practice.

## The paradox of enabling and disrupting

Change is often the product of external forces, many of which we can't control. Adapting to change requires letting go of things that aren't working, adopting a willingness to experiment and sometimes fail, and learning to juggle competing priorities while remaining profitable and fair. But what role does technology play in adaptability? Does it enable or disrupt—or both? And why does it matter?

In short, the answer is both.

In today's business and social climates, technology often plays out as a disruptor. It alters how consumers behave and businesses and competitors respond. Just look to the explosion of food delivery apps, telemedicine, and digital grocery orders throughout the pandemic. These services, along with the technology behind them, were introduced before the pandemic hit. But when traditional commerce came to a grinding halt, these were the technologies that both disrupted consumer behavior *and* enabled businesses and customers to stay connected, eventually transcending into the new status quo.

As you can see, technology plays a dual role in how businesses respond to changing customer needs. But perhaps the most powerful application of technology is when it enables long-lasting collaboration and innovation—and during times when adapting to change is the only way to navigate it. Take AI adoption, for example. While not entirely new to digitally minded organizations, use of AI saw sweeping growth throughout the pandemic. One study reveals that as much as 52 percent of companies accelerated their AI adoption plans in response to the pandemic, while 86 percent say that AI has become a “mainstream technology” at their company in 2021 ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2021). For many businesses, AI enabled agility, adaptability, and growth during a time when others were just trying to stay afloat.

That brings us back to the question of why it matters: it's because even in the midst of disruption, your customers still rely on you to meet their needs. In fact, research shows that 85 percent of executives are concerned the pandemic will have a lasting impact on their customers' needs and wants over the next five years ([McKinsey](#), 2020). Businesses must understand how they can use technology to innovate in ways that both enable recovery and disrupt the market to gain an edge post-crisis. Staying power, after all, is about more than just bouncing back—it's about pulling ahead, too.

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85 percent of executives are concerned the pandemic will have a lasting impact on their customers' needs and wants over the next five years.

— McKinsey

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To that end, let's look at some key considerations businesses should prioritize for a digitally enabled transformation strategy to innovate for a competitive edge.

## The need for digital transformation

We've established that technology is a must for disrupting markets and enabling future growth. But you can't just "do" technology overnight—fueling a competitive future requires forethought. So what does all this look like in practice? How do you set your business up to own the next big technological breakthrough?

Bringing innovative technology into your organization's daily workflow needs to be part of a larger digital transformation strategy. More specifically, we're talking about a digitally enabled strategy for resilience, one that engages customers, empowers employees, optimizes operations, and transforms products. It might sound like a tall order, but there are steps you can take to prepare your organization for new ways of working. A good place to start is by identifying key dimensions of your business that can be strengthened and accelerated by technology. For example, Boston Consulting Group recommends the following (2020):

- **Protecting and growing the top line** should be front and center as you navigate an evolving market. It's critical to quickly identify and address changing customer needs using data-driven and digital marketing, sales, and pricing.
- **Developing agile operations** ensures your organization can manage disruptions in supply chain, logistics, manufacturing, development, and corporate functions. Doing so enables continuity of business, a critical aspect of surviving disruption.

Your company's current technological capabilities will impact the speed at which you react and take command of these dimensions. Regardless of how far you've come in your digital transformation, one thing is clear: the need to transform isn't going away. Research shows that 75 percent of executives believe digital transformation is becoming more urgent in light of the COVID-19 crisis, and 65 percent anticipate increasing investments in digital transformation ([Boston Consulting Group](#), 2020). As the pandemic has made clear, adopting and managing digital technologies will continue to enable competitiveness and long-term resilience.

We've examined how technology prepares your organization to develop competitive solutions. Next, let's consider the second part of the equation: how your internal structure impacts your organization's ability to adapt and innovate.





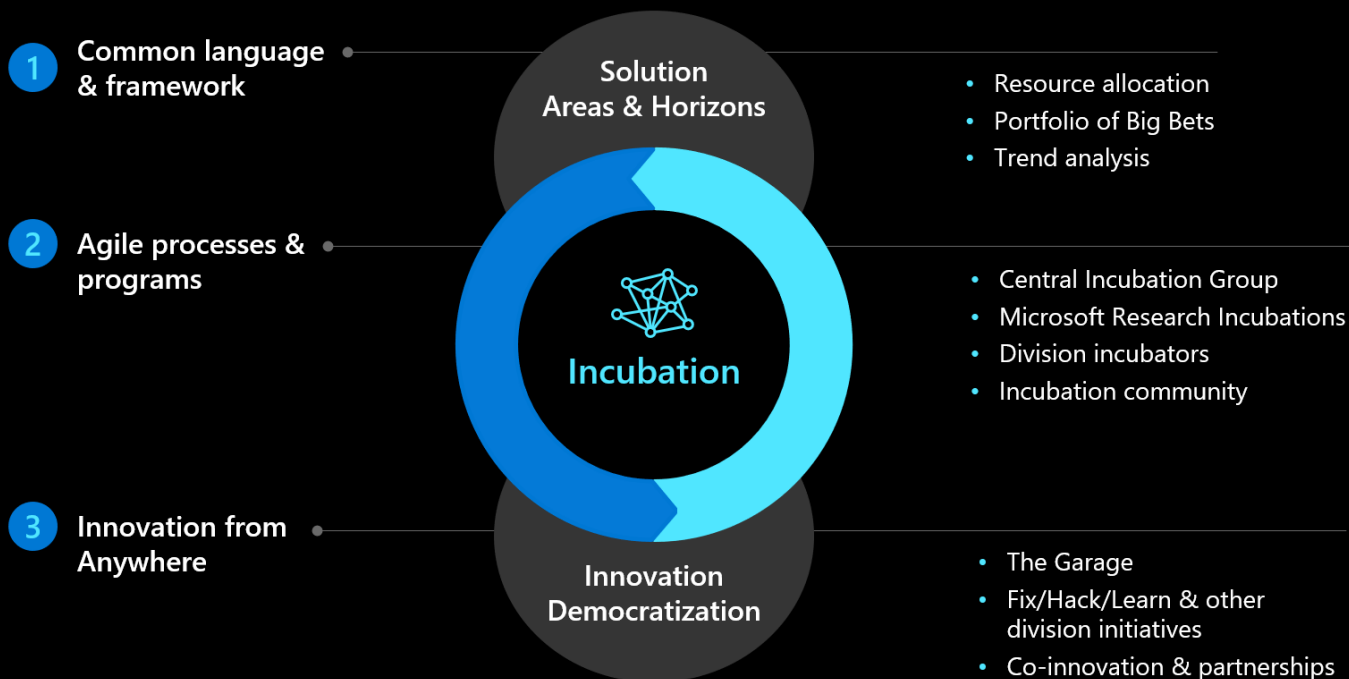
## Reimagining internal structure to support innovation

So far we've established that technology is a must for businesses to stay competitive today. But businesses can't rely on technology alone to get ahead. They must also conduct a comprehensive dive into the internal structures and systems—from people and programs to finance and communications—that support innovation.

The first step in the process is recognizing that when it comes to innovation, participation matters. But how does that translate into an actual work environment? And how do you sort and nurture everyone's ideas in a way that is financially profitable and fair? How do you decide which ideas won't make the cut?

The answer is to carefully construct an *innovation architecture* that includes strategic direction and programs that allow ideas to build momentum. This means making innovation a collective priority and giving people the tools to act. Notably, providing consistent support and follow-through is critical for success. When people feel prepared to collaborate and are given the right tools and support, adaptability becomes a natural part of the workflow. Disruptions become manageable, and businesses keep moving forward.

## Innovation Architecture

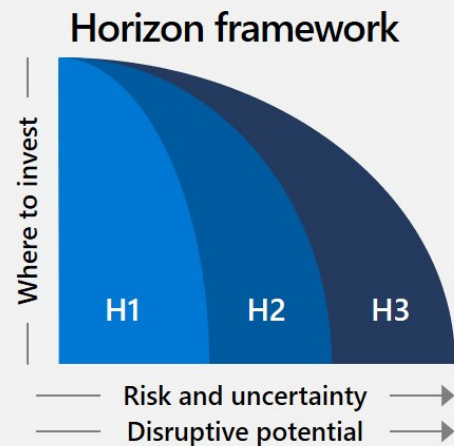


Let's take a closer look at innovation architecture in practice, starting with a framework that helps business leaders move ideas forward in a fair and profitable way.

## Leveraging a horizon-based framework

One of the biggest challenges when building a foundation for innovation is knowing how to evaluate and prioritize ideas in ways that support both employees and business models. One way to do this is by using a horizon-based framework that ensures decision-making is consistent and fair. A common framework is McKinsey's Three Horizons Model, which groups projects into three "horizons," from improving core business functions to creating brand new revenue streams. The risk and uncertainty of specific applications depends on a company's level of maturity, size, business objectives, and more.

- Horizon 1 represents initiatives that optimize existing business models and **core business functions** in the short term.
- Horizon 2 initiatives take advantage of **emerging opportunities** to expand to new markets and customers.
- Horizon 3 involves disruptive and innovative **new business models** that focus on future timelines.



The Three Horizons Model is an enduring framework that's useful when establishing an innovation architecture because it's formulated around people, processes, and outcomes. However, it relies on time as a core value, with the assumption that breakthrough innovations take years of development. As you think through your own innovation architecture, it's worth considering that technology has changed the dynamic of time.

Today, many would-be Horizon 3 disruptions can be rapidly implemented by repurposing existing Horizon 1 technologies into new products and business models. That increased speed of deployment, itself, is disruptive.

Competition moves at a breakneck pace. In this landscape, disruptors that attack the market have gained the advantage. While a horizon-based framework provides an excellent foundation for how to think about innovation prioritization, it's important to adapt the model's time frames to fit your organization's objectives.

Once you've established a cadence for pursuing ideas, it's important to consider how data-driven processes and digital feedback loops can move those ideas forward. Let's examine the role data plays in your innovation strategy.

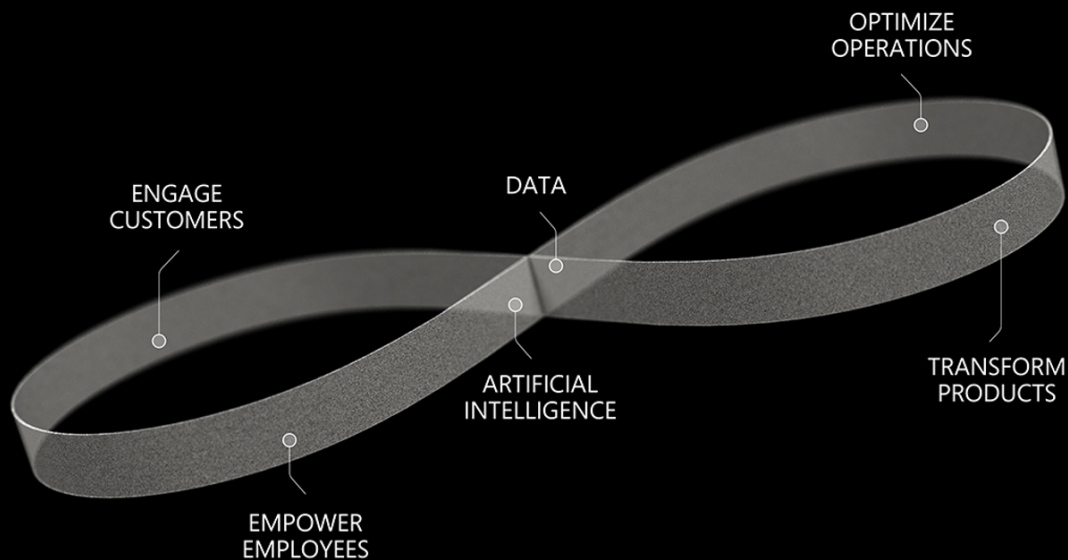
## Becoming an intelligence driven organization

Laying the foundation for innovation is often part of a larger digital transformation effort, one that uses emerging technologies like AI to empower organizations to collect, analyze, and use data in meaningful ways.

We've worked with customers across industries to help them identify and deploy the right technology solutions aligned to their digital transformation goals. Insights from these experiences led us to develop the Intelligence Driven Organization (IDO) model, a roadmap for helping businesses design processes that generate intended business outcomes.

The IDO model relies on digital feedback loops, or flows of information that emerge when a business process—like a customer interaction or back-office operation—has been redesigned around data. Whatever the circumstance, the related data is collected and used to optimize that process by AI-enabled applications.

# Intelligence Driven Organization



## Digital feedback loops

Crucially, all information can be surfaced to the business processes that need it. In turn, this enables organizations to be more productive at scale and become increasingly customer centric, which ultimately helps inform their ability to innovate.

The IDO model makes digital feedback loops a reality with four key steps:

- Develop an **executive strategy** that will see an intelligence driven culture take root.
- Ensure the right **technical capabilities** are in place.
- Ensure your day-to-day execution is enabled by an **agile operating model**.
- Envision and prioritize a set of future **business use cases** that represent the desired business outcomes.

Following the four steps helps organizations overcome common obstacles such as shortage of data science skills, difficulty envisioning the right business use cases, and a culture that struggles to understand the need to be data driven.

IDOs innovate and transform their business by combining and democratizing data with AI, modern applications, and agile development to deliver greater value to their customers. These organizations empower every employee to foster growth through innovation, speed to market, and cost efficiencies. By becoming a business driven by data and AI, companies can make better informed business decisions that represent the needs of both the business and its customers.

We've reviewed how to formulate an internal structure that supports innovation through common frameworks and data-driven processes. Next, let's consider the final part of the equation: how changing your business model makes your organization more competitive and responsive to customer needs.

## Business model innovation

No matter how we think about it, innovation creates change—but the evolution of ideas and technology cannot stand alone. Those changes must still translate into business outcomes, and often that means your supporting business model will need to change, too.

At Microsoft, this is evident in our own transformation journey. As we entered new markets, engineered new products, and expanded our services, we adapted our supporting business model accordingly. We shifted from selling software, which has no marginal costs, to selling cloud technology, which is costly to provide and scale. When we only sold software, our revenue, consumption, renewal, and growth strategies looked a particular way based on the product, which followed a buy-first, use-later model. Because revenue was booked up front, usage of our software was less relevant since it was already paid for. With the expansion into cloud services, our models completely changed. Our revenue became based on usage over time, and consumption became much more relevant.



We made these changes because they were needed to keep up with market demand—but they didn't overwhelm the business because we were intentional in our approach. As we transformed our business model, we were careful to avoid an abrupt reset. We introduced new cloud offers while maintaining legacy offers. Customers retained choice and flexibility. External partnerships benefitted, too. Partner roles became less about distribution and licensing and more about building and managing solutions—creating opportunities for new types of partnerships.

Ours is just one example of how growth drivers can vary based on the product or service at play. But the common takeaway is that it pays to think beyond a pricing change for a single product because it creates more opportunities to cross-sell and upsell or to find new ways of bundling and packaging. This is especially the case with AI-infused products based on real-time data. As the new data come in, the product evolves.

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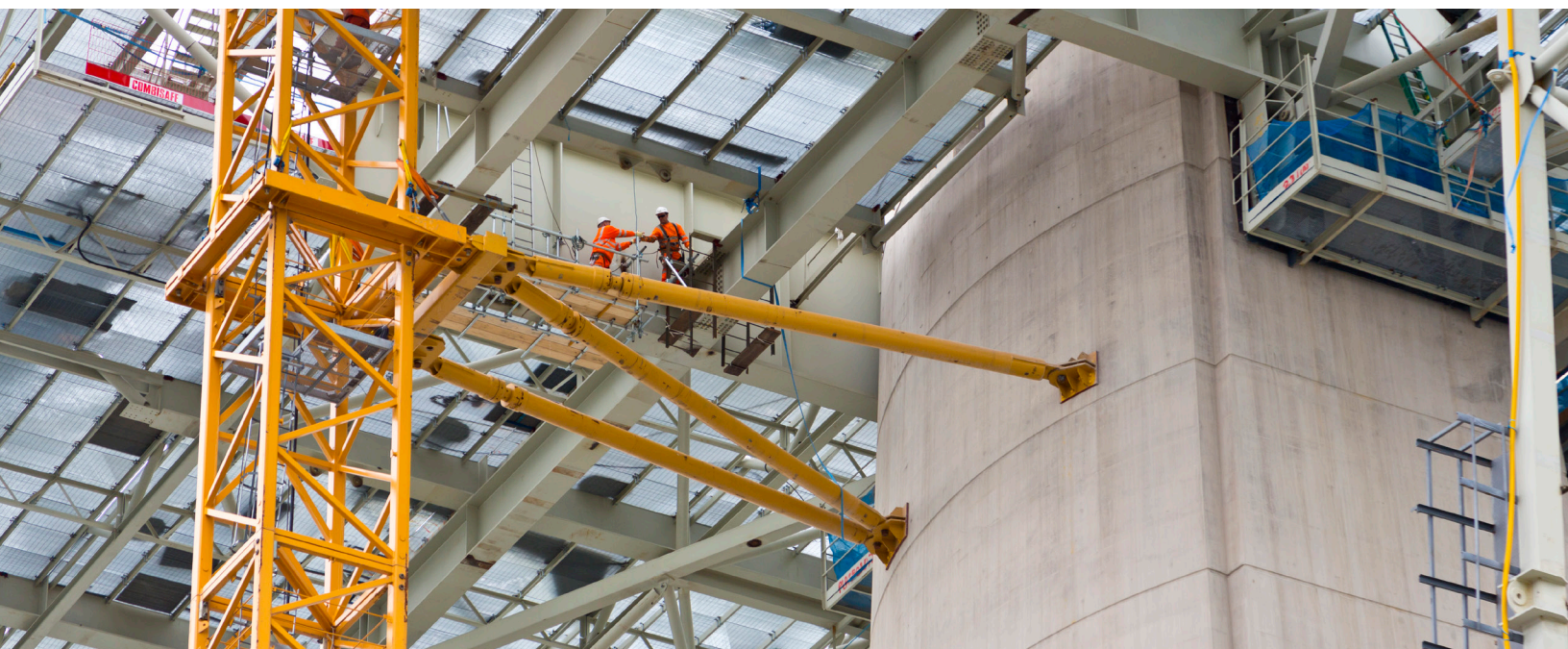
**Partner roles became less about distribution and licensing and more about building and managing solutions—creating opportunities for new types of partnerships.**

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For example, if a product makes recommendations based on data, the recommendations will naturally change over time. Since the product isn't static, the business model is more likely to be a subscription, rather than a buy-first model. Ultimately, business models will take advantage of the sophistication that AI brings to the products themselves with pricing analytics and optimization.

Bottom line: whether you're facing new customer expectations, supply issues caused by climate change, the integration of new technology, or the need to redesign a product—there's a clear opportunity to stay ahead of changing market factors by proactively rethinking your business model.

Let's explore the story of HOCHTIEF, a long-time construction industry leader that is shifting their business model not only to improve their own bottom line, but to modernize an entire industry.





## HOCHTIEF

Nearly 150 years old, HOCHTIEF is a construction and engineering services leader with public and private clients all over the world. Today, they're using AI and next-generation technologies to improve processes and solutions across an entire industry that has been slow to change.

HOCHTIEF determined that the best strategy for dealing with industry-wide challenges such as competition, fragmentation, and changing conditions was to digitize—using AI to respond in new ways to solve business problems and create new business models. Recognizing the wealth of data they generated during the life cycle of each project, AI became the catalyst for creating new business opportunities and solutions within the areas of road infrastructure, contract analysis, quality control, and safety.

But they're doing more than just crunching data. HOCHTIEF is investing in its own spin-off companies dedicated solely to digitization and innovation. One HOCHTIEF subsidiary is Nexplora, an innovation hub dedicated to digital transformation. Nexplora collaborates externally with leading tech firms and universities to develop new hardware and software applications designed to benefit the construction industry.

Operating like a startup within HOCHTIEF, Nexplora is dedicated to changing the current business model in the construction industry. To that end, Nexplora is generating a platform based on AI that delivers solutions that support the many subfields of HOCHTIEF's work on their sites across the globe. Among these are about 20 new projects they're exploring, along with a visionary approach called "Life as a Service." With this new service, Nexplora envisions using AI to understand how people's lives will change in the built environment over the next 25 to 50 years. Most construction projects are intended to have a lifespan of 50 to 100 years, so ensuring that the project meets the needs not just of today's communities, but of tomorrow's, requires a predictive and analytic approach. It also requires a collaborative one. The very nature of HOCHTIEF's work demands strong partnerships with the many government entities and other businesses that manage and use the public spaces in which they work. The ability to leverage those partnerships to innovate new services and business models is helping to modernize the entire industry.

But Nexplora isn't the only HOCHTIEF subsidiary that's revolutionizing the field of construction. EDGITAL, created to drive innovation related to HOCHTIEF's public infrastructure projects in the Public-Private Partnership business unit, has a similar endeavor underway. They are creating new revenue streams by delivering AI applications as a service. For example, EDGITAL is contracting with cities to plan road maintenance more efficiently with an AI solution that allows engineers to inspect roads continuously and safely.

Change is inevitable. But it's clear from examining the success of companies like HOCHTIEF that transforming business models and go-to-market strategies is key to supporting innovation initiatives, core values, and business priorities—so you can achieve the staying power you need.

## With a foundation in place, the need for vision and leadership emerges

So far we've discussed some of the ways businesses can build a foundation that supports and encourages innovation. Regardless of size or industry, there are steps you can take and programs you can implement—all of which can be scaled depending on your business and customer needs. Being proactive and intentional will help your organization stay agile and competitive in the face of disruption.

There's another important consideration, though, when it comes to innovating and long-term resilience. The programs and services you put in place are only as strong as your organization's ability and willingness to follow through with them—and that support needs to come from leadership. As we've learned, innovation cannot happen in a vacuum, and people at all levels of the business should be encouraged to participate in order to reap the full benefits.

Ultimately, your organization's leadership must set the vision, articulate it clearly, and follow through by consistently building a culture that helps innovation thrive. In the next section of this paper, we'll consider steps leadership can take to encourage organization-wide innovation.



## Cultivating an innovative mindset

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Organizations that embrace innovation have a clear advantage over competitors. Surprisingly, though, it's not always access to technological breakthroughs that holds us back from achieving full innovative potential—it's a cultural disconnect.

Work culture can be a hurdle when it comes to innovation. Clearing it requires an all-hands-on-deck approach that encourages buy-in, participation, experimentation, and collaboration across the entire organization. It requires a culture that elevates innovation as a platform from which all employees are empowered to take risk and collaborate with others.

Fostering this type of workplace environment doesn't happen overnight, though. Organizational leadership must not only invest in the tools for making innovation possible, but they must also invest in building a holistic, collaborative innovation culture. This is a culture in which people feel seen, heard, and empowered to use the tools available to them—and that requires leadership to evaluate and adapt some key organizational attributes needed to support innovation. These attributes are:

- **Internal alignment:** Alignment between teams is critical for innovation. Cross-functional teams should work together to achieve common goals. In fact, 83 percent of digitally mature organizations depend on cross-functional teams to advance their innovation efforts ([Deloitte](#), 2019).
- **Mindset:** Organizations thrive when they embrace a growth mindset and willingness to fail and learn from the experience. Embracing and living this mindset means people will be more comfortable with challenging the status quo and taking risks.
- **Skilling:** The skills gap is a particular pain point: the top impact noted by 55 percent of CEOs surveyed is the "inability to innovate effectively" ([PWC](#), 2019). Understanding, accessing, and changing the skill set of employees, when needed, can make all the difference. No matter what level of technology is involved, organizations are always run by people.



- **Budget:** On average, IT departments spend less than 20 percent on building innovative new capabilities ([Deloitte](#), 2020). Being intentional about budget allocation can set up long-term success. Focus on finding the right balance between funding existing revenue streams and incubation opportunities.
- **Vision:** It's essential for innovation to align with growth strategy and ethical principles. Organizations should determine intended direction and understand what's needed to get there—then innovate in ways that support the path.

Prioritizing these attributes will help create a foundation capable of supporting innovation. Your next step will be to make innovation an actionable part of your organizational culture. Let's consider what that looks like in practice and how you can provide the tools and resources needed to foster a widespread and collaborative culture of innovation.

## Providing time, space, and resources

At a high level, getting people involved in innovation comes down to enabling them. Employees should feel empowered to be more productive, collaborate effectively, and stay connected. Leaders should invest in employees as the highly valuable assets they are with new approaches to talent management and development. In practice, this might include:

- Sponsoring learning opportunities like **lectures, trainings, and workshops** on both technical and non-technical topics.
- Offering **seed funding** for start-up style pitches or idea generating contests.
- Creating a **dedicated physical space** for collaboration and ideation.



In essence, offer opportunities that spark ideas. At Microsoft, we have The Garage, our official outlet for experimental projects, workshops, lectures, and trainings about new technologies and use cases that are open to any interested employee. We invest in the Garage with the understanding that the ideas and experimentation coming out of this group have great potential to lead to strategic decisions and organizational changes that help advance Microsoft into the future.

The good news is that there are countless ways to encourage experimentation, even if a physical workspace isn't possible. Events similar to Microsoft's annual Hackathon—a company-wide social event for technical and non-technical staff to share ideas and collaborate on solutions—are great ways to include employees across every division of your company, and they can be implemented remotely so that local and global offices can participate together.

No matter the route you choose, it's about providing the time, space, and resources needed for experimentation—all with the understanding that the simplest ideas can be the start of something big. Once those ideas begin to flow, it's essential to have mechanisms for nurturing and testing them—or filtering them out. One helpful way to create some structure around your process is to have a central incubation group, a committee of unbiased moderators from different departments across the company. This helps ensure objectivity and work toward the common goal of either filtering ideas out or moving them forward. Your central incubation group might be tasked with duties like funding projects tied to defined growth stages, coaching teams across the company, assessing project proposals, or aggregating learnings for company-wide sharing.

But it doesn't end there. In addition to providing the tools needed to innovate, business leaders must also dig deep into their organizational culture to find out how people work, communicate, and collaborate—especially in these times of remote and hybrid work. Rethinking how you currently approach workplace communication and collaboration can open new doors to widespread innovation and employee engagement.

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## **It's time to reimagine workplace culture**

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed traditional workplace operations, scaling an immediate need for business infrastructures to support hybrid and remote work environments. Learning, communicating, and collaborating all look very different now. Day-to-day social interactions have shifted, too. In a largely work-from-home environment, coffee break chats and ad hoc introductions—the social capital many had relied on but perhaps took for granted—have been replaced with digital interactions, most often with direct team members.

These shifts in organizational networks matter. Workplace connections provide the means through which employees and workgroups exchange information and create knowledge. They're needed to maintain learning, productivity, and support—and they can't just disappear because communication modes have changed. Leaders must formulate new ways for employees to learn and connect. They must ensure that even in a remote work environment, networks for skill development and continuous learning remain collaborative and prioritized. In essence, innovation must happen at a cultural level to accommodate the need for learning and collaboration in this new world of hybrid and remote work.

Let's take a closer look at how leaders can encourage engagement within these areas.



## *Rethinking skilling and collaboration in a remote workplace*

As we revealed earlier, adapting to change sometimes means embracing new ways of working. In the last two years, workers across the globe have had to quickly learn new video conferencing software, design tools, communication platforms, and even computer equipment. Some people have onboarded to new companies, while others have started new positions within their old. What all of these things have in common is the learning curve that employees face—and sometimes that curve is steep. Businesses can't expect employees to face that curve without resources and support. Now more than ever, continuous learning and skill development is necessary for preparing your workforce to become agile and empowered in the face of disruption.

There's no question that COVID-19 has changed workplace learning. A recent study of European organizations shows that up to 94 percent of learning and development professionals report having to change their strategies in response to the pandemic, with only one in four finding those changes easy to make. That same study reveals digital learning is on the rise, and an organization's digital learning maturity matters. In fact, those with a mature digital learning approach are twice as likely to have found it easy to cope with the impact of the pandemic. However, nearly 60 percent thought their organization's adoption of digital learning was still immature, pointing to a greater difficulty in coping with the pandemic ([Fosway Group](#), 2020).

There's a clear opportunity for learning and development to play a more strategic role as organizations navigate the impacts of COVID-19 on their workforce. Even before the current state, businesses were beginning to recognize the growing challenges of the skills gap in an age of digital transformation. Research shows that prior to the pandemic, there was already a 32 percent increase year over year in the identification and assessment of skills gaps ([LinkedIn Learning](#), 2019).

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94 percent of employees report they would stay at a company longer if it invested in their learning and development.

— [LinkedIn Learning](#)

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With the speed at which the pandemic has accelerated digital transformation, addressing skills gaps with continuous learning opportunities is even more critical for employees to remain agile and prepared to innovate when new solutions are needed—and employees are asking for this. Up to 94 percent of employees report they would stay at a company longer if it invested in their learning and development ([LinkedIn Learning](#), 2019).

We're at a critical juncture in which catering to employee learning and skills assessment is absolutely necessary. But we also have to keep in mind that a significant part of learning doesn't happen easily without a collaborative environment that recognizes shifting workplace norms. By that we mean the traditional 9-to-5 workday is fading, and so is the line between "office hours" and everything else. In response, businesses need to accommodate new communication and collaboration norms so people can skill up more effectively.

As employees redesign their workdays in the shift to hybrid and remote, it's important that businesses focus on *how* people can work better. Managers need to model sustainable working practices and offer coaching and regular check-ins that show they care. They need to ensure people are getting the downtime they need to recharge and adopting tactics that feel healthy and rewarding. This will look different for every team, and leaders will need to experiment to discover how to most effectively communicate and collaborate, then create norms that support those discoveries. Without this foundational practice, skilling and continuous learning efforts can't be fully realized across the organization. Collaboration, communication, and learning must all work together—like most other aspects of innovation, none can exist in a vacuum.

Fortunately, studies show there are actionable steps leaders can take to facilitate effective collaboration and learning ([LinkedIn](#), 2020):

- Embrace your organization's learning culture and create a **learning brand** that employees recognize and relate to.
- Offer learning opportunities that are **social and mobile** that can be used in person or remotely.
- Create optional, **self-directed learning** opportunities that employees can utilize outside the traditional workday hours.

Underlying all of these steps is the importance of innovation in communication strategies. Leveraging both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools—for example, video conferencing calls *and* live collaborative documents that are accessible afterwards—can be an excellent way to facilitate efficient communications.

If leaders can understand employees' differing adaptive strategies and needs around communication and skilling, they can take informed actions to encourage resilience. To that end, let's take a closer look at how people are at the core of successful business outcomes.



## *Competitive and resilient businesses prioritize people*

The spectrum of knowledge needed within the tech industry is diversifying, and so are the backgrounds of the people bringing it. But we still have a lot of work to do create inclusive work environments at scale. As an industry, we need to establish a growth mindset, foster inclusion and diversity, and step back from the hustle long enough to recognize that every truly competitive and resilient business is built on a culture that prioritizes the human experience.

Reimagining a workplace culture in this way is a learning experience for people at every level of the business. To this end, Microsoft has developed a Growth and Resilience in Tech toolkit, designed to help anyone in tech, from student to employee, mentor or manager, hone important non-tech skills and foster a more inclusive and diverse workplace. Through this work we've come to recognize a few important learnings that help every employee maximize their impact:

- **Recognize discomfort:** We've all felt out of our comfort zone, whether it's learning a new tool or pitching an idea. Struggle, challenge, and discomfort are all part of learning. Great innovators are made through the willingness to try and sometimes fail.
- **Strategize holistic solutions:** Problem-solving involves a lot more than technology. How we approach a challenge from an emotional perspective can be just as important as the solution itself. Making space to recognize and strategize around real life is essential for succeeding.
- **Pivot and persist:** Unexpected challenges arise every day. Understanding and naming what is happening, disentangling what we do and do not have control over, and regrouping with new strategies helps improve persistence and resilience.

These learnings can be used to challenge our perceptions, broaden skillsets, and build flourishing workplaces that support innovation. But as we learned earlier, the effort cannot be a siloed one. People from across the organization must communicate with transparency and collaborate with intent. Culture cannot be created from a checklist. It has to be lived through the lens of every single employee and the experience they bring.

Next, let's see how one of the world's largest communications firms and a global food manufacturing enterprise remain competitive in the market by building cultures of collaboration and innovation.





WPP is the world's largest creative transformation company that oversees agencies in 80 countries. As true experts in their field, the 100,000-person company is responsible for nearly one in four advertisements worldwide. Their agencies are always working to help clients reach the public in more creative and effective ways, and WPP's own employees are an essential part of making this happen. WPP is investing in AI technology to empower its employees to apply their creativity in new ways. In fact, creativity and technology are so integral to the company's success that they created an entire position—Global Head of Data and AI—tasked with embedding data and AI into every aspect of their work culture.

WPP's success with AI boils down to their culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism. They believe the best innovation is developed closest to their clients, a principle known as distributed innovation. This means WPP agencies develop solutions to meet clients' needs, and those solutions can be adapted and reapplied across other parts of the business, delivering exponential return on a single investment. Distributed innovation essentially acts as a template that enables everyone to innovate. People across different positions in different agencies are empowered to take a known solution and apply ingenuity to solve business problems for their own clients. This approach drives constant change and encourages employees to collaborate, share, and reimagine outcomes without reinventing the wheel each time a new challenge arises.

This strategic approach has already paid off with tangible results. WPP has created the WPP Data Catalogue, containing incredibly diverse datasets easily available to everyone and already used by more than 1,000 people throughout all 80 agencies. But they're also invested in how WPP employees interact with and learn from the data, and they're doing more to ensure accessibility and understanding among many more employees. They have a goal to educate at least 50,000 colleagues about AI so they can take advantage of it in their work and communicate about it with other colleagues and clients.

Despite their successful embrace of technology, WPP's greatest asset isn't their huge volume of data—it's the way their employees work together to accomplish real-world problem solving. They demystify AI by bringing people together to talk about it and demonstrate its value. To that end, WPP established the WPP Open Data & AI Community where active members enable learning by sharing tips and asking for help. The community hosts events, webinars, and training on topics ranging from data fundamentals to AI ethics.

Notably, certain attitudes within their culture have been essential to WPP's success with AI initiatives. First is an openness to change and the ability to see new possibilities. Another is a willingness to make investments in both time and budgets. With this they convey that not everything is driven by revenue pressure, and that time can be a valuable asset. Finally, WPP embraces a very human-centric approach that sees failure simply as an opportunity to learn. They acknowledge that not every project will be successful, and that sometimes it's better to fail fast and restart—because that's exactly how new and improved ideas are born.

By incorporating AI solutions and building a culture where everyone can innovate, WPP has established themselves as an organization where technology powers creativity—and every colleague has a part to play.

Now let's look at the story of a global food enterprise that leads with a unique approach to culture, positioning them as one of the most competitive companies in the world.



Mondelēz International is a global snacking leader, with iconic brands like OREO cookies, Cadbury Dairy Milk chocolate, SOUR PATCH KIDS candy, belVita biscuits, and more. With a focus on customer satisfaction, Mondelēz International is embracing AI across their organization—from research and development to marketing and IT—and creating new ways for people to work together. As it looks to the future, one of its primary goals is to become a digital-first company. With AI and other digital initiatives, Mondelēz International sees the opportunity to become more nimble across the enterprise, for everything from R&D to marketing. AI is helping not only accelerate existing operations but also transform the business to better meet consumer expectations and increase competitiveness.

Mondelēz International believes that AI development is most successful when AI experts collaborate with peers across the organization. Data science, modeling, and simulation experts work closely with the biscuit, chocolate, gum, or candy development experts. Their rationale is clear and rooted in both culture and strategy: everyone has a different part of the puzzle to offer, and every piece is needed to complete the picture.

They've also found that getting buy-in across the organization is one of the most important success factors. This is especially the case when gathering data to train AI models and ensure adoption of AI solutions. Mondelēz International takes a few approaches to earn buy-in. First, leadership makes sure that individuals understand the value a new solution will provide for them personally. When people see firsthand how a sweeping change makes their own lives easier, they're more likely to get on board. Next, the company offers a compelling story from leadership. When leaders talk openly about the collective journey, their vision, and the support they're providing, there's naturally a push for individuals who are reluctant to come on the journey as well. Finally, Mondelēz International creates opportunities for peer sharing. Hearing from peers about their successes with AI and modeling provides compelling examples of doing the work faster, cheaper, or better.

Since they started working with AI and other digital tools, Mondelēz International has aimed for them to be used broadly, at all levels of the company, not just by a select few. They've already succeeded in bringing AI to non-AI experts in areas like food science. This puts AI directly into the hands of the people closest to the business problems, and it helps them reach many more consumers in a fraction of the time and cost. Plus, Mondelēz International has been able to equip employees with this knowledge that otherwise would have taken years to develop.

In just a few years, Mondelēz International has gone from being an AI novice to having a number of highly successful AI implementations across every area of their company. They understood that in addition to this vision they needed a plan that would encompass strategy, cultural change, and the democratization of AI. With this foundation in place, Mondelēz will continue to mature as an AI-driven company in years to come and gain competitive advantage as a result.

It's clear that equipping and encouraging people is at the core of successful innovation. It's your people, after all, who bring the creativity and dedication needed to solve your biggest business challenges. Providing them with consistent opportunities and resources is paramount to building a culture capable of innovating—and one that remains competitive on the other side of those business challenges.

It goes without saying that building a culture of innovation starts by looking inward. But in addition to looking *across* their organization, leaders must also look *beyond* it to consider how they're impacting their industry, customers, and communities. In the next part of this paper, we'll examine the growing demand for corporate accountability toward societal change, as well as how co-innovation creates a stronger, more sustainable future for your business, your stakeholders, and society at large.





## Co-innovating for broader impact

Throughout this paper, we've explored what it means to innovate for a competitive future. Much of what we've discussed coalesces into one key concept: change. To become agile or adaptable, to transform or disrupt—it's all grounded in the idea that change is inevitable, and we have to plan, act, and reflect with intent in order to persevere.

It's a timely lesson, as businesses around the world have been inundated with change for the better part of two years. But even before the pandemic, the tides were beginning to shift on the role of business within the broader societal landscape. With years of growing public awareness around issues like climate change, corporate and governmental technology use, and human rights reform, a hunger for accountability has surfaced. Today, the fundamental role of business entails a lot more than just answering to the bottom line.

What this means is that all business leaders can greatly benefit from three guiding principles as they consider the future of their organization:

- Demonstrating **how we do business** is just as important as the products and services we offer.
- Innovating **with societal impact in mind** is critical for improving business practices and solving global challenges.
- Partnering **externally with other businesses** creates the greatest impact.

Let's take a closer look at these ideas and examine some ways your organization can co-innovate for a broader impact.

## How you do business matters

From consumer buying habits to government regulations, businesses today face increasing pressures to disclose how their operations impact society's most pressing issues. In recent decades, a growing spectrum of accountability measures has emerged as a way for businesses to answer to stakeholders. The rise of corporate social responsibility (CSR), for example, is indicative that business leaders understand the need to be more transparent, both internally and outside the organization. Furthermore, the evolution toward quantifying a company's performance on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues further cements that need—and organizations have taken notice. A recent study revealed that 96 percent of the world's largest 250 companies by revenue already report on their sustainability performance ([KPMG](#), 2020). It stands to reason that stakeholder pressure, from consumers to investors, is a driving force behind these growing accountability measures.

But accountability is now also at the urging of governing organizations, and for good reason. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline 17 targeted objectives that promote solving some of the world's greatest environmental and societal challenges by 2030. From clean air to zero hunger and quality education, these SDGs represent issues that have been greatly exacerbated by the ongoing global pandemic. Left unchecked, they will not only continue to impact hundreds of millions of people around the world, but will also affect every aspect of global business development, from consumers to supply chain to distribution.

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96 percent of the world's largest 250 companies by revenue already report on their sustainability performance.

— KPMG

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Some governing bodies are now elevating this urgency by enforcing disclosure of compliance. The European Union Non-Financial Reporting Directive mandates that large EU companies disclose their actions on both environmental and social issues, as well as human rights, corruption, and the status of their own workforce.

The EU's initiative represents a departure from both the self-regulating nature of CSR, as well as from what ESGs can reasonably measure. But this departure is also noteworthy because it shows that accountability among businesses isn't optional anymore. Lawmakers and governing institutions are confirming what business stakeholders have already come to know: corporations, large and small, are key players in the evolution of society.

With growing awareness of this connection, organizations gain the opportunity to pursue business outcomes that positively impact some of society's greatest challenges. And as businesses around the world leverage technological innovation to expand their geographical reach, release competitive products, and grow their customer base, they should also remain aware that all innovation has a direct impact on society—and we all have the unique ability to ensure it's a positive one.

## Innovating for impact

It's promising to see that organizations worldwide are reevaluating their impact on society and responding to the public's demand to understand how they do business. There's a lot to gain from doing so. Reaching the SDG targets by 2030 has the potential to not only generate shared prosperity across a healthier planet, but also opens up \$12 trillion in market opportunities ([United Nations cGlobal Compact](#)).

However, with the SDGs targeting a date of 2030, there is limited time to develop enough widespread solutions to address the breadth of challenges. These fast-moving targets are quickly outpacing efforts to address them through traditional and reactive means. It's helpful to recognize, too, that the environmental and societal issues at hand are deeply complex in nature. There are no easy fixes. But technological innovation holds the key to progress. In fact, it's the only way forward—and businesses are primed to play a key role. As Boston Consulting Group points out, "of all the forces that the private sector can bring to bear in attempting to advance the 2030 SDGs, by far the most powerful is its unique capacity to innovate quickly, attract capital to innovative solutions, and drive innovations at scale" ([2019](#)).

This observation is encouraging, and it shows that businesses can make a genuine difference within communities. But how does it translate to actionable steps for business leaders? It starts by recognizing that all innovation has an impact outside of your business. It's important to take a close look at your company's roadmap for creating financial, social, and environmental value, both within and outside, and innovate in ways that actively promote progress. There's a real opportunity here to leverage innovation across every part of the business, creating a culture in which it's normal—and expected—to adopt new mindsets, create new business models, and develop disruptive technology solutions. Being realistic and transparent about the impact of your innovation is the most effective way to enable the kinds of products and services that will eventually feed global populations, produce clean air, reform education, and tackle the many other societal issues we face together. Innovation doesn't have to be—and shouldn't be—only about the pursuit of the bottom line. It holds the potential to accomplish so much more when we leverage it with a greater purpose in mind. Accordingly, leaders should ensure that innovation is targeted to benefit both their business and society in tandem.

It might sound like a high bar, but it's not one we have to pursue alone. Now more than ever, organizations of all types are coming together to push the boundaries of what's possible. In fact, proactively seeking collaboration is one of the most impactful first steps we can take together.



## Co-innovation fosters critical insights

It's clear that businesses today play an integral role in solving some of humanity's greatest global crises. But no single business can do that alone. Instead, external collaboration can connect groups who have specific knowledge of the issue at hand. Whether that expertise is in technology, pharmaceuticals, human services, manufacturing, or something else, every business has customers and community partners—from corporations to start-ups and NGOs—that are brimming with diverse perspectives and potential breakthrough knowledge. Bringing those businesses together for joint innovation efforts can produce widescale outcomes that no single business can tackle alone.



Co-innovation is all about building partnership-driven relationships, not transaction-driven ones, to achieve specific outcomes rather than focusing on innovation for innovation's sake. It's also about working together to ensure digital strategy is aligned to business outcomes and delivers measurable value for entire industries. In the last two years, for example, we've seen countless scenarios in which cross-industry collaborations have become increasingly important for success. In fact, a recent study from BCG Henderson Institute analyzed five industry verticals—industrial automation, precision agriculture, transportation and logistics, building automation, and automotive. The study found that 25 percent of the highest-value problems require collective action across enterprises to solve them (2021). They also studied smart city use cases such as traffic optimization, disaster response, and energy management. Results showed that 50 percent of current use cases and as much as 85 percent of future use cases require cross-industry data sharing and collaboration (2021).

From these results we can see that collaborative relationships are critical for making progress, not just for individual businesses, but across entire industries. If we take that logic and apply it on an even greater scale, we can discover entirely new ways to approach and solve some of society's biggest challenges. It's a significant realization because the key to progress in these areas is rapid scaling of specialized solutions—and that's where co-innovation can help. When groups from both public and private sectors incentivize partnerships, they can leverage their most innovative capabilities to advance the SDGs and other global initiatives. Such partnerships can quickly develop and scale innovations that support the widespread launch of new technologies where they're most needed. In fact, this has become so important that the UN has already registered more than 4,000 partnerships in the Global Registry of Voluntary Commitments & Multistakeholder Partnerships, some of them targeting specific thematic areas where business can make a difference ([Boston Consulting Group](#), 2019).

Business leaders have also taken notice of the shift toward co-innovation. A recent global executive survey revealed that of the business leaders who formed strategic partnerships during the pandemic, 78 percent intend to maintain the partnership once the pandemic subsides ([Deloitte](#), 2020). Similarly, another study revealed that 76 percent of executives believe the stakes for innovation have never been higher—and that innovating with ecosystem partners and third-party organizations is the only way to “get it right” ([Accenture](#), 2020). Based on the speed with which global events have evolved in the last two years, it wouldn’t be a stretch to argue that “getting it right” is more important now than ever before.

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76 percent of executives believe the stakes for innovation have never been higher—and that innovating with ecosystem partners and third-party organizations is the only way to “get it right.”

— Accenture

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All innovation has impact—but that impact spreads and deepens with every partnership formed. From industry to global societal problems, co-innovation has the potential to augment any single organization’s innovative capabilities.

Let’s explore the story of one innovative company that joined cross-industry forces to leave their impact on one of the greatest global challenges in recent history.





UCB is a Belgium-based biopharmaceutical company specializing in immunology and neurology. With nearly a century of experience, innovation has always been part of UCB's mission to transform the lives of people living with severe diseases. But like most in the industry, UCB faces challenges that accompany a complex, highly regulated work environment. Bringing new, safe drugs to market is risky, costly, and can take decades. At every step, staggering volumes of data inform their work and must be analyzed with extreme attention to detail.

To help overcome these challenges, UCB is embracing new technologies. A key part of their corporate strategy is the transformation to a digital company, which includes leveraging partner expertise in AI and supercomputing. These technologies are improving the speed, quality, and cost-effectiveness of pharmaceutical innovation. From initial research and molecule development to clinical trials and patient outreach, UCB is integrating AI across the organization to help develop better medicine that reaches patients sooner.

The need for rapid drug development on a global scale became very real with the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of this, UCB wanted to use AI to identify potential molecules that prevent replication in the COVID-19 virus. However, UCB knew that to test such a high volume of data required an unprecedented amount of processing power to achieve a shorter timeline. For that reason, they turned to external partners for help. UCB partnered with Microsoft and earned their AI for Health grant, enabling them to use the computing power of Azure to rapidly process their molecule designs and tests. With their new partnership and AI technology, a significant portion of UCB's employees were equipped to hit the ground running with the COVID Moonshot project—an open-science consortium dedicated to developing safe, globally affordable, antiviral drugs against COVID-19.

The result of UCB's challenge to accelerate drug design and development was significant. By collaborating with Microsoft and integrating Azure, they completed six months' work of computational screening and compound design in just three days across data centers in the US and Europe. This not only saved time for researchers and scientists during their research and clinical trials, but it allowed them to quickly contribute their findings in the fight against COVID-19.

While the target of their research was new, the collaborative process was not. UCB had long been developing a culture in which data scientists work alongside biologists, chemists, and others to drive innovation. With this collaborative nature engrained in every level of the company, UCB was well prepared to step into a high-pressure situation and work across industries with tech companies and medical providers. In fact, years of building an organizational infrastructure optimized for innovation was a key factor in UCB's adaptability. With cross-discipline training and wide use of technology, a significant portion of UCB's

workforce was equipped to use data analytics to meet the project's different needs. Combined with the AI and supercomputing expertise of collaborative partners, UCB's experience developing, testing, and delivering new drugs was pivotal to accelerating project timelines.

Clear communication and expectation-setting made a difference, too. With reliable, structured communication protocols already in place, UCB was able to adapt and manage a huge volume of quickly changing information, both internally and among project partners. Finally, UCB's leadership empowered employees to step up and contribute in new ways, highlighting both individual and organizational adaptability when it was most needed.

In the end, UCB released their work into the public domain, and now a partner company has picked up the project for continued development with outside funding. The COVID Moonshot project has solidified UCB's belief that partnerships and digital tools can help deliver critical knowledge, solutions, and medicines to the communities most in need. It has also demonstrated the potential for community participation, impact, and empowerment that continues to grow well outside their own walls. With the project's worldwide, open-science format, there is a clear opportunity to empower other research organizations to build on current progress. It's this type of dedicated partnership and collective goal-setting that UCB believes can make the greatest impact.

## A clear directive has emerged

When crises arise, it's important to keep community resilience at the heart of rapid progress. Society is speaking loud and clear, demanding innovation that improves lives and can be trusted. It's not just about what technology can do—it's about what it *should* do.

We've discussed many of the actions, beliefs, and approaches an organization can take to build a foundation that supports innovation. But we've only just scratched the surface—there are countless ways to make innovation a reality, depending on your organization's priorities. By bringing people together with purpose and maintaining responsibility at the core of your business, you'll be ready to navigate new challenges and leverage human ingenuity in ways you've never imagined possible.





## Preparing for the future

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Notably, we see a strong correlation between successful, long-term innovation and organizations that achieve resolute staying power. While success can take countless shapes and forms, it comes down to leveraging innovative technology to recover from crisis and leap ahead of the crowd by becoming the next disruption.

As we've seen over the course of the last year and more, people all over the world and organizations of all kinds have been challenged in unprecedented ways. But times of crisis push us to innovate, to adapt, and to evolve. With a steady approach, people are innovating to break through with more resilience than ever—and accomplish some remarkable achievements along the way.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the crisis of today, but there will be another tomorrow. We can never truly know what the future holds, but we can be prepared for the opportunities it presents. As we continue to leverage our shared experiences to mobilize and strategize for future global challenges, we will also continue to share the many incredible success stories we've witnessed over the last year—because it's what we can learn from each other that inspires all of us to go the distance.

As we've seen, successful innovation is about much more than changing technologies. It's about people and the evolution of their ideas. It's about how those ideas can help meet and overcome our greatest business and societal challenges—because how we respond today will shape our tomorrow.



# Getting started

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Empowered with tools, resources, and support, every employee at every organization has the potential to contribute to industry-changing transformations. Taking the next steps to fulfill innovative potential means thinking big about how innovation can have the greatest impact on your business. As you develop your organization's approach, we encourage you to visit our AI Business School to learn more about how AI is transforming specific industries like retail and healthcare, to illuminating the technologies like deep learning that make this possible. Explore real-life stories of AI transformation to learn the insights and tactics that have led to success, along with tools and frameworks that will help you empower your organization to prioritize innovation.

## Additional resources

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- [Growth and Resilience in Tech toolkit](#) – Learn to hone important non-tech skills and foster a more inclusive and diverse workplace.
- [Organizational Resilience](#) – Discover how Microsoft solutions can help you strengthen resilience in people, teams, and your broader organization.
- [Societal Resilience](#) – Discover the people and ideas that are helping us overcome the pandemic and emerge more resilient than ever.
- [Microsoft Innovation](#) – Learn about advancements in technology on the horizon.
- [The Garage](#) – Read about programs and experiences that help spark ideas and foster a collaborative culture.
- [AI Business School](#) – Discover how to put AI into action
- [The Rise of the Triple Peak Day](#) – Read about navigating the workday without the traditional 9 to 5
- [3 Ways Hybrid Collaboration Can Bridge Both Space and Time](#) – Learn about to encourage effective communication in a hybrid work environment
- [Intelligence Driven Organization](#) – Learn how Microsoft became an Intelligence Driven Organization and how your business can do the same

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