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PERSPECTIVE FROM THE PANDEMIC

An Emerging Reality
for the Workplace

ASPEN INSTITUTE ROUNDTABLE
ON INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION



CONTENTS

Foreword	2
Introduction	4
A Shifting Workplace	6
The Role of Technology	13
Perspective & Purpose	20
Conclusion	27



FOREWORD

For the past decade, the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Institutional Innovation has focused on exploring how organizations can thrive in a constantly changing world. This past year, in light of the coronavirus pandemic, the Roundtable went virtual, occurring over a series of sessions in September 2020 and a capstone meeting in March 2021. The pandemic influenced not only the form but the very substance of our discussions. Our theme, “Building Resilience in Complex Ecosystems,” took on new resonance as the white-collar workforce shifted home, technology took center stage, and employee well-being became a management imperative. Each session was guided by three key questions: first, where we are today; second, where we need to go; and third, how we will get there. In total, more than 50 academics, corporate leaders, and other experts took part in the conversations. The meeting was held under Chatham House Rule, so names are omitted from this report, but all of the findings detailed here stem from the insights and observations of participants.

These conversations were deeply rooted in the challenges of the moment: the seismic impact of COVID-19 and its disruption of the economy; political divisions and a presidential race; and the national reckoning with systemic racism. While this discussion is informed by the crises of 2020 and 2021, we do not assume that life will just go back to the way it was once the pandemic is under control, or once there is



a return to in-office work.

Instead, we hope that these challenges have been a powerful catalyst to make necessary changes to how organizations operate. The focus of these roundtables was to identify opportunities for robust improvement, particularly to how organizations see and articulate their goals, and how they support their employees' sense of purpose. The big question at the core of the sessions is: how to get to the place we need to be?

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, almost overnight, offices across the country emptied out, and millions of white-collar employees found themselves faced with the challenge of working remotely. After a year, more than one-third of the entire U.S. workforce has shifted home, and over 22 million Americans have lost their jobs.¹ At this point, even when the economy recovers, it seems increasingly likely that many workers may never return to a traditional office environment.

Fortunately, technologies developed before the pandemic made it possible for workers to stay in touch with one another. Tools such as Zoom and Slack are now indispensable to supporting remote communications. But are these tools capable of enabling businesses to function effectively over time? Can they really support creative collaboration and innovation as well as routine activities? What impact do these tools have on well-being and the sense of belonging that good workplaces engender? And, how do these dislocations intersect with the larger movement toward rethinking the nature of work?

While coping with the impact of the pandemic has been a top priority, a confluence of forces, including deep economic dislocations, a reckoning with systematic racism, and political instability, have provided a formidable “stress test” for many businesses. The fact is, the issues at the root of these challenges have been simmering for some time, and the pandemic brought them to a boil. The Aspen Institute



Roundtable on Institutional Innovation asked experts to consider how these difficult circumstances might be the catalysts required to lead to positive changes in how businesses operate and, in particular, how they see and articulate their purpose. As one participant questioned, “Can we take advantage of this crisis to completely reimagine work?”

This report summarizes shifting workplace environments, the role technology has played and can continue to play in evolving ecosystems, and how perspectives from the pandemic can drive the changes needed to ensure purpose in our workplaces.



A SHIFTING WORKPLACE

As much of the white-collar workforce shifted to working from home, and frontline workers faced new barriers to their safety, managers had to center on employee well-being like never before. Managers quickly discovered who must balance work with caretaking responsibilities, who has at-risk family members. Many faced a pervasive underlying current of stress permeating their workforce.

Throughout the past year, managers have had to ask themselves: am I supporting employees in a way that meets their needs amidst crisis? What does productivity mean in this new environment? And, how do I make results feel tangible during remote work?

At the same time, the pandemic was a catalyst for a nation-wide reckoning with deep systematic issues of racial inequality. Within the first few weeks of the pandemic, let alone the past year, Black and



Before the pandemic, the mentality across organizations was you leave home at home, and work at work. Now, working from home has forced the realization that these two dimensions cannot be divided.

Brown communities were hit harder due to the fact that they make up a large part of frontline workers and that they were in many cases the first to be fired when cuts were made.² Calls for organizations to “do



better” with anti-racism and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) rang throughout the country. Managers and CEOs realized that their organizations must become intentional in setting DEI goals, and that they must become the champions of such goals. This section will review key shifts forced by the pandemic that participants highlighted as beneficial to evolving ecosystems: a reframing of resilience, a focus on frontline workers, and a reckoning with racial justice.

Reframing resilience

At the onset of the pandemic the entire country went into “crisis mode.” Leaders were challenged to find a balance between taking immediate actions to respond to a radically changed environment while remaining focused on pursuing strategic objectives that are critical to ensuring an organization’s long-term success. One participant noted that the key to this balance is understanding the difference between *resilience* and *adaptation*.

**What we thought
was impossible isn’t.
What we thought we
can’t do, we can.**



While *resilience* and *adaptation* are both positive responses to stress, there is an inherent tension between the two: resilience is about “the ability to

bounce back,” and enables an organism (or an organization) to return to its normal (pre-stress) state as quickly and with as little damage as possible. Adaptation, on the other hand, involves responding to stress by changing in some fundamental way in order to function bet-





ter in a new and different environment. At the onset of the pandemic, most organizations leaned towards resilience as the means to get through hard times. However, a year into the pandemic, it is clear that institutions must also be adaptive, not just resilient, and in fact, their workforces are willing and eager to be so.

The need to shift the mentality to an adaptive response became clear for a few key reasons. One, it became evident that, after the pandemic, there will not be a return to “normal” work environments immediately. Thus, adapting to more flexible schedules and communication methods is key for organizations to remain productive both during and after the pandemic. Two, there were in fact a number of elements of remote work that benefited white-collar employees, from flexible work hours to the ability to participate in events without the need for travel. And three, as a country, we need to better support those who have been traditionally marginalized from the workforce, in particular frontline workers, who have suffered the worst.

Focusing on frontline workers

Traditionally, management and senior leadership shoulders the burden for setting strategy and driving change in the workplace. Now, those transformations are being fueled by creativity and imagination from many parts of the talent pool, in particular, frontline workers. Participants pointed to frontline workers as being actively engaged in improvising creative responses to unfamiliar circumstances, while many senior leaders, who are focused on “crisis management,” have





been concerned with survival – missing the opportunity to respond to new circumstances with new solutions, and not thinking enough about adapting their structures to new environments. Evidence suggests that an organization’s workers are more prepared to engage in a process of transformation and adaptation than their leaders may assume. A survey on the future of work conducted in the U.S. and seven other developed countries in Asia, Europe, and South America, which included 6,500 business leaders and 11,000 workers, found that “the two groups perceived the future in significantly different ways.”³

The survey, which was published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 2019, found that the leaders “felt anxious as they struggled to marshal and mobilize the workforce of tomorrow” and were worried about how they “can find and hire employees who have the skills their companies need and about what they should do with people whose skills have become obsolete.” In contrast, “the workers didn’t share that sense of anxiety. Instead, they focused on the opportunities and benefits that the future holds for them.” The bottom line: workers were “much more eager to embrace change and learn new skills than their employers gave them credit for.”

Of course, roundtable participants noted that workers have leaned on their employers to cope with the changing conditions, particularly when it came



It has been impressive to see junior-level staff pushing for change in traditionally hierarchical organizations.





to having the right infrastructure and support to work remotely. That said, the pandemic upended traditional hierarchies when it came to solutions; frontline workers took ownership of processes to drive change, and managers and leadership adapted to these changes as they listened to the needs of their workforce. Participants noted numerous benefits that stemmed from such efforts, including a focus on safety and mental health, and the understanding that workers need to define their own needs for healthcare, childcare, and quality of life. Further, numerous participants noted that the push for substantive action on anti-racism and DEI is coming from frontline and junior-level staff.

A reckoning on racial justice

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the country to reckon with the deep systemic racial justice issues harming our communities – from healthcare to the criminal justice system. Not only have African Americans and Latinos lost jobs at a higher rate than whites due to the pandemic, but also COVID-19 has disproportionately killed more individuals from these communities.⁴ What is more, protests in summer 2020 over the killings of numerous Black Americans by police, including George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, brought racial justice to the forefront of national conversation. For organizations, pressure from employees, customers, and clients to take a stance against injustice mounted, and many organizations grappled with how to expand their commitments to DEI, and fulfill goals and demonstrate results.





Roundtable participants pointed out that tackling these issues is not about making good on quotas but, rather, ensuring work environments are providing opportunities for all employees' purposes, that all are acknowledged and all voices are heard. Workplace diversity, therefore, must be followed by efforts for inclusion. Roundtable participants discussed that the first step in this process is to discover what meaningful inclusion looks like. One participant noted that inclusion for minority groups starts with the ability to express themselves freely, and feel comfortable doing so, and that this culture is still lacking in many workplaces.

Research shows that workers of color are more likely to wear facades of conformity at work, and to pretend to go along with the status quo. Further, employees of color may feel they are held to a higher standard of exceptionalism and are often faced with the feeling that they have to prove they deserve the positions they hold. Efforts towards building an inclusive culture must therefore start with ensuring that everyone feels accepted and respected, in particular those from underrepresented minority groups.

One positive from the pandemic is that it is impossible to ignore disparities; it has initiated an accelerated DEI process.



Recognizing this, managers must provide the space for employees to bring their full selves to work, and as one participant put it, they must be given the privilege to feel the “freedom to be average.” This





comes with fostering an open space for employees to dissent, fail, and contribute honestly to their work. As one participant noted, when employees have the freedom to fail, it generates an environment where staff feel they can take risks and think creatively – in the long run, a benefit for the organization. First and foremost, this is possible by generating a work environment built on trust.



ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The sudden arrival of COVID-19 shone a bright light on the role that technology can play in allowing businesses to operate with a remote workforce. The pandemic also vastly sped up the adoption of digitally based activities, such as e-commerce, telemedicine, and virtual well-being programming. But are these changes simply short-term responses to an emergency, or are they portents of a larger, more fundamental shift in how business is done?

Roundtable participants agreed that realizing the potential of this kind of integration means more than just acquiring the latest technology and bolting it to an existing system. New ways of designing organizations, new business incentives, and new management and leadership practices are required. As one participant noted, the winners will be those who are able to think architecturally about organizational transformation. Once again, the pandemic has made clear that, in order for technology to reach its maximum benefit long after the pandemic ends, institutions need to hone the skill to adapt. This section will outline digital transformations and the possibilities they have opened up for expanding potential and inclusion in the workplace.



Digital transformation

Digital transformation has been a major theme in the world of business for much of the past two decades. Start-ups that were “born digital” sprang up and became billion-dollar enterprises with astonishing speed, and have challenged old assumptions about how businesses grow. Older enterprises have grappled with how they should leverage technology to support more effective collaboration among their workers, to accelerate innovation, to increase agility, and to deliver greater value to consumers.

Obviously, the pandemic forced something new on most white-collar workers – remote work. Roundtable participants shared digital tools, beyond the mainstays of Zoom and email, that have been invaluable in allowing their teams to carry out their jobs from home. Not surprisingly, business collaboration tools including SharePoint, Slack, WhatsApp, and Quip have become indispensable to teamwork from home. In addition, social media platforms, like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook, were cited by participants for their ability to keep workers connected personally as well as professionally with colleagues anywhere in the world. Also mentioned were more specialized applications, such as Miro for sharing a virtual whiteboard, Roam for note taking and contact management, and Prezi for making presentations. Finally, several participants stated that they still depended on traditional communication methods, like the phone and physical mail, to maintain



We have to understand the multiple possible futures in which our organizations will live.





one-on-one human contact.

While white-collar workers were dealing with the above digital transformations, another shift occurred for frontline workers. Over recent years, concern about the number of jobs that may be replaced by machines has threatened workforces, from factory employees to security personnel. The pandemic, however, made clear that there are human capabilities that can never be replaced by a machine. One participant argued that the pandemic forced recognition of the critical role of human imagination, which has the unique ability to integrate opposing qualities in finding novel solutions to thorny problems. The capacity to be creative amidst a need for immense adaptability is thus a human value that industries must encourage.

Another participant added that we now have an opportunity to redesign work to blend uniquely human skills, such as empathy, creativity, and imagination, with machine skills, like speed, perfect recall, and speedy computation. Ideally, machines will make human work less repetitive and more meaningful, supporting creativity and industrial innovation. Further, while tapping into the power of artificial intelligence (AI) is an imperative for many businesses, even more important is understanding the potential of AI, which represents the creative partnership of humans and machines.

While the big question has been whether organizations are capable of transforming themselves quickly enough to keep up with the pace of change around them, the COVID-19 pandemic, once again, illuminated a long-standing issue by making this question one that needed





needed an immediate answer for the success of workforces around the world. Overnight, organizations had to adapt to digital processes to permit communication and work from home, and it was evident that learning must change to prepare workers for these new realities. Educating students for the jobs of the future will have to change: it will not be enough to simply develop domain knowledge and computer skills, but students will need to cultivate new capabilities – strategic thinking, ethics, dealing effectively with ambiguity – to take advantage of the new power of technology. A large-scale partnership between business and education will also be needed to reskill and upskill workers for new jobs.

Expanding potential

For organizations with workforces at home, technology has permitted a glimmer into our colleagues' lives that did not exist before the pandemic. Roundtable participants shared that in fact, for many, virtual work has been surprisingly intimate. Meetings and discussions over Zoom where pets join, kids shout, and family members wander by reveal a shared sense of humanity during a collective crisis. The pandemic personalized our work life like never before.

Further, there is a sense that working from home has put managers and staff on a more equal level. For some, this had an impact on the contribution employees feel they can make to their teams. Participants noted that it is easier to raise one's hand and the pressure of speaking in front of people in a big room is somewhat lifted. One par-





ticipant who worked remotely prior to the pandemic also noted that, before the pandemic, she was often the only person on the phone – an invisible voice in the conference room – and was therefore unintentionally left out of conversations. With everyone working remotely, that dynamic has changed, and allowed those who were on the sidelines to be on equal footing with their colleagues.

Flexible work should not be viewed as second class.



The remote environment has also demonstrated to managers that not all their employees thrive in the same atmosphere. Some who were unproductive in the office space

have become more productive working remotely. For others, it is the inverse. In addition, those who perhaps did not speak up in a conference room meeting may feel comfortable contributing more over calls or video meetings. The pandemic demonstrated the need to rethink how managers encourage staff engagement, and play to employees' strengths. It also showed that, when there is a return to in office work, some may feel they can be better contributors by working from home.

Finally, the pandemic showed many they can rely on their work community in trying times. Virtual happy hours, book clubs, wellness support groups, and other shared activities helped solidify a sense of community. For frontline workers, those who could rely on their workplace for childcare, personal protective equipment, and safety protocols felt some stress alleviated. The potential to use the digital world to drive thoughtful inclusion efforts and generate communities of support is a benefit participants hope will continue after the pandemic.





The possibilities for inclusion

Roundtable participants also felt hope for the potential role technology can play in providing space for organizations to make intentional efforts towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. While this is primarily relevant for white-collar jobs, lessons can be translated to frontline workers, as well. First, industries can expand hiring to intentionally attract remote employees from across the country, generating more diverse teams. This can happen in numerous ways. One, hiring managers can expand their searches to applicants outside the “industry cities” or in rural areas where commuting to work in a downtown office is costly and burdensome. Two, the process of interviewing over the phone or video can expand opportunities for those without the means to travel during their job search. This can also allow hiring managers to target graduates of historically black colleges, colleges in rural areas, and community colleges, inherently increasing representation in their applicant pool.

Second, participants noted that one benefit of remote work has been flexible work environments for parents and others with caretaking responsibilities. The pandemic has altered the traditional 9-5 work day for many organizations as caretaking responsibilities mounted with children staying home from school and elderly relatives moving in during a global health crisis. But, while organizations have had to adapt to their employees’ competing responsibilities, across the board, remote workers have in fact remained productive. Participants expressed a hope that this reality allows a continuation of flexible work hours and location after the pandemic is over. Further, they





hope that industries are more inclusive of certain groups, particularly women, who have historically been marginalized or prevented from moving up in a company due to biases that their competing responsibilities cannot be appropriately balanced. One participant concluded that the pandemic has generated open conversations that allow employers to see their employees as whole people, caretakers, parents, children, and more, and this understanding in itself is the first step to generating inclusive work environments for all.



PERSPECTIVE & PURPOSE

Participants celebrated the resounding adaptability of so many industries and individuals during this crisis. As one participant noted, if we step back for a moment, it is truly incredible that so many people were able to maintain productivity working from home in the midst of a global health crisis. However, there are lessons to be learned for our post-pandemic reality. In particular, the pandemic illuminated the need for middle management just as organizations were beginning to cut such roles to save overhead. Further, junior staff have demanded changes in culture, value-setting, and DEI that have benefited their workplaces. For many workers, the pandemic has given them perspective on their priorities, and caused reflection on the question: does work provide purpose?

Unfortunately, surveys reveal many staff are “sheltering in place,” waiting until after the pandemic to look for new jobs, as they feel undervalued in their current role or as though their organization does not operate according to their values. As the economy improves and businesses expand, the next six months may prove a reckoning for managers who have not adapted to changing expectations. This section will discuss the way management responsibilities have transformed, how organizations must address DEI as a core priority, and how they must be better prepared to offer support in crises. Participants reflected that the lessons learned throughout the pandemic will



hopefully be integrated into institutional innovation long beyond pandemic life.

Re-imagining the role of the manager

Across the board, roundtable participants agreed that we are experiencing a shift in the required core competencies of management. The pandemic has forced leaders to see that employee well-being is a key driver of corporate performance, redefining what it means to be a 'good manager.' Rather than focusing on helping staff to improve their technical skills, employers need to focus on capabilities such as creativity and collaboration. Especially during the pandemic, one participant noted that admitting when you were wrong, or did not know the answer, are qualities that are enhancing manager effectiveness and permitting more open communication during a time defined by fear.



We have to understand the multiple possible futures in which our organizations will live.

Roundtable participants also agreed that the pandemic elevated the role of middle management. Throughout the pandemic, middle management has stepped up to act as the key facilitators between staff and management. Acting as the liaison between levels of staffing and ensuring that everything from pandemic protocols to workplace benefits are being effectively communicated, middle management has been the glue holding many organizations together. One participant mentioned that, instead of removing this strata of





staff, as has been the pattern the past few decades, we must appreciate their unique role as essential translators and retain middle management.

DEI as a core priority

The representation and inclusion of people of color across all levels of staffing remains elusive in the workplace. However, the confluence of the pandemic and societal embrace of racial justice further exposed the changes that are urgently needed if the workplace is to achieve true diversity, equity, and inclusion. Roundtable participants voiced that meaningful change requires the full commitment of CEOs, who must serve as the ultimate chief diversity officers in their organizations; this role cannot be delegated.

Participants pointed out that improvement in expanding representation in the workforce starts with understanding how hiring happens for entry-level jobs. The pandemic has shown that managers will need to reconsider how they recruit and hire workers by determining which skills are needed to help the organization thrive. The old process of looking for candidates with elite educational backgrounds, well-typed resumes, and strong interviewing skills can eliminate many options who have the potential to make significant contributions but do not have traditional credentials. Hiring managers must shift to looking for skills like agility and adaptability, and they must bet on the potential of candidates, particularly those in minority groups, who may not have had access to internships or other prestigious opportunities.





However, as highlighted earlier, the effort for DEI does not stop once an organization hires more people from minority groups. True inclusion in the workspace will only be achieved if managers invest in the success of their employees and, in particular, encourage staff from underrepresented groups to share their lived experiences. Importantly, minority workers must also trust that their colleagues will support them if they feel they are being treated unjustly. Participants acknowledged that these conversations can be uncomfortable, particularly over remote work environments, but that they must continue, and that employers continue to ask of themselves, what will they do upon the return to in-person work? What actions can be taken for the benefit of DEI that can make employees feel seen and heard in-office, and how can we prepare for that now to ensure the conversations that have occurred the past year do not get pushed aside when the rollercoaster transitioning back to in-person work takes place.

Participants proposed concrete solutions. One said that they are establishing new policies within HR to allow employees to safely report grievances. This, as they see it, is the first step to addressing issues of inequity and exclusion, and understanding what in the system is broken, and how to redesign where necessary. Another participant said that in their office, inclusion commitment sessions – meetings where staff concretely discuss ways to improve inclusion – provide opportunities. One useful tactic from these sessions is inviting all employees to share moments where they have felt excluded. This generates empathy and puts the issue at the forefront of conversation. It also provides a baseline understanding across colleagues of what





someone means when they voice feeling excluded. This generates empathy and puts the issue at the forefront of conversation. It also provides a baseline understanding across colleagues of what someone means when they voice feeling excluded. These efforts are key, for inclusion can be the accelerator to belonging, paving the way to mental well-being.

Another participant added that expanding DEI applies not just to the office workplace but also to all of one's communities. They raised the issue that prior to the pandemic, people rarely considered the front-line workers who contribute to their daily well-being as being part of their community. However, the pandemic has highlighted that front-line workers, from baristas, to subway technicians, to security personnel, suffered because of the lack of in-office work and accompanying commuting. Participants concluded that, upon the return to in-office work, white-collar employees must ensure that those who have been on the front line during the pandemic are actively incorporated into their organization's community. As one participant noted, they are essential workers.

Offering support

It is true that some companies and their workers have been surprisingly successful in continuing to function, even with the disruption. However, the last year has taken a measurable toll on most workers. According to the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, the average number of adults reporting symptoms of anxiety and or depres-





sion was 41.1% as of January 2021, up from 11% during this time in 2019 before the pandemic hit. Those who have experienced job loss or lower incomes due to the pandemic report even higher rates at 53%.⁵

There was wide consensus from roundtable participants that anxiety and fear are key human attributes that must be normalized in the workplace. One participant noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused people to feel as though they are running on a treadmill, and that they are being forced to be more and more productive while balancing their home lives. This has caused exhaustion and burnout.

New spaces for communication have allowed us to rethink the connection between well-being and performance.



Many participants believe that, during the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown them that bringing humanity to work must become the norm. They agree that revealing one's whole self makes a better leader. While

these ideas had been floating around startups for a decade, the pandemic has finally driven home the need for mental health and well-being as critical factors. Most importantly, workers need to be active participants in defining their own needs so that their employers can meet them with relevant programming and benefits.

Several roundtable participants described the shifts in their companies and efforts to address the challenges facing their workforce, from inclusion to burnout. Among companies that employed parents





with young children, 70 percent reported experiencing burnout as they tried to balance work and family responsibilities. One participant shared that they were encouraged by the bold, candid conversations occurring around mental health across workplaces. Another participant added that a key benefit of the pandemic is that it has given people a chance to reflect on what is really important to them. Yet another added that they discovered they had been providing benefits that did not matter to many employees; discussion groups allowed them to identify the types of benefits their employees really need. A common theme once again emerged as participants noted that these efforts are fundamental to their organization's success. The pandemic has made them understand that the creative juices that run their institutional innovation fall flat under high levels of stress and anxiety.



CONCLUSION

The sudden, wrenching disruption caused by the pandemic should not be seen as an isolated, unusual event, but rather a manifestation of a new reality – a “whitewater world” of change that is continuous and accelerated. The rapid response of thousands of organizations to shifting to remote work demonstrates that they are capable of making big changes in short periods of time. But the question now is whether they are capable of going further as the world shifts away from a pandemic model of work. Can they continue to strive for more inclusive and diverse work environments even when the alarm bells stop ringing?

Investing in your purpose will provide you with the greatest potential for progress.

We must bring lessons-learned from the pandemic into our work culture and environment moving forward. In focusing on the long-term agenda, organizations must demonstrate that they see people, not just profit. The pandemic has shown that investing in your purpose will provide you with the greatest potential for progress. By focusing on inclusion, organizations must take concrete actions that demonstrate they see their employees’ needs and permit flexibility and adaptive work environments. Technological developments have only made this more possible, and such advantages should be used to increase the potential for employee creativity. Finally, in addressing the



need to reckon with industry bias, CEOs must become the champions of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; hiring managers must use technology to the benefit of attracting more diverse talent pools; and efforts must be made to allow all employees equitable opportunity to contribute to their workplace and community.

These are only some of the first steps that may lead to institutional innovation, and certain concepts and themes just scratch the surface of the concrete actions that organizations can take to achieve such goals. We look forward to continuing these conversations and ensuring that lessons learned during the pandemic are integrated into our ecosystems moving forward.

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