The future of society: Building back better together

How technology and business can work hand in hand to build a fairer, more sustainable society

O2 business

BLUE DOOR INSIGHTS

Introduction: An opportunity to build back better

> **"When we talk about rebuilding, we're not talking about short-term fixes. We need to drive sustainable change for future generations, addressing climate change concerns as well as the recovery from the pandemic."**
>
> **Jo Bertram, Managing Director, O2 Business[1]**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to combat it have brought out the best in British society, but also laid bare many of its inequalities. As a sudden shock to the system, it has catalysed new conversations around public health, social inclusion, smart cities and environmental sustainability.

There are exciting opportunities to harness those conversations to rebuild for a better world. Business, government, the third sector, academia and citizens all have vital roles to play in making it happen. But with so much to address, where should we focus our efforts?

Three key areas of focus

We've pooled the thoughts of some of the UK's most forward-thinking organisations to understand the opportunity that lies before us to 'build back better'. We present their thinking, strategic approaches and real-world experiences in three key areas:

- **Diversity and inclusion:** With organisations of all sizes pledging to build a more diverse workforce and leadership team, how can we make this happen on a meaningful level?

- **Smart cities:** The lives of city dwellers can be greatly improved by smart city technology, but progress has been slow. How can we accelerate it now, in a way that benefits everyone?

- **Smart investments:** As we battle a health crisis, inequality and climate change at the same time, how can technology help to address pressing social and environmental challenges?

1. All quotes in this paper have been taken from the O2 Blue Door Expo 2020 – Future of Industry Panel Discussion

Diversity and inclusion: Learnings for leaders

Organisations of all kinds see diversity and inclusion as the right thing for society, and are keen to play their part in ensuring a level playing field for people of all ages, races, genders, abilities, sexualities and socio-economic backgrounds.

As well as being the right thing for society, diversity and inclusion also make sound business sense. Companies with more diverse boards and workforces demonstrably perform better, by creating products and making decisions that are more reflective of the true make-up of society.

> **"A diverse workforce makes better decisions and is more representative of the customer base. It's not just the right thing to do – it's commercially valuable, too."**
>
> **David Clarke, Director of Services, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)**

Diversity starts with leaders

However, it takes hard work to create an organisation that is representative of society and offers true equality of opportunity, recognition and advancement.

The work starts with leaders, who typically set the tone for the organisation's culture. Leaders must clearly define the challenge as it relates to their organisation, and – uncomfortable as it can be – must work to understand their own biases and how they might create a barrier to diversity.

Two things can help. Unconscious bias training can raise awareness of hidden biases. And listening – in a genuine and empathetic way – to the experiences of others can reveal the existence of prejudices and discrimination that leaders are then better equipped to address.

> **"We have a scheme of lunch and learns where people share their story. You realise they may have faced challenges that you didn't fully appreciate, or experiences you didn't expect."**
>
> **Paul Asare-Archer, Head of Compliance, O2**

Three ideas for improving diversity and inclusion

Once leaders have listened and learned, it's time to act and make a difference. There are many practical things that leaders can do, including:

1 Create clear pathways to progress

People from less-privileged and traditionally excluded communities often need help to fulfil their true potential. Internal networks can help to surface issues that can then be addressed, while mentoring programmes can help more people from disadvantaged backgrounds advance their career.

Offering work experience can help younger people imagine themselves in a fulfilling role and make more informed choices about their education. Showcasing a diversity of role models is critical, because 'if you can see it, you can be it'. Forging links with local schools and offering role models to speak at assemblies can have a big impact.

2 Re-examine recruitment practices

Recruitment is one of the biggest factors affecting diversity and inclusion, because outdated beliefs can become ingrained in hiring culture. Take a fresh look at the language of your recruitment ads, and the sites and publications where they're appearing. Is anyone being inadvertently excluded or made to feel this job is 'not for them'?

Proactively ask recruitment agencies to put forward a diverse selection of candidates – often this is the push they need to start re-examining their own practices. And when interviewing candidates with disabilities, or who may require accommodations, focus on their skills and the value they can bring to your organisation, rather than what you think they 'can't' do.

3 Understand the culture war – and pick the right side

Recent years have seen the emergence of hate groups, websites and factions that are opposed to diversity and equality. As more advertising is placed programmatically, it's vital to keep an eye on where ads are appearing, to make sure they're not funding hate sites or hateful narratives.

The language of hate subcultures is evolving, so leaders should learn to recognise, challenge and reject language associated with ideas such as white supremacy. Hate groups will often dismiss efforts towards diversity and inclusion as 'wokeness' or 'political correctness', and it's essential that leaders understand and communicate that these are positive attributes with real value for society.

> **"Political correctness always seems to be used as a slur, which is ridiculous because it's about talking in a language people are comfortable with."**
>
> **Jake Dubbins, Co-Founder and Co-Chair, Conscious Advertising Network**

A time for positive change

One of the positives of the pandemic is that leaders listened like never before to their employees' needs, wishes, ideas and experiences. Now there's a chance to put that listening into action to create a more diverse and inclusive organisation going forwards.

Smart cities: How can we get there faster?

The smart city vision promises many benefits for society, from reduced reliance on fossil fuel-burning transportation, to faster and easier access to health and social care. But while there's been a lot of talk about smart cities, progress in the UK has been slow.

Obstacles to building UK smart cities

Many of the obstacles are well known. Firstly, there needs to be a common understanding of what a 'smart city' is and consensus around how we get there. Technology vendors and local government organisations currently have very different perspectives on what's important and what's feasible.

Secondly, it requires high levels of collaboration. Yet planning is typically siloed between local government services such as housing, transport, health services and education. Getting everyone aligned requires vision, direction and a will to overcome obstacles to collaboration. Starting with one service may be more productive than aiming to digitise the whole city.

> **"It's impossible for a municipality to launch a single contract to provide a smart city. Focusing on one service can make a difference – and from a 5G perspective, the one we've started with is transport."**
>
> **Robert Franks, Managing Director, West Midlands 5G**

It also needs investment at a time when funding for local services has never been tighter. Much of it is therefore likely to come from the private sector, and many businesses are excited by the possibilities and keen to be on board. Cities must be careful to channel that enthusiasm into initiatives that provide true social benefit, rather than projects that appear profitable or 'shiny'.

> **"If we adopt a mindset of the more we work together, the greater the chances of success, rather than just myopically focusing on profit, we've got a much greater chance of implementing at a mass scale."**
>
> **Steve Rose, Executive Partner, Nokia Bell Labs Consulting**
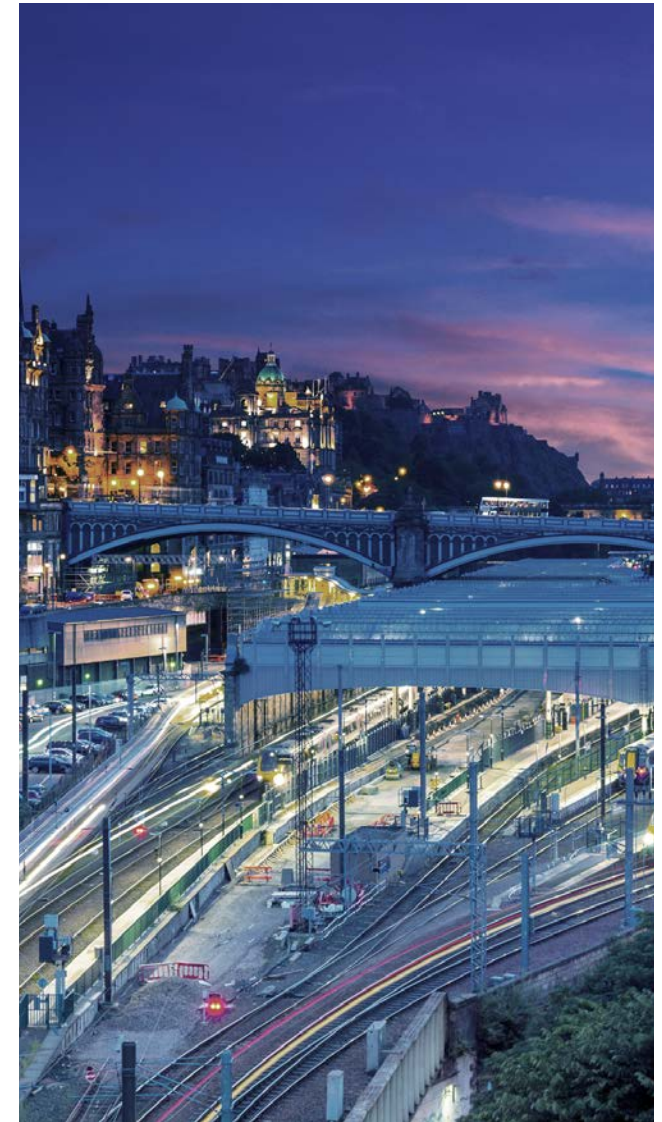
Technology and the smart city vision

Technology is pivotal to achieving the smart city vision, but that doesn't mean applying a layer of tech over existing services. It means going back to the fundamental needs of city dwellers and city users and analysing what makes a city work, so that existing inequalities aren't accidentally baked in.

> **"Every Smart City must be focused on human outcomes. Technology is just the enabler – the tools we can use to tackle inequalities, health challenges and environmental challenges."**
>
> **Alastair McMahon, Commercial Director, Smart Cities, Health, Mobility, O2**

For maximum impact, it means finding and funding initiatives that will deliver benefits on multiple fronts: improving health, reducing pollution, improving quality of life for everyone, and reducing the cost burden on financially struggling local authorities.

Some critical technology elements must be in place before embarking on more advanced projects. Ubiquitous fibre to the premises and 5G will create a level playing field in terms of connectivity.

There must also be ways to gather and analyse huge volumes of data, from millions of touchpoints, in a joined-up way to drive further improvements. And increasingly, edge cloud capabilities will be needed to handle real-time, ultra-low-latency data processing near where the service is delivered.

> **"A smart city has data at its core. It enables the city to react to its citizens and ensure its services can meet demand. Unless there's a connectedness of data, a city can never be smart."**
>
> **Laila Takeh, Senior Manager, Digital Strategy and Innovation, 5PRING**

With these elements in place, new smart services can be delivered on top of an infrastructure that is fit for purpose.

A new spirit of collaboration

The good news is that COVID-19 has created a new spirit of collaboration between local government, academia and private enterprise to get UK cities back on their feet and ready for a new digital era.

Progress may be faster as a result, but COVID-19 has also created a big new challenge. As people have adopted radical new work and travel patterns, do we need to rethink existing smart city vision? And with more people working from home, is it time to start thinking about smart towns and villages too?

Smart investments:
Using technology to build a better world for all

The pandemic was a shock to the system, prompting huge shifts in lifestyle and outlook. Lockdowns and travel restrictions slowed the pace of life for a lot of people, giving them pause to consider what they truly value and care about.

Many turned their focus to their local community. They rediscovered a love of wildlife and green spaces, cared for their neighbours, and developed a deep appreciation for the key workers who risked their lives to keep Britain functioning. The impact was felt at an environmental level, too, as pollution levels noticeably dropped and nature returned to places it had left.

> **"This is probably our last, best chance to stop massive, widespread environmental destruction."**
>
> **Jeff Knot, Operations Director Central and Eastern England, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)**

Three areas for technology investment

This shared experience has created a strong desire to keep going: to make some of these shifts permanent, and rebuild a society that is fairer, greener, more resilient and sustainable for the long term. Technology will play a vital supporting role in a number of key areas:

1 Reducing environmental impact

To reduce our carbon footprint, we need to be able to monitor and measure the direct and indirect emissions created by both consumers and businesses. Smart meters can help to reduce direct emissions by encouraging us to keep energy use down. Innovations like community fridges, meanwhile, can reduce food waste and help get food to those who need it.

> **"Sometimes a simple technology like a smart meter, things that don't cost a huge amount of money, can suddenly become really effective."**
>
> **Oliver Rosevear, Head of Environment, Costa Coffee**

Recycling can be increased with developments like reward machines, which incentivise and embed good recycling behaviour and help to create a low-carbon, circular economy. Connectivity will enable these and many more smart technology initiatives, allowing data from connected homes, workplaces and devices to be gathered and analysed for new opportunities to make a difference.

2 Empowering and educating communities

Powerful storytelling over digital media can drive huge changes in behaviour. We only need to look at the impact of Blue Planet 2 on attitudes towards ocean plastic, and Greta Thunberg's sail voyage to the US on attitudes towards air travel. Businesses and community groups can similarly harness digital and social media to tell stories with purpose, raise awareness of issues, and nudge consumers and employees towards positive behaviours.

Lockdown showed the power of social media, video calling and messaging apps to keep communities connected even when they can't meet in person. These technologies have become a rallying point for climate and environmental action, giving more people a voice on proposed developments in their area, and helping to preserve green spaces. They're also the medium of choice for younger generations to campaign for a better and fairer world.

"The youngest generation are using technology to campaign in entirely new ways that have the potential to drive really significant change."

Jeff Knot, Operations Director Central and Eastern England, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

3 Creating a fairer society

Lockdowns laid bare the inequities between technology 'haves' and 'have nots' in British society. While children in some families were able to attend video classrooms and access online resources, those without computers were left behind.

"There's an assumption that we're all digitally connected, and there's a level playing field in access to technology. And what we've seen is that's not the case."

Trewin Restorick, Founder and CEO, Hubbub

As we rebuild for a better world, it's vital that everyone has access to computers and connectivity to participate fully and fairly in society. Businesses and consumers have a key role to play in redistributing technology – for example, through laptop and smartphone recycling schemes – to ensure no one is digitally left behind. And with more technology finding an extended life in a circular economy, there's less electronic waste, too.

Business must embed social and environmental purpose

For UK businesses, corporate social responsibility can no longer just be a 'veneer' on top of business as usual. Environmental and social purpose must be firmly embedded within the organisation's daily operations, delivering tangible benefits for people and planet as well as for the business.

80% of CEOs believe the business world is not doing enough with its sustainability agenda[2]

(Accenture and UN Global Compact)

2. https://www.accenture.com/us-en/insights/strategy/ungcceostudy

Summary:
Doing good is
good for business

The pandemic has given people across the UK pause to reconsider what we truly value, and think about the kind of world we'd like to leave for future generations. As we strive to create a fairer, more equitable society that's sustainable for centuries to come, business has a key role to play.

Businesses that embed social and environmental purpose into their fabric will find they reap the rewards in terms of lower costs, an engaged workforce, and greater demand for products and services that are more reflective of the customer base. In short, doing good is good business.

Talk to us about your future journey

We're here to help your business build back better in any way we can.

If you'd like to discuss any of the ideas raised in this paper, we'd love to hear from you.

You can **contact** our team or call us on **0800 955 5590**

Get further insights

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Our future thinkers

We'd like to thank all of our contributors for their insights, experiences and expertise:

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