

Innovation, Excellence, Corporate Boards and the Future of Work[^]

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Uncertainty is the defining theme of the World Economic Forum's 2026 global risks outlook (WEF, 2026). It affects the path of innovation and many issues on the agendas of corporate boards. Given evident and latent issues, danger points and tensions, during 2026 boards should continue to expect the unexpected (IESE, 2025). The business context is complex and fraught (Coulson-Thomas, 2025a). Respondents to WEF's latest Global Risks Perception Study viewed both the short and long-term global outlook negatively, with 50% of them anticipating either a turbulent or stormy outlook over the next two years, and 57% of them with such expectations over the next 10 years (WEF, 2026). The international context in which businesses operate is unstable and expected to be stormy as great power rivalries lead to conflicts (Jiandong, 2026; Westad, 2026). There are hybrid and active wars to navigate.

The nature of a previous world order and a set of post-World War Two international institutions that were once thought to stabilize the global economy could now be driving instability, inequality, and disorder (Prasad, 2026). The 2026 pre-Munich Security Conference report portrays a world in which disruptive forces are in the ascendancy and favour destruction over reform (Bunde and Eisentraut, 2026). Warfare and the international economic disruption it can cause have become an ever-present danger. The trust required for cooperation is being replaced by distrust (WEF, 2026). New relationships are being sought. Re-establishing collaboration across a fracturing international system requires understanding the potential for cooperation and how this might best be pursued (McKinsey and WEF, 2026).

Collaboration is increasingly needed to address common challenges (McKinsey and WEF, 2026; WEF, 2025b; WEF and Schwab Foundation, 2025). It is difficult to achieve and being replaced by confrontation and great power competition as governments lose faith in alliances and multilateral frameworks, and a multipolar landscape emerges (Jackson and Brenes, 2025; WEF, 2026). New arenas of rivalry and conflict are opening, and the nature and location of global competition is changing (Laruelle and Radvanyi, 2026; Rosen, 2026). In a more transactional era in which disruptors exercise hard power, economic and trade dependences and vulnerabilities are weaponised (Fishman, 2025). Boards that have focused on competitive advantage are now having to give more attention to cooperation and collective responses.

Requirements for coping and survival in an unstable and insecure world are changing. There is often a thin line between success and failure (Watling, 2026). Survival for a company or employer may mean economies, fewer jobs and lower quality work. Geopolitical rivalries are increasing the hybrid warfare and hostile use of cyber-attacks to gain advantage and damage those seen as opponents (Coulson-Thomas, 2025c; Mellen, 2026). Longer term geopolitical prospects are also being shaped by climate change, and possible trends and reactions are likely to benefit some countries, sectors, locations and enterprises and disadvantage others, creating unprecedented opportunities for innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship (Snell, 2026). Staying power, arranging successions, remaining viable and maintaining a strategic focus while adapting, renewing and reinventing will determine eventual success.

The world has become a dangerous place. The open use of hard power by UN Security Council members, hot and hybrid warfare, open rivalry among great powers and pervading

insecurity resulted in global defence expenditure rising to \$2.63 trillion in 2025 (IISS, 2026). Hot wars have accelerated asymmetric warfare as people are replaced with drones and autonomous vehicles. Resources needed to address multiple existential threats are increasingly devoted to national defence. Many governments of nation states find it more difficult to protect their citizens from contemporary challenges, deliver services they expect, have leverage and remain independent and viable in a competitive and hard power world (Dasgupta, 2026). What can, could and/or should major companies and their boards do to navigate contemporary economic, environmental, geopolitical, and technological challenges?

This article examines how innovation, excellence and corporate boards might influence each other and the future of work. It complements an earlier study (Coulson-Thomas, 2024a). Innovation, especially in relation to digital technologies, views of what might be regarded as excellent, and implications for the future of work and the role that directors and boards might play are or could be inter-related. Corporate purpose and board priorities can affect the people of organisations. Changes in access to work and experience of it may impact their allegiance, trust and motivation, and the extent to which they will prioritise their own welfare and that of their families over cooperation for a wider public good. It might affect support of collective responses to global risks and existential threats when whole of society and/or international action is required. Will boards and others able to influence action needed for collective survival adopt a holistic approach and systems perspective, adapt and act responsibly?

The future of work and employment and skill requirements may all be affected by: corporate cultures; the technological and environmental challenges and opportunities, global risks and existential threats that confront companies and their directors; how corporate boards perceive and exercise corporate social and environmental responsibility when responding to them; and related legislation, regulatory requirements, and official and professional guidance (Coulson-Thomas, 2024a & b). This article also covers the influence of innovation, notions of excellence, and corporate boards upon future work, and issues and questions that boards and others might wish to consider. How might generative AI and other exponential technologies be used to develop responsible and innovative work-related systems (Bonime-Blanc, 2026)? What criteria could be used to determine the excellence of work-related outcomes? Where does future work feature in board priorities given other issues on current board agendas?

People, Responsible Innovation and Work

Uncertainty also pervades assessments of the possible impacts of certain factors such as AI on work and the labour market. Despite attempts to forecast the future, early research findings have been described as inconclusive (Kolko, 2026). Questions relating to economic possibilities and the impact of technological development upon the future of work have been asked over a lengthy period (Keynes, 1930; Edwards, 1979; Leontief and Duchin, 1986; Zubof, 1988; Susskind and Susskind, 2015; West, 2018; Kraus et al, 2023). It may be easier to assess possible impacts upon jobs and employment than implications for the future of work in general (Jesuthasan and Boudreau, 2018; WEF, 2025a). For example, the nature of jobs in certain fields such as science are thought more likely to be affected by AI than other activities (Adam, 2025). How should varying impacts across areas and functions be addressed?

The desirability and responsibility or irresponsibility of innovation can depend upon its purpose, impacts including externalities, and whether it benefits special interests or a wider public good (Coulson-Thomas, 2026a). How might employees and other stakeholders

confront irresponsibility? Certain innovations could increase negative impacts while others might reduce them. For example, innovation has been found to moderate the relationship between energy use and environmental degradation across 45 Oceanic-Asian countries from 1990 to 2018, weakening the beneficial impact of renewables and mitigating the harmful effects of non-renewables (Oluwaseyi Musibau et al, 2025). What steps should boards take to ensure that innovation is desirable, beneficial, responsible and sustainable (Coulson-Thomas, 2025e)? Given other board priorities such as global risks where does future work rank as a criterion for assessing the beneficial impact of changes enabled by innovation (WEF, 2026)?

While this article is concerned with the influence of certain factors such as innovation on the future of work, other influences are in play, and many aspects of the future are the concern of corporate boards. The World Economic Forum expects a combination of environmental, geoeconomic, geopolitical, technological and other factors to result in significant changes to work activities and some 22% of existing jobs between 2025 and 2030, with 170 million new jobs being created and 92 million jobs being displaced (WEF, 2025a). Corporate boards are likely to be concerned with a wide range of challenges impacting organisations and their operations and activities, with affects upon future work one of many aspects to consider (Lynn et al, 2023). Despite statements such as “people are our most important asset”, board attention may be upon immediate issues or a crisis rather than future work matters, which if operational rather than strategic may come to a board for information instead of for decision.

The perceived significance, nature and impacts of changes can vary from the incremental to the fundamental which may require a reinvention of jobs and a review of models or processes (Jesuthasan and Boudreau, 2018; Gartner, 2026). Much will depend upon whether expected developments are slowed, prevented or hindered by resource constraints, mineral shortages, hybrid or hot wars, trade restrictions, weather events or other disruptions. In relation to negative impacts, externalities and any social contract, who should be responsible for what? Some boards might wish to question the future role of work within communities and societies and in relation to other human activities and needs (Deranty et al, 2023). How should climate mitigation, relocation and infrastructural replacement activities and work be organized and remunerated (Coulson-Thomas, 2024a)? The longer international and collective climate action is delayed, the more a whole community and/or a societal response will be needed.

In relation to jobs, and whether changes contribute to assessments of excellence can depend upon their impact, including on those who undertake them, and the perspectives, priorities and values of assessors. One criterion for assessing excellence in relation to work could be the extent to which it is perceived as meaningful (Althorpe, 2023; Lysova et al, 2023; Parmer, 2023; Sheppard, 2023). More and better jobs might not be for everyone (Duhautois et al, 2022). Replacement jobs may not match those which preceded them, and they may be held by different people (Eslund, 2023). There may be winners and losers. Certain groups, locations and communities might be disadvantaged and/or marginalised as changes occur. Do developments augment and build, or limit and stunt (Furendal and Jebari, 2023)? Changes to where and with whom work is undertaken, and new ways of working, may involve a board, especially if changes to corporate policies and guidelines are required (Hobsbawm, 2022).

When discussing the desirability of future work from an organisational perspective one should not overlook the impact of work on those who experience or undertake it, and what it means for their self-identity and impacts upon culture, communities and societies. AI

adoption can have hidden costs. It may be disruptive and stressful for employees, erode their skills and wellbeing, create opportunities for corporate espionage, and result in a loss of engagement and trust (Aykens et al, 2026; Gartner, 2026). While it might be early days, Gartner has found only 1% of recent layoffs resulted from productivity improvements following AI adoption (Gartner, 2026). Many people's sense of who they are and their identity, meaning, purpose and value derive from their work. This may be especially true of professionals (Coulson-Thomas, 2024b). For future work, employers may increasingly seek relevant skills rather than degree certificates (Aykens et al, 2026; Gartner, 2026). Knowledge can rapidly age. The ability to do things, adapt and problem solve may gain more traction.

Directors may expect a Chief People Officer or a Personnel or Human Resources Director to keep them and/or the board informed of major global and market developments and trends affecting people and work (Jackson and Meer, 2023; Aykens et al, 2026; Gartner, 2026). Future work requirements may not necessarily involve jobs as we know them today (Jesuthasan and Boudreau, 2021). However, a requirement for human talent is likely to remain. When innovating and applying emerging technologies on transformation journeys, boards should ensure that what is required to attract, retain, engage and inspire the talent that future business models, forms of organisation and work will require is properly considered (Winkless, 2026). World Economic Forum (WEF) survey participants ranked 'likely skills in demand' with analytical skills coming first, followed by resilience, flexibility and agility, along with leadership and social influence (WEF, 2025a). How should companies best compete for those and skills in demand?

Much will depend upon the priority which boards attach to increasing the probability of longer-term collective survival. People themselves may show a degree of realism that some boards might lack. With white collar jobs facing disruption due to AI adoption, 62% of those surveyed by Gartner would switch to a skilled trade for pay and stability (Gartner, 2026; McRae and Lowmaster, 2026). People may feel and share pressures experienced by directors and many executives (Coulson-Thomas, 2025a & b). There may be potential for future labour relations to be less confrontational. How might people and organisations best work together on common interests and shared objectives? What form should next-generation employee engagement and volunteering models take to inform, involve and build more responsible and socially and environmentally aware cultures, and enhance business value? How could inclusion, equity, and employee and community wellbeing be better embedded into long-term corporate strategy (Coulson-Thomas, 2025d)?

The people of organisations are already affected by external challenges and threats that responsible boards should endeavour to address. Many of them have experienced extreme weather events, more polluted air, and/or other negative externalities (AQLI, 2025). Higher temperatures from global warming can affect corporate performance as worker productivity drops by 2–3% for every degree above 20°C (WHO and WMO, 2025). What can be done to better engage them and involve people where and when a whole of society response is increasingly required to confront multiple global risks and existential threats (Coulson-Thomas, 2025d)? How might this best be brought about? People individually and collectively will themselves consider responses to work related anxieties and pressures as will governments on their behalf (Kelly, 2023). Corporate responses may reflect and complement other reactions. Certain legal and regulatory requirements may have to be complied with.

A degree of fruitful collaboration may be required for effective adaptation to various factors and considerations relating to work (Cheyney et al, 2023; Michalik, 2023). A board might also authorise contribution to consultation and/or discussion relating to the regulation of future work, or the protection of workers, and/or the safeguarding of labour standards (Colfer et al, 2023). Where would this rank in relation to other priorities, such as sustainability or collective action in response to climate change? Local or wider cooperation can increase the number of affordable and practical possibilities that are considered. Social innovation and its scaling up increasingly requires collaboration and collective effort (OECD, 2025; WEF and Schwab Foundation, 2025). How can social innovation best be powered through corporate partnerships with startups, incubators, and universities? What funding, mentorship and acceleration models could be used to strengthen local innovation ecosystems?

Aspects of future work may become politicised (Kelly, 2023). A board could strike a path that is relatively immune from what it perceives as political interference. It might itself take steps to address challenges in attracting talent and or increasing inclusion, ahead of statutory requirements (Jetha et al, 2023). Might open market responses lead to better equity, diversity and inclusion outcomes than the public imposition of dramatic increases or decreases of requirements resulting from changing political fortunes (Morton, 2025)? How can boards ensure executives take advantage of opportunities which companies have for enterprise and entrepreneurship? Will the extent to which a company is considered excellent reflect its contribution to collective responses to shared challenges? Can visioning exercises embrace the full range of challenges, risks and threats that now confront corporate boards?

Visionary Leadership and Institutional Excellence

Corporate leaders and boards are important in relation to innovation and work as they have the power to provide direction on what represents excellence and ensure the requirements and interests of the people of organisations, and labour as well as capital, are considered. The relative power of different factors of production and how it might be used in designing, negotiating and determining employment, work and workplaces has been identified as an influence in some situations and contexts (Edwards, 1979; Acemoglu and Johnson, 2023; Rometty, 2023; Suleyman and Bhaskar, 2023). In the absence of clear direction from a board, executives may strike a different balance between their perception of the interests of an organisation and its employees. In relation to climate change and other existential threats, the interests of people and organisations may converge and overlap. A challenge for leadership is to innovate and adopt and apply technologies in ways that achieve a beneficial relationship with the natural world and are environmentally and socially responsible (Parris, 2026).

Given the contextual challenges, risks and threats, the fragility of current arrangements and legacy institutions, and the need for longer-term thinking, is more visionary leadership required and what represents institutional excellence? Whether visionary leadership is beneficial or should trigger alarm bells depends upon the relevance, requirements and implications of the vision. Many corporate visions are bland and quickly forgotten. They do not differentiate. Having seen them, people are often uncertain about what to expect or do differently. How might their own future working arrangements and experiences be affected? In an uncertain, unpredictable and unstable era, a shared or collective vision that motivates a visionary team might be less risky and more flexible than one driven by a single leader

(Paradiso-Testa, 2025). How might the people of an organisation and its stakeholders best be engaged in the formulation of a vision in a turbulent and volatile context?

When the future is so uncertain and many alternative scenarios, responses and strategies are possible, could seeking a single vision be a risk and possibly counter-productive? Where, to what extent, and in what form should future work feature in a corporate vision? How might visioning embrace unpredictability? On occasion, undesirable or unethical means might be used to further a compelling or strongly driven vision (Buss and Kearney, 2025). How might the implementation of a vision be aligned with its formulation? Increasingly, in an unstable and insecure world when ever more people feel marginalised and unimportant, should their desire to feel they matter, and any longing they might have for a deeper purpose, be a concern of corporate boards (Stulberg, 2026; Wallace, 2026)? Could the articulation of a shared and inspiring purpose be the key to visionary leadership and institutional excellence?

While stretching, a vision should be capable of motivating progress towards its attainment. It should reflect the realities of a situation and context, and what is possible in relation to resources, space and time. Any future work element of a vision would need to accommodate multiple uncertainties. Crises often have a spatial dimension, and multiple disasters can occur together. In an insecure world many international leaders would benefit from an international spatial awareness and perspective that embraces potential vulnerabilities and flashpoints, boundaries between contending alliance groupings and their memberships, and communication and travel links and corridors, such as might be found in a series of geopolitical maps from a particular national perspective (Rogers and Young, 2025). Does leadership need to be redefined for our current era of polycrisis, disruption and disruptors

Will more people, with what skills and support, be needed in crisis response and climate adaptation roles? If several crises and catastrophic events occur together leaders can play a role in encouraging a focus on realities, addressing multiple issues simultaneously, and the comparative assessment of the costs on inaction. Preoccupation with pressures of the moment can result in the cumulative cost of a category or sequence of disasters being overlooked. The results of a University of Chicago led statistical model suggest a greater than 90% chance that total U.S. only weather and climate disaster damages from 2026 to 2030 will exceed \$500 billion, and a 54% chance they will exceed \$1 trillion (Cael, 2025). Directors require a holistic perspective, and directors must ensure that they and management join up the dots. How might holistic thinking that embraces the short, medium and longer-term, both within boards and across executive and management team silos, best be encouraged and supported?

Excellence is associated with being outstanding or exceptionally good. Given the adverse impacts and negative externalities of collective corporate operations, human activities and contemporary lifestyles, the widespread use of the term suggests either a low bar to qualify or its use as an aspiration. In most fields of human endeavour and whatever the purpose, some perform better than others and there are often a few who stand out. Excellence might be relative, or it could indicate a level that more people could achieve. For some, excellence may be associated with coping and resilience in the face of the distractions, pressures and uncertainties of the contemporary world (Stulberg, 2026). What represents institutional excellence? How might it become a source of competitive advantage? What needs to change to future proof excellence for transition from reactive governance to anticipatory leadership?

Views of what constitutes excellence can vary across societies as well as within them. Could an institution be regarded as excellent in one location or context and suspect in another? Where do aspects of culture, ethics and accountability rank as pillars of excellence? Some differences can become more extreme and entrenched in an era of fragmentation and polarisation (WEF, 2026). As global risks continue to spiral in scale, interconnectivity and velocity, according to the WEF 2026 marks an age of competition (WEF, 2026). When a good standard of living can be obtained in very different political systems, the values of liberal democracy, competitive capitalism, individual independence and competition might not appeal to those more concerned with community, cooperation and being an element of a whole (Stam, 2026). What aspects of government arrangements contribute to excellence in varying national contexts? How can governance frameworks drive performance and trust?

Influencing the Global Future with Sustainable Growth

The nature of growth ambitions, future work and lifestyles, along with the energy demands of AI adoption and population increase will determine whether global growth is sustainable (Georgieva, 2024). Within a potential problem from one perspective there may be a partial solution to another issue. In relation to future work and the impacts of climate change, skill requirements may change. In absolute numbers, frontline workers are expected to exhibit the biggest increase and clerical and secretarial workers are expected to show the largest decline, while the fastest percentage rise is likely to occur in technology-related roles (WEF, 2025a). People, organisations and governments in an unpredictable era facing multiple challenges and constrained resources may have a shared interest in sustainable growth and arrangements and practices that enable and support it. What aspects of people management need review?

Most global risks and existential threats are the result of human activities, many aspects of which are not sustainable, as our planet struggles to cope with an increasing human population and unsustainable growth ambitions (UNEP, 2025b; WEF, 2026). Over a ten-year period, WEF survey participants expect the three top global risks in terms of severity of impact to be extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and critical change to earth systems (WEF, 2026). With many of the earth's critical ecosystems on a pathway to collapse and global biodiversity loss, resulting security concerns add to economic, geopolitical, technological and other uncertainties (DEFRA, 2026). Yet many directors remain complacent and distracted. Accumulating evidence of longer-term threats are ignored while they focus upon more immediate issues. What must happen for sustainability to become a core strategy for more corporate boards? What could trigger needed change?

Should options and prospects for future work be viewed through a sustainability lens? How might sustainability become a strategic priority for more boards, rather than a matter to be delegated to compliance teams? Could advancing stakeholder capitalism and greater engagement remind directors of their social and environmental responsibilities, the interests of future generations, the differing perspectives of Gen Z, and the diversity of views that can exist within stakeholder groups? Innovation for sustainable living is not new and has been pursued for many centuries (Kehnel, 2025). The relationship of business with the natural world continues to be an issue for responsible business leaders (Palmer and Lehman, 2026). What can and should be done to refocus innovation and corporate capabilities on addressing global risks and existential threats, and increasing our chances of collective survival?

Global temperatures continue to rise, and global warming is accelerating (Forster et al, 2025; Kacperczyk, 2025). This could have implications for future work and how, where and when it is undertaken. Innovation and the many opportunities it can create for enterprise and entrepreneurship could play an important role in addressing them and climate change. The priority given to this arena and confronting other existential threats could be an indicator of institutional excellence and corporate responsibility. New ways may be needed to fund work and collective efforts to confront existential threats. Global warming represents a severe threat to many species, including iconic ones whose prospects could be used to raise public awareness and concern. For example, thinning Antarctic ice sheets reduces areas which Emperor Penguins can use during their annual moults while their feathers re-grow to prevent them dying from drowning in large numbers (Fretwell, 2026). How might such examples that people may relate to engender emotional and wider support of environmental action?

Sustainability, continuing relevance and successful adaptation require boardroom foresight and a strategy beyond a quarterly lens. What steps should be taken to lengthen directorial and board perspectives? Anticipation and foresight can often enable preparation for approaching events and situations, even though their exact timing and magnitude may be uncertain. One development or occurrence may also trigger or increase the likelihood of others following. For example, during a period of instability and transition a loss to an authoritarian power or defeat could lead to a chain of further reverses if a winner is emboldened and seeks additional advances (Masala, 2025). Success rather than failure should be sustained. What else needs to change for leadership itself to be resilient and sustainable (Coulson-Thomas, 2025f)?

Resilient leaders accept where they are rather than wish they were somewhere else. They engage with and act in the situations, circumstances and contexts in which they find themselves. They are flexible, accept realities such as ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty, and endeavour to handle volatility with tolerance and adaptability. Environmental volatility such as extreme weather events results from inadequate collective human effort to contain greenhouse gas emissions in response to global warming (UNEP, 2025a). The multilateral system like eco-systems is under pressure. Declining trust, diminishing transparency, less respect for the rule of law, and heightened protectionism, threaten longstanding international relations, hinder trade and investment, and increase the propensity for conflict. WEF global risk report respondents selected geoeconomic confrontation as the top risk most likely to trigger a material global crisis in 2026, followed by state-based armed conflict (WEF, 2026).

Corporate Boards in an Age of Permanent Disruption

Activities of environmental, political, geopolitical and technological disruptors increasingly prioritise the interests of themselves and their supporters. Those at work or aspiring to work may suffer collateral damage. In a hard power era, many business and national leaders now operate in a context of permanent disruption. The rise of "middle powers" like South Africa, Brazil, and Indonesia might once have indicated multipolar stability, but today, such countries can be pressured to pick sides in an intensifying US-China struggle for hegemony (Jiandong, 2026; Prasad, 2026; Westad, 2026). It has been suggested that decision makers are caught in a destructive feedback loop between economics, domestic politics and geopolitics (Prasad, 2026). With trade stand offs, instability and war the new status quo, what can be done to reinvigorate a world economy, prioritize common interests, and prevent greater instability?

What forms of accommodation, agility, flexibility and new relationships are needed? How might independence and self-sufficiency be preserved?

What forms of governance are required in an uncertain and insecure world (Coulson-Thomas, 2026b)? How should boards be governed, provide direction and navigate through geopolitical shocks, fragmented supply chains, digital acceleration, climate risk, regulatory flux and capital volatility? Where are the priorities, deficiencies and possible opportunities, including for collaboration, collective responses and future work? The global geopolitical environment is expected to remain demanding as new rules and norms emerge, competition for critical minerals, water and finance intensifies, and international companies adapt to differing geographical spheres of engagement (Jones and McCaffrey, 2026). Are boards prepared and grasping nettles? What can businesses and countries do individually and collectively to reduce dependencies and vulnerabilities? Will directors handle the pressures (Coulson-Thomas, 2025a & b)? How might they best be coached, helped or otherwise supported?

Two of the top ten two-year risks ranked by respondents to WEF's 2026 global risk survey are technology risks (WEF, 2026). In addition, there are four top ten societal risks which are partially caused or aggravated by applications of technology, including AI (WEF, 2026). Where businesses do not recognise and address negative environmental and social impacts of their activities and offerings, there may be pressure for governments and regulators to step in. In some countries people are concerned about the negative consequences of the extensive use of mobile phones by children and young people and related anxiety and mental health issues (Haidt, 2024 & 2026). Given that many algorithms used in phones and other devices seem to be designed to be addictive, what steps are needed to address unwelcome consequences of AI adoption as AI chatbot use replaces interactions with friends, parents and other humans? How might the development of future generations, communities and societies be affected?

Many unwelcome impacts and unintended consequences might have been foreseen. What can responsible boards do now in terms of actions, priorities or incentives to improve anticipation and reduce harmful impacts and unwanted outcomes. What must happen for boards to move beyond compliance to strategic foresight? Should adaptive boards redefine oversight, speed, and strategic resilience? The challenge facing many people is increasingly one of adapting and coping in the absence of strategic direction (Fernandez and Landis, 2025). Is a shrinking of imagination reducing or limiting our capacity to act, adapt and respond to multiple challenges and articulate compelling and engaging visions (Mulgan, 2022)? Why does "business as usual" governance no longer work in contemporary circumstances? Are there lessons from global board failures and recoveries that might still be relevant? Where are they most needed? For example, entry into situations is often easier than extraction from them.

In uncertain and unpredictable contexts, situations and circumstances can rapidly change, and current activities are often not sustainable. There may be insufficient time left to pursue past policies of maximisation, and the ever more that is strived for might turn out to be a temporary requirement. Stranded assets from needed transitions are a growing issue. Would a strategy of sufficiency be a better option than an obsession with growth, make more responsible use of scarce resources, increase flexibility and involve less environmental damage (Dhir, 2025)? What could the consequences be for future work and employment? Might President Trump's disruptive approach break institutional inertia and compel problem-solving of stalled challenges, or will private interests supplant public ones, and transactional

deals replace principled cooperation, as great powers seek to dominate regions rather than observe international rules and norms (Bunde and Eisentraut, 2026)?

Across G7 countries there is disenchantment with the performance of democratic institutions and a pervasive loss of trust in meaningful reforms, with few believing their current government's policies will make future generations better off (Bunde and Eisentraut, 2026). If governments are struggling to provide services and support where, when and with whom might businesses step in? Would this require a rethink and a widening of the mandates of some boards? Are there solutions that certain or many businesses could provide (Townsend, 2023)? Is there a role for more politically activist companies and corporate diplomacy to act or partner with social stakeholders and policy makers to work for the public good, collaborate to address challenges and enhance resilience, provide public goods, shape regulation, and become more of a force for good (Mariotti, 2025)? Notions of public and private sector work and remunerated and voluntary work may change. How should adaptability, responses to disruption, and exploring such opportunities be embedded into board agendas?

Boards should be alert to ever present dangers perceived hitherto as longer-term that may require some contingency preparations. For example, contemporary vulnerabilities include undersea cables that carry internet traffic around the world and in certain locations are especially susceptible to deniable hybrid warfare attacks (Subramanian, 2025). How can boards best balance short-term pressures with long-term resilience? Geoeconomic confrontation is the top ranked two-year risk in terms of impact in WEF's latest global risk report (WEF, 2026). Many countries have been under short-term US pressure to conclude new trade agreements. Some smaller economies are negotiating trade agreements according to World Trade Organization (WTO) principles being flouted by the US and China, but it remains to be seen whether the two economic superpowers will bring about the collapse of the WTO system (Bunde and Eisentraut, 2026). Does trade expertise need strengthening?

Contemporary geoeconomic and geopolitical disruptions may justify a review of board and management roles and responsibilities. Who should do what in relation to coping with contemporary challenges, risks and existential threats? How might board-management dynamics be strengthened? As crises and disruptions occur, more decisions may need to be taken at short notice. What changes are needed in terms of composition, behaviours and practices for boards to be more future-ready for faster, high-quality and relevant decisions? Does board and senior executive succession planning and talent building need to occur on a continuous basis (Morris et al, 2025)? Given the need for regeneration, reinvention and repurposing, and greater flexibility and faster adaptation, what can be learned from community efforts to regenerate overlooked and forgotten places to create new opportunities in the face of challenges such as climate change (Sheffield, 2026)? Such initiatives often involve people from a variety of backgrounds working together for a shared purpose.

Board's Role in Governing Innovation Without Stifling Entrepreneurship

While in themselves technologies are usually neutral, they along with enabling algorithms can be deployed and used in ways that exploit, control or oppress those who work with them. It is how technologies are used, by whom and for what purpose that may determine whether their impact on future work is acceptable, beneficial and benign or harmful. Could an innovative application of AI help work and processes to be re-designed and/or re-engineered in ways that makes it more satisfying and enriching (Mather, 2026)? Boards could encourage

innovation and entrepreneurship relating to current and future work that enhances the experience, skills and satisfaction of those undertaking it, builds an employer brand and attracts talent. How might directors and others respond to the use of AI and other technologies to develop governance systems that are needed to address challenges, risks and threats which include those for which they could themselves be the root cause and a rationale for needed changes (Bonime-Blanc, 2026)? Are they sufficiently self-aware?

Whether innovation is desirable depends upon its purpose. A profit maximisation motivation for innovation and an AI development pathway may not deliver the best outcome for the environment and/or society when negative externalities result, such as when automation is pursued rather than the creation of new tasks and enhancing effectiveness and the value of work (Acemoglu et al, 2026). What should the board's role be in governing innovation? In the current marketplace it has been suggested that customers increasingly seek transformative experiences to achieve their aspirations, including well-being and purpose (Pine, 2026). This could be encouraging for our collective survival if the search embraced living simpler, healthier, less stressful and more sustainable lives in harmony with the natural world. Innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship that could bring this about are much needed, should be encouraged and obstacles to them addressed (Townsend, 2023; Salopek, 2025).

How should boards drive innovation without stifling it? When providing strategic direction for innovation and balancing contending factors, they must also ensure steps are taken to enhance the benefits derived from an existing portfolio of activities, while innovation to generate new income streams, remain relevant, current and competitive also occurs. What steps could be taken to encourage an ambidextrous mindset and foster an innovation culture? Creating space for innovation relating activities within organisations can be challenging when there are purpose, priorities and other considerations to navigate and structure, support provided needs to preserve spontaneity, and political and tactical skills may be required (Whitelaw and Garcia-Lorenzo, 2026). The locations in which breakthrough innovations may occur is spreading (Gul, 2025). How might innovation be inspired across an organisation?

Innovation governance should ensure obstacles to creativity and responsible innovation are identified and addressed, and innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship are inspired, encouraged and supported. How should this be done? The people of organisations should be encouraged to ask questions, reflect and think. These activities should not be confined to the boardroom and C-suit. Grassroots circular economy innovations in the global south are enabling vulnerable communities lacking resources to make the most of what they have (Ashton, 2025). Considerations such as inclusion and access can be more than a desirable aspiration. They and disability could be a catalyst and drive innovation (Govindarajan et al, 2026). Innovation governance should ensure innovation activities are aligned with corporate purpose and vision, strategic goals and objectives, current priorities and global risks and existential threats. Might the emphasis need to shift from the oversight of innovation to its orchestration? What would this involve, both in relation to the board and the executive team?

Boards should encourage executives to identify and overcome barriers to innovation. What more could be done to support them? Collaborations and partnerships across business unit, departmental, functional, organisational and other boundaries are often needed for innovations to scale more rapidly (Hill et al, 2026). How should boards inspire, empower and support all stages of innovation from initial ideas to later adoption (Salopek, 2025)? Where

could more be done? What changes to board structuring and staffing for innovation might be required? Are innovation aspirations accompanied by aligned corporate incentives, awards, and enterprise eco-systems and support? Is there space within corporate workloads for innovation related activities? Where do they feature in board-level and management KPIs for innovation, R&D and digital value creation beyond financial metrics? How is innovation reported, and how engaged with current efforts, priorities and outcomes are stakeholders?

Responsible boards ensure innovation focus and priorities reflect public concerns about the environment and sustainability, ESG considerations and global risks (WEF, 2026). Impact can be increased by working with other entities, complementing external innovations and learning from activities elsewhere. For example, companies can sign up to the UN Global Compact's Science Based Target Network's (SBTN) Step Up for Nature initiative, a global movement of companies signalling their ambition to take credible, science-based actions for nature (UN Global Compact, 2026). Holistic thinking can require joining up data from different locations and events. An analysis of four decades of data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) database of U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters suggests their economic toll is likely to grow even larger by the end of this decade (Cael, 2025). Climate action could be a shared priority. Such data could be used to identify opportunities for innovative combination of people and technology responses.

Innovations for which companies have high expectations are sometimes slow to scale (Hill et al, 2026). What can be done to speed up adoption, application and monetisation? Scaling up individual and collective innovations to address common challenges and existential threats, and action to tackle some negative externalities can encourage others. Some solutions can and do create further problems. How should unintended consequences of approved activities and adopted innovations, be monitored, assessed, addressed and fed back to innovation decision makers? What changes of innovation governance and strategy, and the board-management relationship, might enable more responsible scaling? For many companies, continuing innovation is a requirement for remaining relevant and should be a key element of overall corporate strategy. When determining an innovation agenda and strategy, account should be taken of innovation ecosystems, infrastructures, and locations (WIPO, 2026). How should they be set and integrated into core corporate strategy? Who might advise and be involved?

Board's Preparedness for AI and Its Impact on Work and Markets

Various emerging technologies, including AI, are transforming work and skills (IMF, 2024; Khoury, 2026). In some cases, as with social media, the algorithms incorporated within them have been designed to encourage repeated use and may influence attitudes, views and values (Filimowicz, 2024). While AI applications may prove to be transformational, responsible boards may wish to ensure their adoption is beneficial for humanity when its negative externalities are considered (Georgieva, 2024). How might generative AI and other exponential technologies be used to develop AI systems that are responsible as well as innovative (Bonime-Blanc, 2026)? What steps could boards take to ensure that executives take considerations relating to a company's people and their work into account when technologies are adopted or upgraded? Are impacts monitored and user responses tracked?

Many businesses operate in contexts in which waves of innovations of others are underway. During 2026 boards may continue to wonder whether and when the AI bubble might burst, what the consequences might be, and given how issues are inter-related whether addressing

complexity in some areas might create new challenges elsewhere (IESE, 2025). Adverse AI outcomes are WEF's global risk with the largest rise in ranking in terms of impact over time, moving from 30 on the two-year outlook to 5 on the 10-year outlook (WEF, 2026). What if bullish AI expectations are exceeded (Citrini Research, 2026)? Benefits that AI, digital and quantum technologies offer come at a cost. Areas chosen for their use should ideally be those offering the greatest collective net benefit. Various policies, regulations and strategies are required for responsible innovation and the augmentation of reality through technology and human-machine collaboration (Khalid et al, 2025). Are boards and others stepping up?

What can be done to build AI competence in the boardroom? A review of literature indicates AI-powered leadership presents various challenges, including ethical dilemmas. It may complicate human-AI interactions, present hurdles in AI implementation within leadership contexts, and create long-term risks associated with AI integration (Aziz et al, 2025). What new skills might be required? An examination of 24 leadership competencies relevant to the AI era suggests that leaders should focus on developing communication skills and forming high-performance teams working cross-functionally and in a symbiosis of humans and machines (Bock and von der Oelsnitz, 2025). AI is presented as a market disruptor. How can directors stay current and make informed decisions while many adopters are still training models, assessing possible applications, or have yet to derive benefits and encounter certain problems? How is AI reshaping industry structures and competitive advantage?

How prepared are directors for the economic, environmental and social impacts of AI? Its rapid adoption is imposing unwelcome costs on many people and contributing to the emergence of affordability as an issue in many countries. The large energy demand of the mega data centres required by AI is resulting in a rapid hike in US energy prices (Bowring, 2026). This has a particularly large and negative impact on the competitive advantage and viability of high energy consuming firms and sectors. What can and should be done by governments and regulators to require data centres to cover the dramatic increases in electricity costs they impose on customers in general? How might other electricity users be reimbursed? Who should pay for the negative externalities of generating the additional energy required? Where will the minerals, including rare earths, needed for AI hardware requirements come from? What are the implications for self-sufficiency and sustainability?

Challenges of AI Adoption

The hardware needed by digital technologies is often overlooked. Its costs and the lost benefits of the alternative uses of the resources they consume are often borne by others, people in general and/or future generations. Developments in hardware, AI and vision systems are giving rise to "physical AI", new generations of robotic systems capable of perception, reasoning and autonomous action (WEF/BCG, 2025). Laggards who may be tardy in finally joining a bandwagon to avoid being left behind are sometimes also late in responding to push-back or reaction against a trend. Activity is not a substitute for thinking about the implications of what others are doing within a sector and/or more generally for how business and work is done, new requirements that may emerge and competitive positioning. What can boards do, where, when and with whom to collectively ensure such thinking occurs? For example, new patterns of work can raise issues for multiple agencies.

How should contemporary boards provide strategic oversight of AI investments, evaluate broader impacts, assess ROIs, handle scalability issues, and monitor long-term value

creation? Can executives be dispassionate and objective about the consequences of their own investment decisions? Who should be involved to ensure assessments are comprehensive, objective and, where possible, independent? While they may offer benefits, AI applications and uses often come with limitations. For example, while AI might enhance supply chain resilience in areas such as improved demand and supply forecasts, accurate problem-solving, increased efficiency of tasks and improved customer services, it also leads to ethical and social implications related to job displacement, privacy, security, biases and transparency (Beta et al, 2025). Given how many users may have similar issues, does addressing possible unwelcome consequences of AI adoption give rise to business and innovation opportunities?

Addressing negative impacts and consequences of AI adoption and developing alternatives, without the drawbacks of current approaches pushed by Big Tech, ought to be a promising arena for innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship. The confining and environmentally damaging use of the large language models of major corporations supported by mega data centres, might be followed by a greater variety more distributed, diverse and flexible AI adoptions on personal devices that allow more creative use of local data relevant to each task, and avoid external exposure to multiple risks (WEF and Oliver Wyman, 2025; Ahn, 2026; WEF, 2026). While giving individual professionals greater freedom to experiment and innovate, this might challenge professions seeking to preserve enough alignment and standardisation for clients and the public to know what to expect from their members. What should board-level responsibilities for responsible AI frameworks be? What questions could and should directors use to ensure AI adoption is responsible, justifiable and sustainable?

Companies that operate internationally may encounter differences in how AI is regulated. Could adopting certain standards put a company at a competitive disadvantage? Might some countries encounter pressure in trade negotiations to modify standards to favour the Big Tech companies of a larger economy? For a company, what are the cross-border implications of AI adoption and use? Regulatory standards have multiplied. They have been portrayed as increasingly complex, and as often hindering rather than supporting economic development. Instead of facilitating innovation and market entry, regulation may in certain cases, delay or even prevent the successful transition from innovation to market adoption (ecoDa, 2026). At the 2026 AI Impact Summit, India's government announced a national health-AI framework, a regulatory sandbox for clinical validation, and a national registry for approved tools.

Cyber insecurity remains a top ten short and longer-term global risk and area of concern for companies and governments (DSIT, 2025; WEF, 2026). It can be exacerbated by AI and new patterns of work. The World Economic Forum's latest Cyber Security Outlook finds those surveyed expect AI to be the biggest force shaping cybersecurity in 2026, with geopolitically motivated attacks and third party or supply chain vulnerability on the increase (WEF and Accenture, 2026). What should the board's role be in AI-driven and other cyber risks and data governance? There are often ethical, institutional and technical blind spots that go unnoticed in AI governance. The CARE Framework (Control, Awareness, Responsibility and Evaluation) could be used to assess and address these gaps (Skeja and Sadiku-Dushi, 2025). This may need to be complemented by a framework for cybersecurity if an area is likely to be under attack (NIST, 2024). How might boards ensure company and value chain wide vigilance? What fall back or plan B and recovery arrangements are in place?

A range of technologies, including AI, have implications for workforce transformation. AI can drive job redesign and skills transition. AI robots can address persistent skilled worker shortages and operate for long hours. Hype attracts funding and increases market value. A survey of 935 corporate executives across five sectors in the U.S., Germany, Japan and Australia most likely to be impacted by AI has found that, while increasing productivity, its adoption has resulted in a net 4% decrease in jobs over a 12-month period (Morgan Stanley, 2026). Contemporary robots increasingly learn like humans do by observing their context, considering what is likely to be required, and by trial-and-error correcting and working out the best way of getting better at required tasks. They may soon be able to write their own code and use other software to achieve tasks. Boards may still influence outcomes. Alternative development paths for AI are possible with a pro-worker rather than automation design emphasis which could focus on making people more effective (Acemoglu et al, 2026).

Technology itself might not lead to effective digital transformation without an organisation's "soft components" encompassing the provision of digital leadership, the cultivation of digital competencies and the establishment of a digital organizational culture (Cyfert et al, 2025).

Technology accompanied by ecosystem partnerships and investment in workforce transformation may be required if intelligent automation is to drive sustainable, adaptive and inclusive growth (WEF/BCG, 2025). Overall, technology and AI adoptions and developments are consuming scarce water, energy, metal and critical mineral resources and generating growing amounts of e-waste (WEF and Oliver Wyman, 2025). Urgent action by business leaders and governments is required to reduce negative externalities, innovate to reduce data centre and other technology water, energy and resource requirements, and seize related opportunities, before remaining climate tipping points are breached. Will this occur in time?

Building Future-Ready Boards for an Algorithmic World Order

Algorithms impact societies, from encouraging addiction to identifying deviancy. They can affect work experience, influence views, modify behaviours, breed dependency, distract or neutralise, and either erode power or consolidate it (Filimowicz, 2024; Gauthier et al, 2026). Algorithms behind the designs of social media platforms can influence the messages people receive, reinforce existing biases and preferences, and lead to fragmentation and polarisation. How many directors fully appreciate their significance? The rules based international order, and traditional diplomacy may no longer constrain certain powerful players in the global context in which boards of companies with international activities operate, and algorithmic forces and AI are also at work and impacting decision making processes. Unanticipated disruptions and other surprises can result. A challenge for fragmenting groups, including boards, is sometimes to find commonality in what really matters to discover opportunities for engagement and cooperation (Goldstein, 2026). What strategies should boards employ?

Future ready boards must be prepared for crises, discontinuities and disruptions, and inspire confidence in a collective ability to cope. Boards can draw some inspiration from the power of nature to adapt, restore itself and rebound, when offering hope and seeking to motivate positive action to buy time and respond to challenges such as climate change (Pearce, 2026). How prepared are they for an algorithmic world order and the transition from an industrial to an intelligence economy? Will companies be able to creatively combine innovative applications of elements of both? What could this mean for our understanding of what it is to be human, and what new risks might emerge? Leaders need to create cultures in which people

focus upon what is most significant for what they are collectively seeking to achieve (Mercurio, 2025). Might this include safeguarding or reinventing a role for themselves?

Achieving success and remaining competitive often requires an understanding of the rules of the game and how these are changing. Are those relating to an algorithmic world still emerging? Could designers of algorithms now have more power to influence than religious leaders? High-tech economy neo-imperialism may be an attempt to escape asymmetric vulnerabilities and dependencies in relation to access to scarce resources required in the AI age (Stam, 2026). Do the requirements of AI, high-tech companies, and leadership of the digital and intelligence economy now take priority over existential threats facing humankind? Are they affecting geopolitical instability? For example, do the Trump administration's US foreign, domestic and trade policies represent a coherent strategic reorientation to avoid great-power war, or protect favoured interests at the cost of general disruption (Stam, 2026)? Are high tech companies now a greater threat to the future of humanity than fossil fuels?

AI, robotics and algorithms are increasingly employed by malevolent and bad actors for a variety of nefarious purposes. They are being weaponised, as when elements of all of them come together in uncrewed ground vehicles currently used in a hot war (Shevchenko, 2026). Strategic oversight and accountability for AI-led decision architectures have become urgent and demanding requirements at corporate and national levels. How should boards respond? There are internal as well as external issues to address. While AI applications may improve financial risk assessment and decision-making there are challenges such as data integrity issues and the need for regulatory frameworks to contend with. A critical literature review of empirical studies of applications has found that they can have mixed results (Kiruga, 2026). The latest version of one AI model has been judged by Anthropic to be too powerful and dangerous for general release (Economist, 2026; Nolan, 2026; Perlo and Collier, 2026). How can boards ensure that such concerns inform future AI adoption, development and regulation?

Technological changes can have profound consequences for risk and its governance. The use of AI to summarise board papers may save board members time, but it and other applications can have unintended consequences (Baron, 2026). For example, it might expose all directors to certain biases and may result in important but less frequently expressed positions or viewpoints being screened out. Cyber insecurity has been identified as a global risk in terms of impacts over both a two-year period and the next ten years (WEF, 2026). What more should boards do to ensure that leading cyber security concerns are ranked along with what usually fails first and why it matters now, and that they are also understood, discussed and addressed (Olzak, 2026)? Uncertainty, instability, misinformation and awareness of individual, organisational and institutional frailty and vulnerability can result in insecurity, suspicion and wariness over whom and what to trust. Is trust now a critical differentiator?

In a global economy in which new sources of disruption, power and risk have emerged, resilience and trust have become vital requirements for continuing operation. What are the implications for corporate governance? How can we build high-performance, high-trust and more resilient boards? Are there hindrances such as a lack of awareness, bandwidth, complexity, drive and motivation that are holding us back (Coulson-Thomas, 2025a)? Is a shrinking of imagination reducing or limiting our capacity to act, adapt and respond to multiple challenges and articulate compelling and engaging visions (Mulgan, 2022)? Are possible better futures and more desirable scenarios being missed because boards do not have the imagination or

vision to see them as achievable and viable possibilities? What governance changes are required? How might trust and transparency be better embedded through more robust reporting, better audit oversight, and revised accountability mechanisms? What most needs to change, and who can assist with this? How should supply chain partners be involved?

Global risks, including technological trends and developments, also impact stakeholders, communities and societies (WEF, 2026). Societal risks such as polarisation and inequality are often a consequence of big tech and/or digital transformation and the algorithms they employ to encourage adoption and addiction. Governance arrangements must embrace foresight and anticipation as well as resilience. How should governance frameworks be revised or adapted to better anticipate emerging risks, technological disruption, and evolving regulatory landscapes as they evolve across global markets? Ideally, they and regulatory frameworks should produce outcomes that are desirable, justifiable, responsible, sustainable, and perceived as fair. Globalization has its advocates and its distractors. It has resulted in negative as well as positive impacts. It has deepened inequality in many countries, stoked political backlash and triggered trade wars. Do economic institutions like the IMF and WTO no longer seem fit for purpose (Prasad, 2026)? Some corporate boards are finding that certain mechanisms and institutions are not impartially and objectively protecting their interests.

Rather than facilitating cooperation, are international organisations becoming increasingly geopoliticised and arenas in which global conflicts are played out (Azzam and Dijkstra, 2026)? Is greater scrutiny required of decisions influenced by AI and/or algorithms? Has governance now become a critical requirement? How can it become a strategic capability, integrating oversight with long-term value creation beyond compliance? Governance arrangements must balance the need for coping with combinations of immediate crises, disasters and disruptions, and the requirement to think longer-term and prepare for eventualities likely to also affect future boards. Rising sea levels represent an existential threat to historic, cultural and artistic centres and entire countries as well as modern and mega cities (Walton, 2025). Is value creation for some reducing value for others? When hard power is exercised to promote certain interests, it and algorithms rather than neutral market forces can determine who benefits. Corruption, nepotism, and favouritism may result.

Sustainability, Climate Action and Green Innovation

Governance arrangements and international institutions are not alone in being unsuited to contemporary requirements for less disruption, continuity, responses to existential threats, and longer-term survival. Current collective human activities are unsustainable and corporate and collaborative climate action is insufficient to prevent global warming and climate change (UNEP, 2025a & b). Overall, decarbonisation efforts are stalling and suggest 2–3°C warming, with some regions facing extreme increases of 8–10°C, while voluntary pledges are unlikely to achieve climate objectives without coordinated collective action (Kacperczyk, 2025). Inaction is welcomed by some, including climate change deniers, fossil fuel lobbyists and those with vested interests, or who are complicit or content to leave challenges to their successors. By then it is likely to be much more difficult and may be too late to resolve them. Does more need to be done, including by stakeholders, to clarify where boards stand on contemporary ambitions, practices, goals and objectives that are not sustainable? Which current forms and patterns of work may not be sustainable? How might they change?

How open and transparent are boards about their own positions and motivations? Who is challenging and calling out hypocrisy? Directors should think for themselves rather than follow the crowd. They should have the courage to challenge. Are some governments deliberately concealing environmental risks and threats (Santarsiero, 2026)? Is this contributing to inadequate efforts to address them? Could a lack of visibility result in leaders and potential innovators giving sustainability champions less attention and priority than they deserve? Are some concealers and avoiders almost as dangerous as climate change deniers (Santarsiero, 2026)? Following presidential direction, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has formalized its repeal of the so-called endangerment finding, a federal rule from 2009 that found greenhouse gas emissions can endanger public health and welfare and upon which most US regulations to address climate change were based (Bittle, 2026).

When and where hard power is exercised, there is sometimes a reluctance to challenge views unsupported by evidence. Many people simply follow direction from above. Others have the courage to question and challenge. Might more react when their own participation in work and work experience is affected? Human and planetary health are inter-related. Pollution of the environment, biodiversity loss, and climate change are important drivers of the emergence and spread of disease, and multidisciplinary collaboration between experts in human and veterinary medicine, developmental biology, environmental science and toxicology, and public policy would be beneficial (Fattorini, 2025). Climate action and green innovation must be responsible. For example, solar radiation modification by geoengineering is largely ungoverned by domestic or international law and can have unintended consequences and be weaponised (Chalecki et al, 2026). Should boards view issues through a sustainability lens?

As awareness of the consequences of inadequate climate action and insufficient green innovation grows, might sustainability and acting responsibility attract investment and talent, and become not just desirable, but a strategic advantage? Could it enhance appeal, reputation, trust and value? Through a sustainability lens, are there applications of AI that could deliver net ESG benefits? For example, how are AI-powered climate analytics enhancing operational efficiency, emissions tracking, and predictive sustainability planning? Data analytics applications of AI could embrace areas and activities concerned with the analysis of data related to existential threats such as climate change (Kumar et al, 2025). How might technology-led insights be embedded into board-level capital allocation and transition strategies? Do governance arrangements cover these areas (De Smet and Koller, 2023; Tayler, 2025)? How supportive are they of finance for climate action and green innovation?

Large sums continue to be spent on fossil fuel subsidies when the renewables needed for a green energy transition can have a cost advantage and their use has rapidly increased (IEA, 2025). A persistent finance for sustainable development funding gap remains in critical sectors such as clean energy, infrastructure and social resilience, with developing countries alone requiring an additional USD 4 trillion annually to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and other climate targets (Mills and Wardle, 2026). How might transitions in the nature and patterns of future work be financed? What is needed to accelerate the growth of green bonds, transition finance, blended finance, and ESG linked instruments? Where in these areas is leadership and innovation most needed? Are there steps that governments, regulators or stock exchanges could take to facilitate financial flows?

Intervention should encourage rather than inhibit responsible innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship. Some calls for action are self-serving or protective. Requirements and regulations can be influenced by those whose activities they are designed to curb or whose behaviours they were initiated to change (Santner, 2025). How are disclosure frameworks evolving? What are the implications of changes and proposals for governance, transparency, competitive advantage, and investor and public confidence? In what sectors is strategic advantage being gained or lost? How should governance impacts of carbon border taxes and climate-linked trade rules be assessed? Are they helpful or harmful? How might net-zero commitments and the circular economy be used as a competitive lever? When boards support or oppose actions and/or requirements, what are the environmental and social implications?

Those who vote for political and other leaders often do so in the hope of advancing their own interests. This may be especially so for those also providing significant financial support. Boards should be alert to conflicts of interest, and directors should take interests and concerns of stakeholders into account, including ESG investors, and ensure compliance with applicable laws, rules, regulations, guidance and codes. Responsible boards ensure that companies they are responsible for are not offshoring negative impacts because of requirements introduced to reduce them. Directors should question rather than assume. For example, do carbon taxes do more harm than good (Broadwith, 2026)? Much depends upon circumstances and the nature and scale of measures. A model suggests that whether emissions are reduced can depend upon where Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism costs are in relation to a certain threshold (Chang et al, 2026). Are boards alert to possible impacts of proposed changes?

Caution should not lead to cynicism. Changes sometimes open doors. They create possibilities rather than restrict. There are opportunities in low-carbon mobility, renewable integration, smart grids, and data-driven urban systems. Future work might involve more green jobs. How aware are directors of such arenas of opportunity? Are they monitoring and learning from the rise of eco-cities, the emergence of green innovation districts, and developments relating to more climate-resilient infrastructures? Some directors just remain aware and interested. Others investigate. They actively look for opportunities for entities on whose boards they sit. Subsidies and regulations can distort outcomes, and the means to achieve ends can sometimes complicate achieving them (Bowring, 2026; Mills and Wardle, 2026). What more should boards do, either alone or in collaboration with others when changes are proposed that they perceive to be harmful, unnecessary or restrictive?

Adaptive Leadership at the Board Level

The world order is in a state of flux and changing, and organisations and their leaders are having to adapt (Stubb, 2026). External environmental, geopolitical and technological developments are driving many of the changes, including those relating to future work, to which boards may feel obliged or forced to respond. When allocating attention, capabilities and resources, a balance must be struck between action and reaction in situations in which a sufficiency of both might be required. Greater uncertainty, instability and insecurity creates fresh interest in adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002; Heifetz et al, 2009). How, where and in what ways should boards adapt in response to the accumulating and evolving combination of challenges, risks and threats that confront them? What form should adaptive board leadership take? Where might future work considerations feature?

How should adaptive leadership be exercised? What might it mean for the relationship between leader and led? Adaptation and, if required, reinvention can also be required by individuals to cope with the challenges of remaining relevant, employable and useful in the AI era, including those with a professional background (Schuster and Oxley, 2025). Adaptation implies change. Leaders need to explain why change is needed and what people can do to enable it. While recognising realities, the challenge for leaders can often be to offer hope and draw inspiration from the power of nature to adapt, restore itself and rebound, and also to motivate positive action in order to buy time and respond (Pearce, 2026). When time is needed to think about the consequences of what is happening and how to adapt, is learning agility now an essential requirement of adaptive leadership?

Experience, knowledge and understanding accumulated in the past may have a limited shelf life or be distracting and possibly harmful in contemporary contexts. Lessons from previous eras may lead people up blind alleys or waste time. The continuing relevance of some directors may melt away and their standing within a board quickly dissolve in the face of successive waves of shifting combinations of issues to address. Others may have the wisdom and flexibility to adjust to new realities and requirements. Rather than an item that is thrown away or replaced, like an organism they respond to changes in the environment and adapt. How does one distinguish between the wheat and the chaff when assembling an adaptive leadership team? Some may adjust more quickly than others. Past stalwarts may flex and snap rather than bounce back. How much time should be allowed for re-adjustment? What changes should be made to prospect assessment and new board member selection criteria?

Some directors may need to transition from drawing upon legacy wisdom to acquiring the learning agility to keep pace with changing requirements as ongoing events, situations and challenges evolve and new ones arise. How should people with established views from a previous era move from experience-based certainty to inquiry-based leadership? Which of the qualities hitherto sought in directors and/or valued contributions from legacy wisdom could still be useful? What can be learned from previous eras of unpredictability, multipolar rivalry, nationalism, populism and rearmament when more powerful countries sought regional dominance (Westad, 2026)? Many sources of legacy wisdom are being lost without most people being aware of it. Climate change, migration, conflicts, pressures of nationalism, requirements for access and other developments are leading to a mass extinction of languages, with a half of the world's 7,000 languages possibly disappearing before the end of the century (Galor, 2026). How might the wisdom of indigenous people best be harnessed?

Adaptive leaders benefit from learning organisations and boards. Responsible boards consciously endeavour to become learning systems to enhance resilience and remain relevant. What could this involve? How should reflection, feedback, and continuous learning and improvement be embedded into board practices? Board meetings themselves can be opportunities to learn. Some boards conclude with a review of what has been learned from certain events, issues and discussions. Eras of confrontation, contending perspectives and rival philosophies are not new. Lessons may also be learned from similar past events, although over generalisation should be avoided (Brands, 2025). Aspects of events and situations, along with the circumstances and contexts in which they occur, can differ and quickly change, as can the concerns, preoccupations and priorities of those considering them.

It might help if leaders know more about who they really are, as well as those around them (Oliver, 2026). In a digital era in which more use is being made of AI agents, autonomous systems and robots, directors also need to understand what is distinctive about being human, and how their qualities, concerns and priorities differ from those of any systems and technologies they depend upon and use. Employing AI to summarise in place of reading oneself can negatively affect learning and development in multiple and unforeseen ways and has societal implications (Baron, 2026). Should the expectation and requirement that directors exercise independent thought be changed to thought independent of supporting systems and technologies? How might human inclusion and individuality be preserved in an age of AI and algorithms? When or will non-humans become members of corporate boards?

Are there other governance implications of adaptive leadership and the associated requirement for learning agility? How might boards still make informed decisions in compressed timelines? Is there a tension between learning velocity and decision velocity, or are both required? Are they complementary and reinforcing rather than contending? In crisis situations that rapidly evolve in real time and require constant attention and frequent and sometimes immediate responses, executives can accumulate power because of the inability of existing governance arrangements to cope. How should boards provide oversight and maintain sufficient control in emergencies to discharge their duties and responsibilities? As autocracies advance and individuals accumulate power, what are the implications for the collective responsibility heritage of corporate governance? What do trades and labour unions need to do to remain players and a source of influence in relation to future work?

There may be governance insights and/or a perspective to be gained from recurring constitutional debates. Balancing individual and state rights with strong federal government and a powerful executive has been a perennial theme since the competing constitutional visions articulated by Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton (Rosen, 2025). What could be different about adaptive governance in times of disruption? It is increasingly required to cope with environmental, geopolitical, technological and transformational challenges and to remain relevant, resilient, secure and viable (Chen et al, 2026; Korobeynikov and Mokhor, 2026). How should governance frameworks that evolve with change best be built and by whom and with what support? Board cultures may have to evolve or be strengthened to embrace adaptive thinking. They might also need to encompass previously under-represented groups. How could boards best be exposed to insights from Gen Z and digital natives?

Boards may require dialogue with management to better understand the current and desired state of their organization's culture and what leadership is and could do to align culture with strategic direction (Meyerson et al, 2026). What might be learned from director and board behaviours, how other boards are led and their agendas, and what higher performing boards do differently (O'Kelley et al, 2025). When assessing a corporate culture from a diversity and inclusion perspective, do we need to look beyond factors that are protected such as gender and race (Coulson-Thomas, 2025d)? A literature review has shown a significant shift from an individualised approach to improving women's advancement into senior leadership roles, to a systematic one, acknowledging that there are entrenched behaviours that result in a lack of equity (Gander and Sharafizad, 2025). Should getting inputs on frontier technologies and from younger generations and other under-represented groups be similarly approached?

For many directors and boards, a drive for adaptive leadership may stem from a desire for the greater resilience required in an uncertain and insecure world (Coulson-Thomas, 2026b). Individuals, organisations, communities and societies must be resilient to confront, cope with and respond to a variety of contemporary challenges, risks and existential threats. Do public and stakeholder expectations of directors need to change (Coulson-Thomas, 2026c)? Are both resilience and strategic adaptation now a critical requirement (Malik and Terzidis, 2025)? As well as having the resilience to react to and recover from past and ongoing developments, at a time of unpredictability and insecurity there is an increasing imperative to be proactive and foresee and prepare for future ones. Should directors advocate and build an adaptive and forward-looking form of resilience? Could adaptive leadership and board, executive and corporate resilience become a strategic asset that gives competitive advantage?

Conclusions

The interplay of contemporary economics, domestic politics and geopolitics in a fractured and polarised multipolar world is contributing to a breakdown of order and stability, greater unpredictability and chaos, and hot and hybrid wars (Prasad, 2026)? Global risks and existential threats are often inter-related and usually the result of human activities, but concern for geopolitical or technological challenges should not lead to those which are environmental being overlooked (DEFRA, 2026; WEF; 2026). Our planet is experiencing increasing stress (UNEP, 2025b). Critical ecosystems are at risk of collapsing and biodiversity loss is a global threat that affects national security and challenges food security (DEFRA, 2026). Are new forms of leadership and governance now needed, and are different and wider contributions currently required from businesses, directors and corporate boards?

Future work is but one of many issues on contemporary board agendas. Discussions about work continue to focus on the likely impact of automation, digital technology and AI on the number and type of jobs in organisations, rather than the nature and patterns of work needed to cope with environmental, geopolitical and other challenges, global risks and existential threats (Coulson-Thomas, 2024a & b; 2025a & b). Uncertainties remain concerning the scoping, introduction, funding, development and management of the activities, jobs, roles, skills and tasks that will be required to enable sustainable corporate operations, business models, infrastructures and lifestyles, and improve the prospects for the survival of ecosystems, humankind and other species. More joined up, aligned and/or collaborative responses are likely to be required. How people are engaged and participate could be critical.

There are multiple uncertainties in the contexts within which directors and corporate boards operate and a myriad of ways in which various factors and vectors are inter-related and influence each other. It may be too early to assess AI impacts upon future work and our security (Kolko, 2026; Nolan, 2026; Perlo and Collier, 2026). The extent to which directors and boards adopt a holistic and systems perspective and understand the inter-relationship of innovation adoption, views of what represents excellence and the nature of future work, and act collaboratively and in a way that is environmentally and socially responsible is also uncertain. While there are many questions for boards to consider, providing suggested directions for future research is problematic. Given multiple uncertainties, it is not clear for how long existing forms and patterns of work, or information, understanding and knowledge are likely to remain relevant. Flexibility, fluidity and adaptation are likely to be required.

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Abstract

Innovation priorities, views of what represents excellence, and the attention and priorities of corporate boards can influence each other and the future of work. They interact in a global context that is uncertain, unpredictable, insecure and fraught. Uncertainty extends to multiple factors affecting the quantity, nature and quality of future work, and how and where it is undertaken and by whom, or what, the technological and other support that is available, and

how various activities and requirements of people are to be met and funded. Boards must accommodate and balance the interests of their people along with those of other stakeholders. There are economic, environmental, geopolitical and technological issues as well as social and work-related ones for boards and governments to address. The extent to which directors and boards adopt a holistic and systems perspective, understand the inter-relationship of innovation adoption, what represents excellence and the nature of future work, and act collaboratively, and in a way that is environmentally and socially responsible, is also uncertain. Flexibility, adaptive leadership and resilience are likely to be required.

Key words:

Uncertainty, Innovation, Excellence, Corporate Boards, Future Work

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