



INSIGHTS SUMMARY

HOW CAN PEOPLE-CENTRED BUSINESS MODEL DESIGN SHAPE BETTER OUTCOMES?

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RAPID TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND EVOLVING BUSINESS MODELS ARE RESHAPING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKERS, SUPPLIERS, CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITIES. THIS WORKSHOP EXAMINED HOW COMPANIES CAN PUT PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE OF THESE SHIFTS, STARTING WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE RATHER THAN INSTITUTIONAL ASSUMPTIONS. PARTICIPANTS EXPLORED WHAT GENUINE AGENCY INVOLVES, HOW LISTENING ACROSS A BUSINESS ECOSYSTEM CAN EXPOSE HIDDEN FRICTION AND TRADE-OFFS, AND WHY TECHNOLOGY SHOULD RESPOND TO PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY PEOPLE. AI FEATURED PROMINENTLY, BUT NOT AS AN END IN ITSELF. THE SHARPER TEST IS WHETHER BUSINESS DESIGN STRENGTHENS PEOPLE'S CONFIDENCE, CAPABILITY AND INFLUENCE WHILE BUILDING COMMERCIAL RESILIENCE AND SHARED VALUE.

INSIGHT 1: FOLLOW PEOPLE'S JOURNEYS BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE BUSINESS

People-centred design starts with a person's whole experience, not simply the point at which they encounter an organisation. An end-to-end review at Walmart, for example, examined the journeys of people with disabilities before they became associates. Looking across associate and customer experiences also revealed connected friction: associates disliked unloading trucks, while customers struggled to find help in stores. Automating an unpopular task could therefore free associates for customer-facing work, supported by handheld technology. Businesses should listen across workers, suppliers, customers and communities, then consider how decisions affecting one group reshape outcomes for another. Different experiences may demand several responses, rather than one standard solution.

"You start with people and their experience. You go end to end. You respect difference and recognise cross-stakeholder impact, and then invest in agency. "

Welby Leaman, Senior Director, Global Policy Strategy, Walmart Inc

INSIGHT 2: GIVE PEOPLE THE POWER TO DEFINE PROGRESS AND SHAPE THE RESPONSE

Participation becomes meaningful when people can define what progress looks like, assess their own position and influence what happens next. Fundación Paraguaya found that income alone did not explain whether families were thriving. Its visual self-assessment considers several dimensions, including housing, savings, motivation and self-esteem, enabling families to build their own plans. Participants reinforced the wider lesson: communities often see barriers that institutions miss, yet consultation becomes performative when an intervention is already fixed. Businesses should ask whether people want a proposed solution before asking how to implement it, value the time they contribute and treat disagreement as evidence that may require redesign.

"The most powerful business models don't design solutions for people; they give people the agency to shape solutions themselves."

Martin Burt, Founder and Executive Director, Fundación Paraguaya

INSIGHT 3: START WITH THE PROBLEM, NOT THE TECHNOLOGY

Technology should address friction identified by workers, customers or communities, rather than provide a use case for a tool that an organisation has already selected. The workshop surfaced both possibilities and warnings. A clinical copilot developed with clinicians could flag possible errors in diagnosis or treatment while preserving professional judgement. By contrast, an AI system in a call centre pushed workers towards rigid call times and higher volumes, without accounting for complex cases or recovery time, contributing to stress and burnout. Co-design must continue from the initial concept through testing, deployment and evaluation. The practical question is not simply whether technology increases output, but whose problem it solves and what new pressures it creates.

"AI should make people better at and more confident in their work, not just faster and more watched. That difference is a design choice."

Lyla Renwick-Archibold, *Technologist and Global Digital Rights Advocate*

INSIGHT 4: BUILD HUMAN JUDGEMENT, TRANSPARENCY AND CORRECTION INTO AI

AI should augment people's work, not become an unquestioned decision-maker. Businesses need to document intended users, design choices, testing, limitations and changes in language that non-specialists can understand. Accessible feedback and appeal routes matter just as much. When a tool fails, the organisation should investigate what the user reports rather than defer automatically to the system. Participants also raised concerns about inaccurate summaries, biased data, and automated recruitment or customer service that removes meaningful human contact. Measures of success should extend beyond speed and cost to include the number and nature of appeals, the corrections made, and whether people feel more capable and confident in their work.

INSIGHT 5: DESIGN FOR UNEQUAL ACCESS AND WIDER SYSTEM CONSTRAINTS

The benefits of AI will remain uneven without attention to electricity, connectivity, devices, data costs, digital skills and local-language content. Participants from Nigeria and Uganda described AI's potential to extend agricultural knowledge where extension workers cannot reach every farmer, alongside the infrastructure gaps that constrain its use. Similar concerns arose in smallholder supply chains, where new data requirements can penalise farmers who lack the means to comply. Businesses cannot address these constraints alone. They need to work with communities, civil society, government and other companies to align investment, governance and capacity-building, while ensuring that efficiency gains do not deepen exclusion or shift costs onto those with the least power.

CONCLUSION

The discussion pointed to three shifts in business design: from institutional boundaries to people's full journeys, from consultation to agency, and from technology-led adoption to problem-led deployment. These shifts can strengthen commercial resilience by revealing friction earlier, building trust and enabling workers, suppliers and customers to contribute more effectively. Yet listening is insufficient if people cannot influence decisions, and well-designed tools will still exclude people where infrastructure, skills or accessible information are missing. Business leaders should revisit a current design decision, identify whose voice and experience are absent, and establish an ongoing process for feedback, correction and shared learning.

RESOURCES

- Explore Insights & Resources, Business Fights Poverty: Business Fights Poverty's library of insights, research, toolkits and practical resources focused on social impact and poverty reduction.
<https://businessfightspoverty.org/explore>
- Compass, Business Fights Poverty: A people-centred framework for measuring and driving social impact across employees, value chains and communities, helping organisations identify priorities, track progress and align resources with people's needs.
<https://businessfightspoverty.org/products/compass>
- AI Tools, Business Fights Poverty: Bespoke AI tools that help organisations unlock and apply trusted knowledge, enabling users to ask questions in different languages and receive practical, source-based guidance drawn from curated organisational content.
<https://businessfightspoverty.org/products/ai-tools>
- Staying Ambitious with AI: 5 Lessons for Responsible Social Impact, Business Fights Poverty: An article outlining five practical lessons for using AI responsibly for social impact, including starting with the social problem, building accountable partnerships, augmenting rather than replacing people, measuring outcomes and designing for inclusion and agency.
<https://businessfightspoverty.org/staying-ambitious-with-ai-5-lessons-for-responsible-social-impact/>
- Harnessing AI for Social Impact, Business Fights Poverty: A Business Fights Poverty resource exploring how AI can be harnessed to strengthen social impact while addressing questions around inclusion, governance, partnerships and responsible implementation.
<https://businessfightspoverty.org/insight/harnessing-ai-for-social-impact/>