

Lessons in Innovation from Tech's Cultural Frontier

Tech trends paint a picture of innovation being all about technology. It's not.

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Digital transformation isn't really about technology.

2015 report authored by MIT,
[*Strategy, not technology drives digital transformation*](#)



LISA TALIA MORETTI

Head of User Research

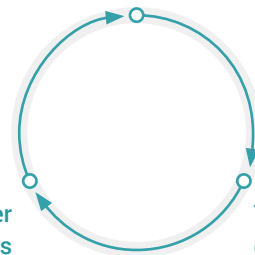
Writing a 'future casting' piece in month two of the new year is a little bit of a cheat but the flurry of technology prediction articles has left me wanting. While some left me flummoxed (apparently, this is yet again, "the year of mobile") and rolling my eyes (a prediction saying that "AI will start to explain itself this year", comes to mind), my general critique is that these predictions fail to acknowledge trends in human behaviour and culture, and how this impacts the innovation cycle. This report aims to fill that gap.

What would we see if we looked at digital transformation through the lens of human behaviour and culture?

Digital transformation is one of those perplexing phrases that somehow has the ability to describe a process, be a process as well as disguise itself as an organisational strategy in order to not only survive change but thrive because of it. Settling on an agreed definition is no easy task as digital transformation has become somewhat of a self-defining term. However, there is a key principle embedded within the term that often isn't discussed and spotlighted enough, especially when viewed through the prism of a tech trends report. The principle is that digital transformation is as much about attitudes, beliefs and values as it is about technology.

Values and beliefs largely determine how we behave. Technology helps to shape behaviour by how it can and cannot be used as well as how it is and isn't used.

Beliefs and values drive behaviour.



Behaviour over time becomes culture.

Tools, like technology, give shape to that behaviour by allowing and constraining actions.

When looked at in this way, an essential step in predicting trends is to look at what people believe, what they value and how they behave. As such, these are the top five shifts in beliefs, values and behaviour that I believe will shape the future of tech innovation across industries and sectors.



2020 looks set to be the year that organisations desire to get more out of their data.

1. Meaningful data

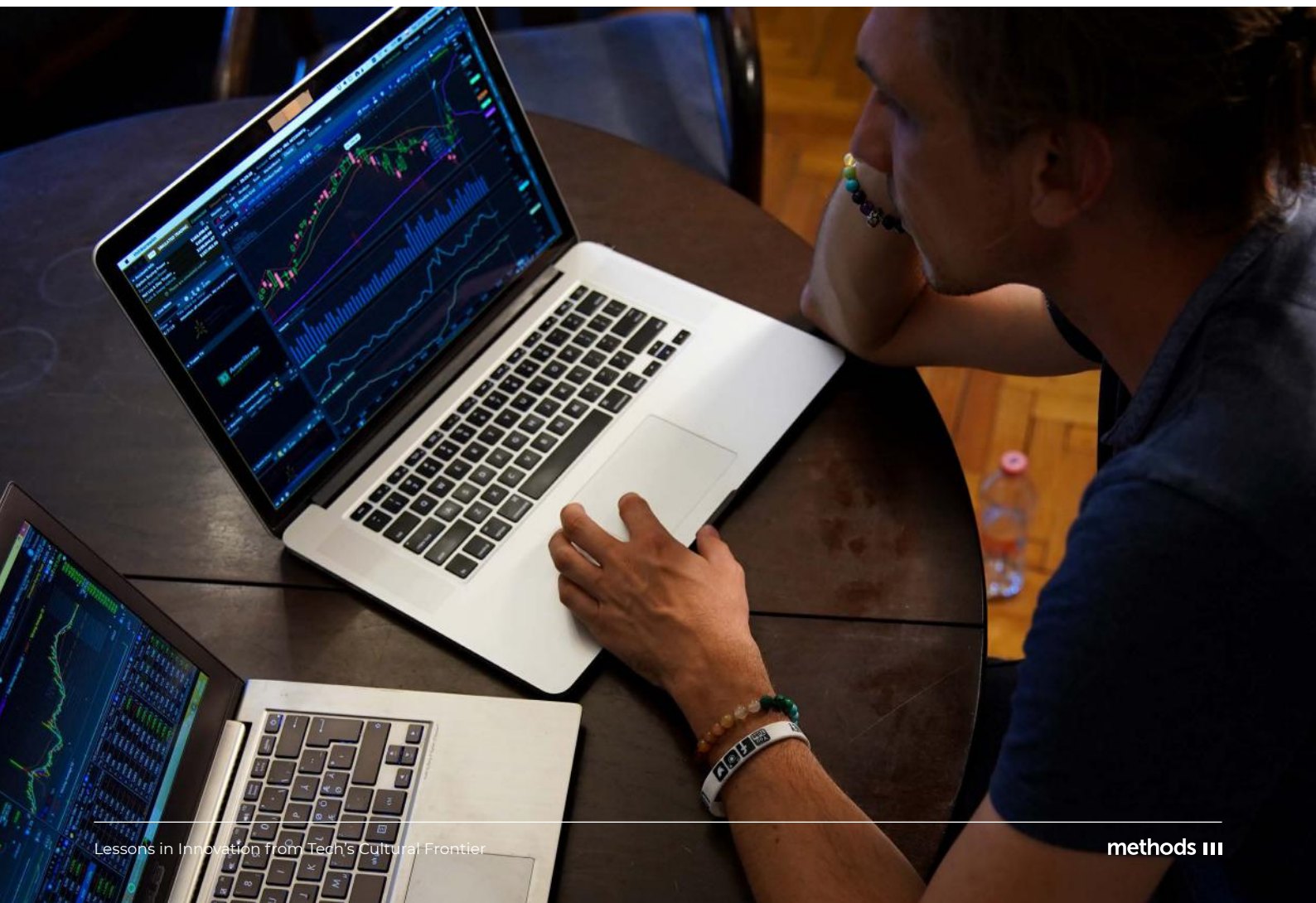
Numbers that make an impact

It is undeniable, the fight for the health of the planet and its people is changing hearts and minds. Whether it was an Attenborough documentary, Extinction Rebellion, Greta or a combination of the myriad of other activities, a new set of values and beliefs is being prioritised. We can see this happening through a number of actions.

Firstly, through language. There is a definite shift in the language people are using to describe output. There is a desire to not only measure 'objectives' but also 'outcomes'. We're hearing the word 'impact' more often and witnessing in seismic proportions what that looks like on both sides of the spectrum; those who are promising to do a lot, and those you have made no promises to date. We see this in [Microsoft's ambitious plan to become carbon negative in 2030](#). Conversely, we can see what happens when a company doesn't rise to the expectation of change. [In the case of Amazon](#), hundreds of employees put their

jobs at risk last month (January 2020) in an open and coordinated effort whereby they criticised the company's practices – including the lack of action around climate justice.

In order to make evidence-based, impactful decisions, 2020 looks set to be the year that organisations desire to get more out of their data. Many organisations will start to conduct data audits, beef up data teams (multi-disciplinary and cross-sector please!) and invest in data strategies that allow for data to be transformed into information, then insights and ultimately knowledge. Data, regardless of how much you have, is just data until you give it meaning; a lesson that many have now learnt. Tools that enable organisations to make sense of data so that they can better understand their impact on people, planet and profits will be key. This includes, labelling (so that definitions are clear), surfacing meta data and visualising data in ways that are understandable and accessible despite technical ability.





2. The rise of the digital humanities



Intellectual diversity is an economic imperative.

The translators have arrived

Technologists are realising that the road to holistic, positive impact cannot be journeyed alone. To this end, we're seeing the rise of the digital humanities. These individuals work at the intersection of technology, social life and their domain expertise. They're not quite generalists but rather act as a bridge or translator between tech teams and the system or social group that will be most impacted by innovation.

These individuals are crucial to any efforts that are working on the successful democratisation, socialisation and operationalisation of technology and data. It's precisely because their approach to innovation starts in their domain rather than with the technology that they are such an asset to technology teams. They are able to support teams adopt new perspectives, contribute to idea generation and design features and services in such a way that incentivises the right kind of behaviour. Without these individuals, foreseeing unintended consequences goes from being a difficult and challenging task to an overwhelming and crippling one that usually leads to one of two directions: inertia or reckless, ethical negligence.

Dr. Charlotte Webb has founded the [Feminist Internet](#), the *Leading Edge Forum* and *Girl Effect* both have Digital Anthropologists on their team and *CrowdDNA* have fairly recently hired Semioticians. *Fjord* has a hired a Data Designer, *GovLab* have coined the term [Data Steward](#) and created an entire network around this role, and *Google* made a splash in *Wired* last October announcing they've hired a [Chief Decision Scientist](#). Data Storytellers, those with good verbal and visual communication skills, who are able to help find the signal amongst the noise will likely find themselves in strong demand as they work side-by-side with their Data Science colleagues. Going forward, more and more organisations will employ individuals who don't 'look' like the usual people they hire. It's an economic imperative that they do and an operational risk if they don't.

This cacophony of skillsets will require new digital tools that allow for idea facilitation, group analysis and shared problem-solving in real-time. Collaborative platforms that display both qualitative and quantitative, verbal and visual data and that don't kill focused, deep work with notification fatigue will become the new darlings favoured by multi-disciplinary teams.

3. Soft skills will be the heart of tech enablement

Redefining digital literacy

A few years ago, I attended a panel discussion on the *Future of Work* where the global HR director of a multinational telecommunications company was one of the panellists. She was asked what she believed was the most important skill in an employee. Without hesitation she answered, "Curiosity." Her reasoning was that regardless of what role an individual fulfils in the company, or how the industry changes, if that person has a natural sense of curiosity, they will be open to learning and better adapt to change.

While this is a great anecdote, the importance of soft skills is not just a matter of opinion.

A key finding from [LinkedIn's Emerging Jobs 2020](#) report shows that as automation becomes more widespread, the demand for soft skills looks likely to increase. They call out communication, creativity and collaboration. This is corroborated in [NESTA's Future of Skills](#) report which outlined a similar set. While there was a particularly strong emphasis on interpersonal skills including teaching, social perceptiveness and coordination and knowledge related to psychology and anthropology, they also called out judgement and decision-making, analysis and evaluation. [Freeformers, in partnership](#)

[with University College London](#), identify 12 attributes that are similar to the above including imagination, integrity, empathy, solution finding and self-leadership.

To understand the importance of soft skills within an organisation, one has to know about VUCA. VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity and has become a catch-all acronym for describing the unprecedented scale and scope of change we're all being subjected to. Building a workforce that is open to change and experimentation is more important than building one that specialises in X skills. This is not to say that experts and specialists are not important. They are important, needed and must be nurtured. But it is to say that any organisational digital literacy training or career development should extend beyond technical skills to include training in soft skills.

Soft skills are not 'obvious'. They take time and attention to develop and succeed in. This trend will influence how we come to define "digital literacy" and "digital leadership" as well as how we educate and professionally develop the next generation to be digital-literate, risk-tolerant and thrive under VUCA-like conditions.

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The importance of soft skills is not just a matter of opinion. It shows up in the research.”



4. Ethics moves from theory to practice-ish

The journey to practical ethics is underway

Many of us working in tech saw the car crash happen in slow motion. The over confidence in big data, automation and 'empowering' users, led to an explosion of fails. In response, we got a heap of tech and data ethics principles and guidelines, which were very helpful to start with. Unfortunately, in many cases, the principles which were meant to act as guard rails were relegated to 'Interesting Thought Exercise' instead.

Then, last year it felt like we had a series of small wins starting with the creation of senior tech ethics roles and the formation of dedicated teams. Now, titles like Chief Ethical Officer, Data Ethics Officer or Technical Ethics Advisor are starting to become more prevalent. Data Scientists and Engineers are having to fill out ethics canvases before starting projects (in many ways inspired by the Business Canvas) and internal ethics committees are being formalised. There also seems to be widespread agreement that data and engineering teams require a set of multidisciplinary brains, and innovative [new processes and methods that support systems thinking](#) and sociotechnical design are gaining traction. Research is being funded that looks at how [AI intersects with disability](#) (alongside race and gender), written and in-person testimony is being given to city councils and national governments concerning privacy, security, automated decision systems and facial recognition technology, and [tech's dirty little secret on its contributing role to the climate emergency](#) is finally breaking into the mainstream.

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A lot has happened, but a lot more still needs to happen.

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Firstly, we need to take all this great thinking that is happening within organisations and we need to branch outward by holding partners and suppliers to higher standards of operation in order to transform business as usual across sectors. An example of something that could become common practice is the creation of an [Ethics Charter](#) (Ciaron Hoye, Midlands LHCR Programme Director has been integral to setting this up). In future, a charter like this could establish new expectations across the supply chain, raise the bar in professional conduct and open the door to audits of a different kind.

Secondly, we need to find a way to fund ethics. Does this have a home in social value reporting? Or do we need to go further up the food chain? If so, how can we better collaborate with the global investor community? Is there a way to hold them accountable for what they decide to fund and ultimately, bring to life? In an article published on [Harvard's Epicenter blog](#), they discuss the role that investors play in helping to "bankroll" ethics. They make a salient point by inverting what's become standard practice. Instead of taking a deterministic approach by assuming that tech, like AI, will fix 'the problem', what if the first stage of investment is the introduction of ethical human oversight and expertise to assess initial assumptions and hypothesis? What if investors could help to shape the ethical vision of a start-up?

The other half of this point is to standardise how we measure the impact ethics has on profits. The sooner we find a way to measure 'ethical' efforts, the easier it becomes to roll out new ways of working from boardroom to shop floor. Any new measurement frameworks should make explicit reference to the principles and goals documented in the near-globally agreed [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) to make it relevant and contextual to international solution-finding efforts.

Finally, the third step that needs to occur in order to take the next big leap forward is discussed in detail within [Data and Society's paper Owning Ethics](#). Due to external pressures, many organisations (especially Big Tech) have provided resources for the production of ethical artefacts (tools, methods, guidelines) that have been rolled out across teams and departments. However, what is being developed doesn't disrupt the status quo but rather embeds a blueprint of the organisation's current structures and logics into it. As a result, many of these new artefacts aren't able to reshape or redefine daily practice but rather are engaged in a series of micro-conflicts as they attempt to insert ethical moments into established streams of work. Group ritual, rehearsed presenteeism and legacy reward systems are the hardest of habits to break.

A willing and able community of individuals have been hired and given the remit and resources to 'do ethics'. The next few years will determine if the powers that be will let them.

5. A New Spirit of Action

Take hold of the urgency and run

“The status quo is a catastrophic risk to all of humanity. What we can't afford to do is ignore alternatives.”

5 Myths about Global Poverty, [Current Affairs Magazine](#)

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It's likely that the next digital mavens won't come from the technology industry but rather from the spaces that intersect with it.

Humankind has proved time and again that it is capable of taking, and landing, some giant leaps. The kind that allowed us to land on the moon, discover antibiotics and connect the world using global communication tools. Measuring, collaborating, thinking and doing things differently will make a big difference but it will make an even bigger difference if we action all of them, rather than cherry picking just one or two priorities.

We have to capitalise on the urgency we find ourselves in and unearth the political will we need to propel us forward. *COP26* in Glasgow will be a good indicator of just how brave governments are feeling. Reducing financial and gender inequalities, re-engineering global food markets, quitting our oil addiction and [reforming tax systems](#), may be some of the most wicked problems we've ever been tasked with solving. These challenges will compel us to re-evaluate our relationship with [creativity and its association with uncertainty](#) and risk. They will require us to better understand, and quickly, [why so many interventions that work well in experimental or research settings often fail to scale up](#). This is crucial not only for those who are looking to action innovative policy but also those who are looking to scale radical solutions that aim to shift stubborn indicators in order to make way for fresh change. Lastly, this will also mean a redesign and rethink of engagement

strategies that activate widespread public participation, collaboration and education around fast-changing and difficult-to-understand topics. Two inspiring examples that nod toward a refreshing take on public engagement is [Latent Being, an immersive installation experience by Refik Anadol](#), and the [National Park City movement](#) that has launched in London.

Technology has given birth to new business models, influenced political systems and proven it has the ability to restructure social relations. And it will do this again. Only this time we won't be so quick to look to these innovators, think they're brilliant and put them in charge. As we enter an age of reformations and redefinitions, reshaping and remixing, there is a deafening call for leadership. It's likely that the next digital mavens won't come from the technology industry but rather from the spaces that intersect with it.

2020 Vision

Given the current social, political and economic backdrop, pointing an organisation down the road toward innovation that ends in technology feels like anaemic advice. Regardless of your definition of digital transformation, it is less something that happens and more something that emerges at the intersection of technology, creative endeavour and human action. May 2020 give you the gift of kaleidoscopic vision.





LISA TALIA MORETTI

Head of User Research

Lisa Talia Moretti is an award-winning digital sociologist, strategist and tech ethics activist based in London. She currently holds the position of Head Of User Research at Methods. For more than a decade, she's studied and written about the relationship between technology, information and society. During this time, Lisa has also presented keynotes and run workshops to audiences from a wide range of business backgrounds on the impact, opportunities and challenges of emerging technologies.

Lisa is an Associate Lecturer in the Institute of Management Studies at Goldsmiths (University of London) and at Cardiff University in the School of Journalism, PR and Cultural Studies. She is also a visiting teacher at Plymouth University and at Sup de Pub in Paris.

Her teaching area of expertise is:

- ▶ Digital Research Methods
- ▶ Design Thinking
- ▶ Campaign Analytics
- ▶ Social Media
- ▶ Brand Strategy

Lisa's research projects with Goldsmiths and King's College have seen her collaborate with To Play For, IpSoft, Adobe, Mindshare and Rackspace. Her research covers a range of technologies including AI, chatbots, VR and AR, and wearable technology and has gained international coverage with CNN, BBC, Fast Company, Campaign, Techcrunch, Forbes and others.

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✉ Info@methods.co.uk

☎ 020 7240 1121

🌐 www.methods.co.uk