Innovation and Sustainability Converge at The Americas Conference

Sustainable resilience, strategies and excellence took centre stage at the INSEAD San Francisco Hub for Business Innovation.

Written by Katy Scott, Senior Editor INSEAD Knowledge.

The pulse of innovation met the beat of sustainability at The Americas Conference at the San Francisco Hub earlier this month. More than 60 expert speakers ignited sparks among 300 alumni, business leaders and entrepreneurs over three days of panels, keynotes, workshops and networking sessions. The focus was on integrating sustainability across all aspects of business, from leadership and strategies to governance, supply chains and climate finance.

Victoria Woo, Director of the San Francisco Hub, set the tone for the conference, framing it as a platform for leaders to explore the possibilities of shaping a sustainable, just and regenerative future. She emphasised the need for ingenuity, radical collaboration and collective action to address the planet's pressing challenges and spearhead a sustainable transition.

Professor Karel Cool unpacked the “how” in his sustainability masterclass, detailing how companies can gain a competitive edge by integrating sustainability into strategic decision-making. This involves thinking about and identifying industry-specific challenges, concentrating on the sustainability needs the company is well-equipped to address and translating those ideas into action.

He illustrated that sustainability doesn’t necessarily have to result in higher costs for companies. “Sustainability and cost reduction can easily go hand in hand,” he said. “The numbers aren't the problem, it's the alignment. Don't wait for alignment within the company – just go for it."
The inaugural INSEAD Business Sustainability Awards recognised four outstanding examples of sustainability excellence: GHGSat, a pioneer in satellite monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions; EcoVadis, a global provider of trusted business sustainability ratings; FUL Foods, a food tech startup harnessing microalgae to create sustainable products; and Eavor Technologies Inc., a company that has invented a new geothermal power generation technology.

INSEAD Business Sustainability Award Winners

All four of these ventures are led by INSEAD alumni. Acknowledging this, Dean Francisco Veloso remarked on the power of the INSEAD alumni community. “INSEAD’s entrepreneurial spirit is different from anything I’ve experienced so far in my career,” he said. Later, in a fireside chat with Victoria Woo, he added: "I am very confident that we are on the right trajectory to make sustainability part of the conversations we have, the research we do and the way that research translates into action."

A diverse range of panel discussions covered topics including the potential and risks of Generative artificial intelligence (AI), the urgent call for climate finance, the evolving role of boards and strategies for disrupting CO2-heavy industries. The conference concluded with interactive workshops on designing sustainable futures, transforming supply chains and becoming agents of change.

Key takeaways from the conference

In a keynote address, Joel Makower, chairman and co-founder of GreenBiz Group, underlined the need to
move away from “random acts of greenness” and have deliberate and positive impact. He invited everyone to think about the “big idea” that they can bring forth and what it would take to make sustainability a core business strategy.

Mary Francia, INSEAD Ambassador for the Americas, led a panel on how boards need to evolve to champion ethical and sustainable practices. She stressed that meaningful change comes from competence, character, courage, and the resilience to follow through on our choices.

Speaking on the panel, Ron Soonieus, Senior Advisor at BCG and Director in Residence at INSEAD, shared some findings from a recent report on the role of the board in the sustainability era. He noted: “Part of resilience is spending time with risks you understand, and part of it is building a culture that can deal with what’s coming that you do not know yet.”

Professor and former INSEAD Dean Ilian Mihov led a discussion on climate finance – the trillion dollar question – that ended with a powerful message from panellist Katie Schmitz Eulitt from The International Financial Reporting Standards Foundation. She said: “This is our greatest chance to tackle humanity's biggest risk. There is no bailout plan.” John Fleming, Partner at Environmental Resource Management echoed her sentiment by saying: “The problem is not going away, but we can accelerate the transition.”

A discussion between Professor Peter Zemsky and Brad Lightcap, COO of OpenAI, explored the societal risks of AI and how it can be used for real-world problem solving, rather than an all-knowing “oracle”. Speaking of how emerging technologies have disrupted industries and jobs, Brad said: “The way we do things will change, we have to be OK with that. But we have to trust that our society is robust and resilient and our institutions and our systems will wrap around the technology.”

Geoff Ralston, former President of Y Combinator, described AI developments of the last year, including the launch of ChatGPT, as perhaps the most momentous technological changes that we've seen. He added: “There are risks, but we will all remember what happened in 2022 and 2023 as one of the most significant changes in our lives and in the world itself.”

AI’s carbon footprint was addressed in a workshop on driving sustainable transformation in supply chains, where Valérie Touchon, Chief Impact Officer of EcoVadis noted: “We are looking at how we can use Generative AI to deliver accurate and faster assessments, but we are super cautious because massive use of AI has a significant CO2 impact.”

Participants were challenged to use ideation exercises from design thinking, like mind mapping, to come up with innovative ideas for a more sustainable future. Gabe Lomeli, Jr., Strategy and Account Manager at LinkedIn Media Production who led the blitz hackathon said: “To find your best ideas, you have to see all your ideas, even the bad ones. When you get to the impossible ideas, push through to one more layer to get to the innovative ones.”

In a workshop on aligning purpose, Jonathan Yeo, Founder at The Potential Space spoke of trying out different “selves” to see what resonates with us. “Transitions tend to start with the idea of having to let go. We start with an ending,” he said. “In order for us to find purpose, we need to explore possibilities.”
Beyond the business, guests enjoyed a dazzling gala with circus performers and sprinklings of magic, as well as a food truck festival in a repurposed double decker bus. These vibrant experiences left everyone eager to reconvene at the San Francisco Hub and keep the dynamic discussions alive.

Stay tuned for the next series of webinars on sustainability and AI, sustainability and leadership and sustainability in finance.

Subscribe to our Hoffmann Institute Quarterly Newsletter

Stay informed on our 60 second quarterly video updates, stories, video recordings of our webinars, and details of upcoming events and much more.

Subscribe

Find article at