WHY ZEBRA?

Taylor Vinters’ Zebra Project, launched in January 2018, brings together business leaders, creative thinkers, academics and visionaries to shape the future world of work.

Our aim was to create a community to work with us, initially over a 12-month period, to discern the fundamentals of future success, digging deep into what the drivers should be behind our businesses, and how we can create step changes in innovation, growth, and the quality of working lives.

Through our monthly discussions, we’ve explored a wide range of drivers that are reshaping the way we work, live and buy: from new technologies; the rise of crowds and platforms; and the global, mobile workforce.

We’ve sought to find the curious and the courageous to debate these shifts, and question each other around the types of business structures, environments and cultures we should be seeking to create in response.

This summary report captures the most important themes and issues that have emerged from our exciting work with the Zebra community to date.

The Zebra Project conversations will continue in 2019, so visit www.thezebraproject.co to keep up-to-date with our latest thinking.

Matt Meyer
CEO
Taylor Vinters
If we haven’t yet crystallised a Zebra model, some striking common features have united discussions across the Zebra sessions, and some actionable leadership agendas have emerged.

**Firstly**, business leaders’ fierce curiosity and desire to understand and actively shape the future, and not to be blind-sided by it. Fatalism and fear have been starkly absent from our conversations.

**Secondly**, Zebra participants have stressed that we have a real choice about what comes next, and have willingly explored how they can frame smart choices, from how best to combine human ingenuity, automation and AI in the blended workforces of the future; to ensuring workplaces are engineered for engagement.

**Thirdly**, Zebra has highlighted how the accelerating wave of technological innovation is acting like a Hadron Collider for organisations, accelerating how all the moving parts of businesses are developing and interacting. The consequence is that this increases the importance of certain parts of every business’s operating system.

Transparency, ethics, purpose, culture, have therefore become dominant themes in our Zebra conversation – the importance of getting these fundamentals right revealed as the vital element in responding effectively to change and creating the conditions for innovation and growth.

**Fourthly**, Zebra has also revealed that the pace of change is outstripping the ability of policy makers and regulators to respond in a timely and consistent way. How do we resolve the tensions between regulatory compliance and innovation?

Zebra has therefore illuminated a broader leadership challenge for business: how to act generously and transparently to create (or help to create) the conditions that will allow them, their workforces, and customers to succeed.

Contextual intelligence – building trust, confidence, and understanding of the next wave of services and innovations – is fast becoming an essential enabler of innovation and sustained business success.
**KEY THEMES**

Blended Workforces and Collective Intelligence

Ethical Innovation

Platforms for Purpose

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"If there is something that is rules based, relatively simple, in services, that’s great territory for robots. But robots have all kinds of novel failure mechanisms, that’s where people work really well with them. A bot might get 70% right, but it’s the 30% that people are great for — acting as the air bag for the robots — and the bots free them up to serve customers better."

Kit Cox, CEO, Enate, speaking at the Humans at the Helm session

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**Blended Workforces and Collective Intelligence**

The Zebra consensus is that the blended workforce will predominate in the future. Whilst we will see no immediate lurch to an era of profound job loss, we will see an unrelenting pressure on all organisations to reshape their models and workplaces in ways that allow current and future employees to work more productively and creatively alongside a new era of AI driven tools and forms of automation.

Our working lives are going to become closely interwoven with intelligent machinery. Is your business actively preparing to get the best out of these new combinations of human, artificial, and shared collective intelligence? For example, robots will do much which is dull, dangerous and dirty, creating more space for humans to work alongside bots and offer better service and higher quality outcomes for consumers.

The vital implication for leadership teams is that they need to strive for clarity on what they are trying to achieve in their operating model, where the value lies, and what that means for a blended workforce strategy.

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"The change management challenges of this shift are self-evident. As Lizzie Penny from the Hoxby Collective noted at our session on the future workforce: ‘The people, the process and technology have to be brought together; incremental change with technology is challenging, so being able to be forward thinking enough to identify the next wave, and building process and people around the shift is key.’"

Zebra contributors recognise these challenges, but UK plc needs to reflect a little less and act a little more. A 2017 RSA/YouGov survey of UK business leaders found that just 14 percent of businesses are actively adopting AI and/or robotics, or soon plan to.

One of the key takeaways from our Zebra sessions was that smart AI adoption requires business leaders to combine complete clarity on what they are trying to achieve, with a willingness to innovate in an agile, step by step way. As Eleanor Matthews from Work Futures noted at our session on AI Entrepreneurship, businesses must ‘not bite off more than they can chew, but adopt an experimental mindset, collaborating with partners to identify the biggest opportunities.’

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1. Automation on our own terms – Ben Debrit and Bhumie Balaram, RSA
Ethical Innovation

Zebra claims no great prescience in including an early session on 'A New Era of Ethical Governance,' which explored the steps businesses can put in place to secure the benefits of AI and big data in an open and ethical way. It’s been clear for some time that AI requires EI (ethical innovation), but our Zebra session on ethical governance took place just one week before the Cambridge Analytica story broke in the press, which has further raised the stakes for leadership teams in getting these issues right.

Expert contributors described how new technology is driving efficiency and new models, but all of which simultaneously creates new fault lines and vulnerabilities (in supply chains; cyber security; data abuses and misuse; and higher hurdle tests around transparency and trust). For example, if a machine makes a decision that harms humans, has unintended consequences for businesses, or is simply not in line with what society deems acceptable, who is responsible?1

Zebra participants agreed that trust, transparency and ethics are therefore becoming priority leadership issues for organisations embracing new technologies. Demystifying AI for people in a transparent way will be a vital enabler for growth. In practical terms for leaders, this means focusing on the how to make the use of explainable AI in their businesses, and decision making processes accountable and transparent. As Anthony Walker, Deputy CEO, techUK, noted at the Ethical Governance session: ‘Why is transparency so important? So that we are innovating in a way that creates broad trust, and that companies are seen as trustworthy by customers and regulators. Companies need to be able to explain why things are being done…….

Perhaps the present danger is that in our rush to condemn the corruption of digital technologies, we will unfairly condemn the technologies themselves.

Rachel Bosman
‘Dawn of the techlash’

At the Zebra session on AI Entrepreneurship, contributors talked about how this will require executive boards and business leaders to define ethical frameworks that guide AI development and deployment in different functions, companies, industries and markets. As the recent Sage report on building a competitive AI economy notes: ‘These frameworks could remain high-level in scope, but apply to everything from corporate risk to employee professional development, to customer service to ethical technology deployment. Established corporate standards could extend to cover how companies present their AI capabilities and accurately convey technology functionality to external audiences’.

The UK Government sees this approach as a vital source of comparative advantage for the economy, as evidenced by the recent creation of the Government’s ‘Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation’. The driving idea behind the Centre is to support both ethics and innovation as mutually supporting objectives, with stronger ethical guidelines providing the clarity and confidence that is needed to drive the growth of responsible innovation and valuable highly trusted services.

Zebra contributors were clear that ethics and transparency should not be seen as a defensive response to brand risk or challenge, but rather the proactive lens through which businesses should be reshaping their whole approach to culture, people, technology and risk.

If companies don’t act in this way, the danger is that the much discussed ‘techlash’ (a trending prediction for 2019), will take deeper root in the minds of consumers and employees. ‘The FAANGs’ (FAANG is an acronym for the market’s five most popular and best-performing tech stocks, namely Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Alphabet’s Google) are far from toothless, but a year of scandals over privacy, data breaches and election meddling, has underlined that the most precious asset a business can build is public trust, and just how quickly it can be squandered.

Zebra will continue to explore the dynamic real-time intersection between AI, big data, customisation and public trust, sharing the best examples of smart, reflective innovation.
Platforms for Purpose

Purpose is a north star in turbulent times.

Contributors to the Zebra Project have sought to underline how a clear and inspiring purpose is the glue that binds organisations together as they seek to innovate and respond rapidly to change. At their best, purpose-led organisations with a clear identity, create a sense of belonging and shared value for their staff and customers.

Simon Sinek has captured this dynamic well. Most people know what an organisation does, but few know why they do it. In other words, most purpose-driven leaders can articulate their mission, but many mission-driven leaders cannot articulate their purpose. Employees only connected to the ‘what’ will show up for the pay cheque, but employees connected to the ‘why’ will give their blood, sweat and tears to their work.

Zebra has drilled down into the ‘why’ and how purpose led organisations can best foster a sense of creative community, inspiring the commitment and engagement levels so central to organisations with exceptional track records for creativity and innovation.

Our 21st Century Workforce session explored how business purpose is as strongly related to successful and engaging workplace cultures, as the chicken is to the egg. One begets the other. As Graham Russell, from Change Associates commented: ‘Successful organisations are conscious about their culture. Their leaders have defined their culture; what they’re about, their purpose, and what they want their leaders to be’.

Our Zebra discussions have revealed the tell-tale indicators of a culture conscious business. Ben Willmott, Head of Public Policy, CIPD describes these businesses as being adept at creating cultures that work equally well for their people and their customers, whatever their age or profile; committed to maximising the opportunities for training and development; and clearly evidencing that they train their line managers to lead people in a way that supports their engagement and wellbeing.

The implication for business leaders is that they need to reflect on the values and beliefs that underpin the purpose of their business, and consider how those values are influencing the way they lead at work, and the workplace culture they are trying to create.

The Zebra session on Business Purpose explored how deep purpose runs in high performing organisations. The key take out was that business leaders seeking to create purpose led businesses need to ask themselves if their purpose is inspiring, authentic and practical. The acid test is whether your purpose is meaningful enough to shape your decision making, in terms of guiding you what to stop and start, and your overall strategic approach to shaping your future, from AI to your labour force.

There was a strong consensus amongst Zebra participants that once purpose is truly embedded in an organisation it helps create a more resilient and adaptable business. For businesses, purpose is equivalent to core strength in a physically fit human being. Without a strong core you can’t twist, adapt and flex to meet future challenges.

1 Start with Why – Simon Sinek, 2011
2 Know The Difference Between Mission And Purpose – Patrick Cook-Deegan, and Kendall Cotton Bronk, Fast Company, February 2018
As this summary report makes clear, the business leaders at our Zebra sessions are not being distracted by the latest tech fad or fashion. Rather the speed of technological change, and the scale of innovation and growth opportunities, is causing many leaders to go back to first principles to ensure they have future proofed the fundamental elements of their business.

In doing so, Zebra participants have revealed that the ‘soft’ infrastructure of business (purpose, culture, ethics, transparency) are becoming the ‘hard’ stable foundations of businesses that will thrive and sustain themselves in the future. In this sense, Zebra has underlined how technology never completely changes the rules it just makes them all work faster1.

So, the rise of algorithmic businesses and big data accelerate the need for businesses to review and rewire the transparency of their decision making. The desire for flexibility and choice amongst employees accelerates the need for businesses to be more conscious about their cultures and practices. Growth opportunities will be lost if businesses do not innovate as quickly in their employment and engagement models as they need to with technology. The imperative to better identify and manage risks has also been a background whirl in many of our Zebra sessions, and these challenges are likely to magnify in 2019.

Numerous ‘what-if’s’ have abounded in our discussions, in particular what if ever more interconnected businesses and supply chains are regularly disrupted by political and cyber risks?

There is still more to discuss. We will continue the Zebra conversation.

Thanks to all those who have taken part so far. Tell us your thoughts on the emerging themes from the Zebra Project, and what you’d like us to explore next.

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Taylor Vinters is an international law firm supporting the businesses which drive the innovation economy, and the entrepreneurs and private wealth that underpin them.

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