

# Building a future-proof company starts with talent, not technology

Jacobs' *Kate Kenny* describes how agility and resilience rely on smarter software decisions and an inclusive company culture.

The last three years have served up a rollercoaster of change. The ups and downs of challenges and opportunities have created an impetus to deliver game-changing solutions. Emerging technologies have powered these solutions, but the true success is thanks to people and our ability to adapt, pivot and thrive.

With the increasing rate of change, a partnership is needed to navigate this new world and optimise digital enablement. Employees must be willing to adapt and upskill, and companies must provide clear leadership strategies and build cultures that support career agility, diversity and talent transformation.

Jacobs is no stranger to these kinds of changes. It has undergone a major strategic portfolio transformation and invested heavily in its culture over the last several years.

We've evolved from a traditional, mostly analogue engineering firm to a data-led technical consultancy focusing on three key accelerators: climate response, data solutions, and consulting and advisory.

While digital transformation is accelerating all industries, success is still not guaranteed – even with hefty tech investment budgets.

Research by the Boston Consulting Group shows that while digital transformation is the top priority for most organisations, only 35% achieve their objectives. The two main reasons for this failure: a lack of a strong vision or strategy; and low employee engagement. Beneath all the acronyms and technical terms, successful digital enablement is a human process.



**“There’s no one-size-fits-all solution to navigating this digital disruption, but we’ve relied on a combined approach embedded into our culture to engage and retain our talent, including evolving our recruitment policies to offer more flexibility.”** *Kate Kenny.*



**“You can buy any technology you want, but the only way it will be harnessed effectively is if the right human is behind the controls.”** *Kate Kenny.*

## Employee & customer engagement is the catalyst for success

We’re all still learning important lessons, but to thrive in our new digitally disrupted world, our biggest priority is to upskill and empower employees, and grow stronger customer relationships.

We’re not alone in this thinking: a global study of 570 companies by Ernst & Young found that the number one shared habit among the most successful digital leaders is focusing on customers first and foremost.

Having company-wide customer-centricity – not just in customer-facing roles – allows us to collaborate creatively and discover new opportunities in our markets. Aligned with this is the fundamental emphasis on trust, partly earned through track record but mostly reliant on how we deal with our customers. Crucially, trust is built between humans, not technology.

The next step is to empower employees with data-led insights and innovative digital tools. That allows them to scale up solutions and offer more value for clients, wherever they are in the world.

Within employee engagement and

retention, one critical factor is the increase in skills gaps due to the rise of emerging technologies. A global survey from McKinsey in 2021 revealed that 87% of companies say they have skill gaps now or expect them in the next few years.

## Harnessing continuous learning and agile careers

There’s no one-size-fits-all solution to navigating this digital disruption, but we’ve relied on a combined approach embedded into our culture to engage and retain our talent, including evolving our recruitment policies to offer more flexibility.

A key ingredient is continuous learning. This provides upskilling and reskilling through in-house, on-demand platforms, supported by a global mentoring system.

The second is harnessing agile careers and sideways mobility. Instead of losing key talent with institutional knowledge, we offer opportunities to work with new people, projects and systems globally through our agile careers framework.

Traditional linear career paths are no longer the default: Agile careers

offer employees greater career growth and satisfaction and the chance to learn new sought-after skills and capabilities. It unlocks higher engagement, retention, and value on an organisational level, and supports the creation of a diverse talent force.

## Diversity and soft skills are success multipliers

The last ingredients are arguably the most powerful. The business case for getting the culture fundamentals right in Diversity, Equality and Inclusivity (DEI) has only become stronger for us in the last few years.

Research and corporate rankings from the Wall Street Journal show diverse and inclusive cultures give companies a competitive edge by boosting both financial results and innovation. One of the key strategies in our award-winning approach: our eight Jacobs Employee Networks, each of which offer employees an opportunity to collaborate with others around the world who share similar interests.

While technical skills within STEAM are crucial, it’s also the ‘soft’ skills like empathy, communication and listening ability, and change management that help to make employees more agile and resilient.

At Jacobs, these skills are an integral part of our learning platform and leadership training, and we’re not the only company to see their value. Project Aristotle reveals that the best teams at Google exhibit a range of soft skills: equality, generosity, curiosity, empathy, and emotional intelligence.

## Start with people, amplify with software

Our biggest takeaway is this: you can buy any technology you want, but the only way it will be harnessed effectively is if the right human is behind the controls. Humans still lead machines in creativity and problem-solving skills – along with other soft skills – which are essential for survival in our fast-changing world. By strategically upskilling and empowering people in your organisation, you’ll future-proof their careers and your company’s success.



**Kate Kenny**

is Jacobs' people & places solutions senior vice-president, Europe.