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## Sustainability and Reporting 2025 Forum: A Futurist's View

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Last month, as part of the 'Sustainability and Reporting 2025' Project, we convened business executives and thought leaders from various fields at a trends forum in Rome to explore what the next 10 years of sustainability and reporting might look like. One of the speakers, Amy Zalman, CEO at World Future Society, provides her take on the discussions.

### What learnings can we take from a futurist perspective to help shape the future of sustainability reporting?

The futurist perspective asks us to always keep potential future conditions in mind. Sustainability reporting is intrinsically concerned with the future, of course, yet the demands of rigorous reporting on conditions now arguably keep reporters fixed firmly in the present. Finding ways to incorporate longer-term forecasting and foresight into sustainability reporting could fruitfully shape the endeavor.

The futurist perspective also values vision and imagination – our most ambitious ideas about the world and the societies in it at our best, most creative and productive, and most fulfilled. Such vision can seem too dreamy in many business contexts and yet it is crucially important to detach ourselves from the constraints of reality and dream of what could be. It is out of visions that seem implausible now that our greatest advances in science, society, business and technology have been made.

### In your experience, which industry do you find to be the most responsive and forward looking, and hence open to engaging with sustainability issues?

Right now, those industries that rely on the natural environment and on labor in areas that are unstable or profoundly unsustainable in terms of our universally shared standards of human rights, appear to be responsive and forward looking. These include food and beverage companies with global supply chains to protect, housing and building materials firms, and energy firms who see their entire world changing before their eyes – climate change, resources, means of storage and distribution, and values.

New companies – those that have grown up in an era defined by sustainability as a value, are also typically forward looking both in their internal policies and vis-a-vis their operating environment. It is in their DNA.

### **What advice would you give to companies, based on the discussions which took place during the Forum?**

I would encourage companies to incorporate an explicit focus on the future into their planning and decision-making cycles. They should make sure to focus on more than one variable or trend. Technological developments, environmental changes, demographic and societal shifts, and regulatory change for example, could all affect future conditions in which companies will be operating. Companies with a strong grasp of how these variables could intersect will have a richer understanding of what will be required to create what I might call a “wholly sustainable business ecosystem”, one in which they help shape both internal company conditions and external ones in a productively, mutually supporting way.

Right now, most firms seek simply to manage their internal processes in order to survive within external conditions that they may not feel they have the power to change. But as those conditions themselves change, companies' strategies for survival and even sustainability will no longer be viable. One way out — a productive way out — is for companies to evolve to become key progenitors of a world in which the internal systems of the firm and the external conditions that support it are treated necessarily as part of the same system. That would seem to be a natural evolution of the sustainability movement, and a necessary approach as external conditions change the terms of success for business.

The sustainability movement and futurism have compatible worldviews and much to offer each other, and I would urge both to seek each out and learn more from each other.

*Founded in 1966, the **World Future Society** is the world's longest running membership organization to support futurists, ignite dialogue about future critical issues and advocate better decision making through the application of Foresight techniques. We have published a magazine, *The Futurist*, since our founding and we hold an annual conference of 800+ attendees that is considered the epicenter of futurist activities globally. Next year's conference will be in Washington DC from July 22-24.*

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