



Image courtesy of Laurie Mahon

# Forging the workforce that will transform the world

The next generation of workers see the world differently than their parents did. Laurie Mahon, vice chair of CIBC's global investment banking business, explains what this means for the infrastructure industry.



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Futurists envision cities with driverless cars and speeding bullet trains zipping around gleaming zero-carbon buildings, all digitally connected and powered by clean, silent wind farms, and with their waste magically whisked away and reinvented into whimsical sculptures in the gorgeous green spaces they also fertilize and water. It's a world transformed from today's congestion and pollution into one of balance and harmony.

But by whom?

Two wonderful books by Greg Goldin and Sam Lubell, *Never Built New York* (2016) and *Never Built Los Angeles* (2013), describe dozens of never-built infrastructure and architectural projects that would have fundamentally changed the cities they were planned for. The books are full of fanciful drawings and exemplary visions, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's radical city plan for Ellis Island, William Zeckendorf's rooftop airport—which would have been built 200 feet above Manhattan—and a system of buses hoisted by helicopter to a downtown heliport in Los Angeles.

But what strikes me about these images is a single unifying factor: people. People who could not imagine, who would not compromise, who could not put the pieces together, who simply would not see the world as something different than it was then.

It is tempting to blame a failure of leadership, but what's more likely is a failure of both business and government leaders to understand that the people needed to implement these changes must themselves be different. Different, in challenging the status quo. Different, in thriving on change and adventure and tough challenges. Different, in knowing that doing good matters as much as doing well—maybe more.

We're contemplating a future of infrastructure built not on carbon and steel but on electrons and fiber and complex chemistry. At the same time, we stare into a future in which the skills of the old-economy infrastructure fade and the need for new

ones rises. Data analysts, coders, and modelers now take the place of draftsmen and accounting clerks. In the field, on-site 3-D printers produce bridge parts once made at foundries hundreds of miles off site. And the lasting consequence: the communities that housed those factories, and the people whose children found good work in them, empty out as their roles in the global economy diminish.

Cities that count themselves among the winners in this new economy are full, but whether employment is "full"—or, perhaps more importantly, "fulfilling"—is a much more open question. Gigging and consulting threaten to replace the 35-hour work week; new technologies and globalization can make workdays and workweeks seem longer than ever, with the 40-hour-a-week, nine-to-five life just a memory.

None of the old patterns make sense, so none of the old answers work. Children can hardly answer the question of, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" when many of the jobs they might be able to choose from don't even exist today.

Our kids—whether millennials (ages 23 to 38 in 2019) or Gen Z (ages 22 and under)—are more likely to think about what kind of a life they want to have. It looks a lot different than ours. More of them say that they want to make a difference, not just get a paycheck. They want to explore new ideas and new places. They'll bring passion, skepticism, and a desire to be part of something—but if they don't feel engaged emotionally and behaviorally, they may well move on.

The workplace must adjust to these seismic changes, and those who fail to adapt will quickly suffer the fate of the dinosaurs. But here's the rub: change won't be easy for 150-year-old banks and fifth-generation building contractors.

So how do engineering firms, investors, and public-sector agencies ensure they attract and retain this incoming talent?

*First, inspire them.* Tell stories of memorable projects, explaining how they came about and what part the team played in getting it done. Describing to law school recruits that they will be preparing bond indentures is incredibly boring and unimaginative, whereas demonstrating that they will be creating the legal framework for a new rail line linking two important cities is exciting.

*Second, challenge them.* Set the bar high, but provide the training, coaching, and mentoring to propel their success. This is the generation that has been in class since the age of two, has had more coaches than the Washington Redskins, and is used to constant feedback. Annual performance reviews and set-in-stone timelines for promotion will not cut it.

*Third, reward them—but understand it is not all about money.* Companies that offer flexible working hours, create out-of-office opportunities, and recognize nontraditional leadership roles (that are not in the chain of command but are nonetheless powerful and directive) are particularly attractive to young workers seeking a different tempo than their parents’.

*Fourth, connect them.* Accept that technology has changed the world. Forever. Understand that working remotely or at odd hours (in the middle of the night or before school) are the norm, not privileges. After all, a team that can communicate across continents seamlessly can do so from either the office or the nursery.

*Fifth, empower them.* Solicit feedback and then react to it. Ask them about what the team is missing (whether it’s people, skills, or tools), and then get those resources. For example, involve young professionals in designing recruiting efforts—such as where to recruit, at what level, and how to tailor the job description—rather than just expecting them to welcome new team members they had no say in hiring. Encourage them to collaborate in designing new technology and reviewing hardware and software choices.

Redesign internal processes to be inclusive instead of exclusive and transparent instead of opaque.

*Sixth, let them go.* Seriously. Even today, many of the best careers are hardly linear, and that pattern seems likely only to intensify. So, understand that when those perfect associates join right out of business school, they’ll probably move on to something different after four or five years. So the senior engineer hired to shape up the structural design team will leave to run a nonprofit that builds footbridges in Australia. What’s underappreciated is that the company will likely be the better for it. Employees who have had a great experience at a firm make fantastic clients and advocates, and new employees who join in their place bring fresh insight and perspectives.

*Finally, be a leader.* It sounds trite, but people who want to make a difference and accomplish great things in life want to work for someone who does too. Lead with purpose.

That should be easy for an infrastructure leader since our purpose is to build a better world.



To make that shiny city and with projects that become real instead of never-built, we need a highly engaged cadre of engineers, planners, financial experts, and political leaders who take on the quest for a cleaner, safer, more harmonious world—and make it their own. ■

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