



**SYSTEMSOFT**  
TECHNOLOGIES™

# HUMAN-CENTERED RESEARCH AND STRATEGY (HCRS)

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WHITE PAPER



# Human-Centered Research and Strategy (HCRS)

This white paper breaks down user experience, customer experience and employee experience research into human-centered research and strategy (HCRS). At the core of each of these approaches is a relationship between a human and a construct. An HCRS approach aims to understand and provide insight into the relationship between people and constructs. For this discussion, constructs may be brands, products, physical and digital systems, employers, customers, and so forth. At System Soft Technologies, we approach user, customer and employee experience research by studying the human-centered relationships and using insights to further the goals of both parties in the relationship.

Investment in your relationship through HCRS can:

- Increase Revenue
- Boost Digital Transformation Success Rates
- Improve Conversion Rates
- Enhance Satisfaction
- Raise Loyalty
- Reduce Churn
- Expand Differentiation
- Reduce Development Resources
- Grow Customer Retention
- Diminish Bounce Rates
- Enlarge Cart Sizes
- Multiply Subscriptions
- Advance Sales Propositions
- Avoid Market-Fit Failures

The return on investment (ROI) of HCRS is realized through improved key performance indicators (KPIs), such as Net Promoter Score (NPS), conversions and reduced development costs, while ensuring digital transformation is a success.

Starting with HCRS equips organizations with the strategy, needs, wants, expectations and proficiencies of their target markets, as well as information about the relationship context. This allows them to build a system or product to meet all the key segments' mental models and provide a unique (differentiated) experience with all the functionalities needed. This reduces redesigns resulting in massive development savings and market-fit failures and ensures the end-product more closely aligns to the user's mental model.

**70%** of digital initiatives fail due to a poor UX/CX

**50%** more accurate build time and cost estimates with HCRS

**80%** reduced requests from developments for clarification

**25%** reduced rework and bug fixes post-launch

*“Each \$1 spent on HCRS yields \$10 in return on average”*

*Dr. Clare-Marie Karat, IBM*



## OUR THESIS

Like common relationship therapists, it is sometimes our mission to help organizations see the world from their user, customer or employees' perspective, improve the communication in the relationship, identify compromises and create unique solutions, improving, enhancing or repairing the relationship, while aligning their business strategies and technological innovation.

In any type of relationship, there is an exchange between parties of costs and rewards. The costs of a relationship can be tangible and intangible. For instance, spending money (tangible) or investing time into learning a software service (intangible) are costs. Rewards can also be tangible or intangible. A software service may reduce costs (tangible) and improve a manager's morale (intangible).

The rewards of a relationship must justify the costs. Otherwise, the relationship will decline and can end. Understanding the exchange in a relationship is a complex research process, as costs and rewards are calculated by individuals, and the value of costs and rewards changes over time.

The value of the costs and rewards in a relationship are idiosyncratic. That is, they are unique to the individuals in the relationship. While white-glove customer service may be extremely important to one customer, it may mean little to another customer.

Similarly, while user-based content recommendations may be appreciated and seen as a value-added service to one website user, it can be viewed as a cost to another (i.e., one's privacy at the expense of curated content).

Furthermore, the value of costs and rewards changes over time. Consider switching from one software provider with mediocre customer service to a software provider that differentiates themselves in part with white-glove service. Initially, improved customer service will be a large reward to the relationship. But, over time, this aspect of the relationship can become normalized. When we normalize aspects of relationships, they no longer become rewards. Instead, they are merely expectations.

Finally, the context of the relationship also impacts the calculation of costs and rewards. If there are no other alternatives to the current relationship (i.e., a market with few to no competitors), an unrewarding exchange can be tolerated. However, if adequate alternatives exist to the relationship, your business will occasionally be compared to the alternative(s). Even if a suitable alternative exists, it does not mean a relationship will be terminated, as there are exit costs associated with termination (e.g., early cancellation clauses, sunk cost of resources, etc.).



Yet, an unrewarding relationship maintained due to sunk costs will become toxic for those in the relationship, leading to resentment, frustration and anger. It is crucial to identify when an unrewarding exchange is occurring and prevent relationship termination or permanent negative perceptions.

The root of an organization's success comes from building and sustaining healthy relationships between the company and its employees and the company and its customers. This is never more important than in the company-employee and company-customer relationship. Healthy relationships are possible when both employees and customers feel valued, empowered and understood.

In the past, the focus of the company-employee relationship has been on nurturing employee engagement, which emphasizes one-way interactions from the company to the employee and measuring engagement from annual employee satisfaction surveys. However, this does not provide insight into how work gets done or how it relates to business performance.

*Employee experience* is the new evolution of employee engagement. It exemplifies a move toward human-centered interactions. Employee experience is more than expensive rewards or weekly happy hours. It embraces the human experience: thoughts, feelings, emotions and overall qualitative experiences one has while working at an organization, including the quality of their relationships and the level of support they feel from employers. Emphasizing the employee experience shifts the focus to a relationship that empowers employees to create experiences they desire.

Similarly, for the company-customer relationship, there has been a shift away from simple satisfaction surveys to more comprehensive and informative means of measuring customers' experience. As with employees' experience, this shift focuses on the human-centered interactions of the customer and identifying their thoughts, feelings and emotions when interacting with your product or service or a competitor's product or service. The goal of this shift to human-centered interactions is to improve the quality of the company-customer relationship, which results in superior customer experiences to increase customer retention, loyalty, conversion and so on.

With the current economic setting and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on work environments, it is most important to consider the employee's experience, as it directly impacts an organization's success. The return to the office presents an opportunity for organizations to re-imagine the employee experience in ways that respect individual differences and can adapt to the quickly changing conditions.



The pandemic has tested the limits of the company-employee relationship and the company-customer relationship. Employers were called on to support workers' health and livelihoods to an unprecedented degree. And while their ability to support workers was under unprecedented scrutiny, often the pressure yielded great benefits. Despite the challenges, workers showed remarkable resilience and adaptability, and with their employer's support, they achieved innovative results, which may have taken years to develop.

We find ourselves at a moment of reflection. On the one hand, workers are reconsidering everything from who they want to work for to the role they expect employers to play in supporting their purpose and values. On the other hand, organizations are contemplating their role in society and their relationship with their workers.

The pandemic also caused customers to re-evaluate how they are interacting with products and services, what products and services they want to spend money on, and even the values of the businesses they frequent. Organizations quickly worked to meet these changing needs, sustaining a positive customer experience.

Understanding how the company-employee relationship will evolve begins with identifying factors that will most influence the relationship moving forward. For instance, Deloitte gathered focus groups of executives to gain perspective on what those factors can be, including economic growth, unexpected disasters, climate change, social divides or the use of business technology.

Deloitte found two factors stood out from the rest: talent supply and government impact. While talent supply has always been a concern for employers, the pandemic exacerbated the growing digital and education divide around the world, which put further strain on talent supply. Depending on how easy or difficult it is to get a job or secure a skilled worker, the availability of talent supply can impact the actions organizations and employees can take.

Government impact was found to be the most influential external factor behind an organization's ability to thrive. The type, consistency and effectiveness of government action can impact the company-employee relationship. For example, government effectiveness in driving social change, including policies to address concerns, such as worker representation, protecting jobs and wages, enhancing benefits, and improving access to education, can all shift employees' expectations of their employer's attention to these issues.

Of course, many factors will influence this relationship over time, with the caveat that influencing factors can vary by industry, geography, company size and so on.

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*40% of the global workforce has considered leaving employers this year*  
**Deloitte**

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One way these factors can play out is in the changing trends of employee benefits. As the world reopens, the workplace of 2021 will be different from that of late 2019, and employees' priorities may also change. Employee benefit offerings that were important a year and a half ago may no longer be at the top of employees' wish lists.

**A few trends are emerging:**

**1. Increased focus on employee financial health.** The financial blow of the pandemic hit hard for many. This increased focus can take the form of more financial wellness benefits (e.g., financial planning and advising, budgeting and savings tools), emergency funds savings programs and student loan repayment assistance.

**2. Demand for more benefits options.** Many got a taste of what flexibility in the workplace feels like when working remotely. These benefits can take the form of flexible scheduling (in location and hours), better mental well-being and mental health in the form of insurance coverage for mental health care, and caretaking benefits in the form of reimbursements for daycare, elder care and more.

**3. Online and remote access to employee benefits.** This can be in the form of online benefits fairs, virtual open enrollment and apps to manage employee benefits. With this new normal, adapting employee benefits to meet the values and priorities of employees is one step toward creating a positive and healthy employee experience. Awareness of priorities, such as benefits, comes from understanding what is important to current and future employees.

Meeting the needs of employees has downstream effects on the customer's experience. During times of crisis, such as the pandemic of the last year and a half, a customer's interaction with an organization can trigger lingering effects on his or her sense of trust and loyalty with the organization.

As many were furloughed and retreated to isolation, the customer experience was determined by how the businesses they frequent and depend on deliver experiences and services to meet their needs with empathy, care and concern. **McKinsey & Company** suggests four (4) actions for organizations to take, addressing immediate customer needs and helping prepare for the future:

1. Focus on care and concern by making a priority of employees and community
2. Meet your customers where they are by innovating digital models to help customers weather the crisis safely from home and expand home delivery options



3. Reimage the post-COVID world by migrating digital channels to boost satisfaction and save money

4. Build agile, adaptable capabilities by finding alternatives to surveys, such as social media, to gain quick customer readings and insights.

These four (4) actions boil down to the critical need for organizations to regularly reassess how their services meet the current and changing needs of their customers. In this new world we find ourselves in, customers have an endless sea of options to send their business, and companies must optimize their efforts by understanding how to meet customer needs and provide excellent customer experiences.

To cultivate high performance, engagement and a successful business, leaders must shift from a “how do I get the most out of my people?” mindset to a “how do I help my people become the best versions of themselves?” This shift in mindset has downstream benefits about how customers perceive company values, whether they feel valued by the company and what rewards the company can provide them.

Repeatedly, research finds top-down pressure on employees to perform is counterproductive. It breeds stress, toxicity and fear of failure among employees and does little to encourage a positive employee experience.

According to one report, close to half of the employees surveyed (49%) said their stress levels were either above average or higher (**Willis Tower Watson**). If left unmanaged, that stress can affect employee health and work performance, such that 60% of stressed employees claim to be less productive and more disengaged while at work. Disengagement leads to deficient performance and dissatisfaction from both employees and leaders, and it trickles down to the customer experience.

More importantly, a positive employee experience can directly increase an employee’s net value to an organization. Low turnover and longer tenures not only have positive financial impacts on an organization, but these factors also create environments people want to join as new employees.

**McKinsey (2020)** recently surveyed more than 800 U.S.-based employees and found the top employee needs include a stable, secure work experience, trusting relationship, social cohesion and inclusion, and individual purpose and contribution. Jointly, these elements accounted for ~60% of differences in work effectiveness, engagement and well-being. By considering a human-centric approach to address these factors, organizations can meaningfully improve the employee experience.



McKinsey's top-ranked employee needs, impacting the employee experience (ranked #1 - #11):

1. Job security
2. Financial stability
3. Balance of work and private life
4. Fair treatment
5. Work with people I can trust
6. Physical and mental health
7. Achieve work goals
8. Receive rewards
9. Supportive co-workers
10. Recognition of my work
11. Fulfilment of my personal purpose at work

Importantly, data suggests a nuanced picture of employee experience. Employee needs are distinctive, such that what amounts to the costs and rewards of the company-employee relationship depends on the employee, the company and the context of the relationship.

Without taking a human-centric approach, an organization does not know how to create a positive work experience or where to begin addressing the needs of their employees. Furthermore, it will be unable to deliver a quality customer experience. While identifying which employees need more and varied types of support, organizations can also tailor steps to create widely shared feelings of well-being and cohesion across their workforce. But gaining this personalized understanding is time-consuming, energy-consuming and, most critically, expensive.

The goal of HCRS is to understand the context and identify cohorts, groups of people, employees and customers, who will calculate costs and rewards similarly and then sample representatives of these groups for various research projects effectively and efficiently.

In the workplace, this means segmenting employees to better understand their specific needs and identify when certain actions can address needs across the workforce. In the marketplace, this means segmenting customers to better understand their unique needs and identify when certain actions can address needs holistically across the target audience.

*While organizations may be unable to immediately act on factors, such as compensation, survey results suggest they can achieve a 55% improvement in engagement by addressing employees' need for work recognition through non-financial means.*





Our research team employs rigorous research methodologies to uncover the users' needs and desires, while establishing a product-market fit. Our strategists work with our research team to weigh the business digital strategy against the needs and desires of users to develop an optimal solution. The research and strategy teams seek to solve the invisible problems the organization and users cannot see. Innovation and market disruption occurs when the right people thoroughly analyze the data.

One way to place the employee or customer experience at the heart of an organization's mission is to adopt a design thinking approach. In the workplace, design thinking moves HR's focus beyond building programs and processes to a new goal. Instead, designing a productive and meaningful employee experience through solutions, which are compelling, enjoyable and ideally simple. In the marketplace, design thinking moves the focus beyond building innovations for innovation-sake. Instead, really understanding which innovations bring value to the customer. Design thinking provides a means to focus on personal experiences and creates processes centered on the worker or customer.

The result is innovative solutions and tools, which directly contribute to employee satisfaction, productivity and enjoyment. This offers excellent value to customers and supports own business goals and objectives.

While the advantages of optimizing the user's or customer's experience have obvious implications for an organization, such as improving brand loyalty, customer retention, customer conversation, etc., which all lead to increased revenue, there are also important business implications when considering the employee's experience. By taking the time to understand the employee's experience, both their motivations and pain points, organizations can create work environments well-suited to meeting the needs of the employee—both their needs inside and outside the workplace. Creating a positive work environment can decrease turnover, attract talent, increase employee engagement, increase productivity and better meet the needs of the customer.

According to the **National Bureau of Affairs**, \$11 billion is lost annually due to employee turnover. While 89% of employers think employees leave for more money, in truth, only 12% leave for financial reasons (**Forbes**). Rather, employee engagement is related to turnover. Highly engaged employees are 87% less likely to leave their companies than their less engaged counterparts (**Gartner**). The costs of hiring, onboarding and training are significant. While the monetary losses are clear, high turnover and repetitive disruption also impact the work culture.

*Design Thinking is an iterative process in which we seek to understand the user, both the employee and customer, challenge assumptions and redefine problems to identify alternative strategies and solutions that may not be instantly apparent with an initial level of understanding. At the same time, Design Thinking provides a solution-based approach to solving problems. It is a way of thinking and working, as well as a collection of hands-on methods.*

**Interaction Design Foundation**



Attracting and retaining the best talent is a priority for organizations. The global skills shortage means employees can be fussy. The largest investors in employee experience are five times more likely to appear in Glassdoor's Best Places to Work ([Harvard Business Review](#)) and over four times more often included in LinkedIn's list of North America's Most In-Demand Employers ([Harvard Business Review](#)). Organizations competing for the best talent and providing excellent employee experiences seem to be key factors in winning skilled talent.

An abundance of research suggests low engagement results in low productivity. Teams with high employee engagement rates are 21% more productive ([Gallup](#)). The negative impact of disengaged and unhappy employees has a far reach. Unhappy employees undermine the excellent work of those that are happy. [Harvard Business Review](#) found the largest investors in employee experience are more often listed among Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies. Supporting engagement means providing a work environment that allows them to operate at their best by supplying the right tech, fostering a positive culture and providing an environment that suits working styles.

Beyond the benefits of providing a quality employee experience on turnover, talent acquisitions, engagement and productivity, there are also downstream benefits to the customer's experience. Employee experience and customer satisfaction are positively correlated. When employees are more innovative and proactive, they produce better products and service ([MIT Sloan Center](#)). Furthermore, organizations investing in employee experience report having higher customer satisfaction ([Harvard Business Review](#)). When employees are engaged and happy, customers notice.

Good employee experience leads to bigger profits. Organizations investing in employee experience outperform the ones that do not by two times in average revenue ([Harvard Business Review](#)). When you add up all these factors, it is easy to understand why investing in employee experience will have strong, long-lasting returns.

None of these benefits, however, are possible without taking time to understand how to build a positive employee experience. That is where design thinking comes in. Design thinking is critical to understanding how to build this experience and thankfully it works.

[Deloitte](#) found that at organizations where HR delivers the highest value, they are five times more likely to be using design thinking in their programs, as compared to their peers. Organizations are beginning to realize the value of design thinking. Just a few years ago, 79% of executives in [Global Human Capital Trends 2016 survey](#) rated design thinking as an important or very important issue.



In 2017, **Deloitte** found 80% of executives rated employee experience very important (42%) or important (38%), but only 22% reported their organizations were excellent at building a differentiated employee experience. As discussed, providing quality employee experience is now most important in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic and employee's changing priorities.

To illustrate the value design thinking can bring to an organization, consider the following. Australia's leading telecommunications and information services company, Telstra, used design thinking to develop a new, 90-day onboarding experience for all employees. Each year, Telstra hires thousands of employees who must learn an overwhelming number of systems, products, pricing plans and more. Therefore, turnover and engagement are always pressing issues. Telstra's research found that employees who succeeded during their first 90 days were more productive over the course of their employment. Using insights from its research, Telstra designed a new onboarding approach, which provided the time and space for key learning to happen quickly, guidance and acknowledgement, and made the experience personal. Productivity rose, employees became more committed and engaged, and new hires became more quickly integrated into the organization.

To serve as your trusted relationship therapist, our **Human-Centered Strategist** uses various methods to understand or develop your business goals, go-to-market strategy, digital strategy, omni-channel experience, primary sales propositions, key differentiators, etc. Then, our **Human-Centered Researchers** use the appropriate methodology to understand your users/customers/employees and the jobs (i.e., their goals and needs) they are looking to an organization, helping them accomplish their journeys, the costs and rewards of their relationship with you, the competitive landscape (i.e., the alternatives to the relationship), and their desires for novel functionality (i.e., innovation).

Our HCRS team serves as a neutral third party, understanding both perspectives and providing valuable insights into the relationship.

Specifically, this methodology is broken down into four primary phases:

1. Discover
2. Design
3. Develop
4. Deliver



The **Discover Phase** has 3 distinct parts:

**1. Stakeholder Interviews.** We meet with your internal stakeholders to understand your business goals and strategies (e.g., how you go to market, your various marketing strategies, your conversion and sales funnels). We work with you to define what success means for your project, and we determine a product-market fit.

**2. Heuristic Evaluation.** Our UX research experts evaluate your existing digital system, or the digital system of a close competitor, to identify potential areas for improvement, additional functionalities and innovation. In some case, these reviews will be competitive analysis, whereby the best practices in your industry, as defined by your top competitors, will be used to evaluate your own digital system.

**3. Usability Testing.** We put your actual users, or would-be users, in front of your digital system. If you currently do not have a digital system, we test a competitor's system. Our experts methodically walk users through the system, meticulously unpacking the user experience. We cover everything from informational architecture, nomenclature on the site, user expectations, the user journey to the psychological (attitudinal and affective) lived experience of your target market.

Moving to the **Design Phase**, System Soft Technologies brings a world-class creative team that knows how to use the aesthetic elements of a site, including the branding, to tell a story and make an impact on the user journey.

Our team understands your brand equity regarding your ability to effectively make an emotional impact on the user and wow them with the aesthetics of the system. The UX designers, content writers and graphic designers are research literate. To create the perfect look and feel for your system, our team consumes and works with our UX research team.

Here are the four steps in the Design Phase:

**1. Branding.** If a client does not have an established brand, we work to create concepts, including mood boards, color stories and logo design, to help a brand find its voice. If the client already has a brand, then the design team still works to create concepting around the already established brand colors and looks for opportunities to enhance the brand.

**2. Content Writing.** We work with the client to establish a brand voice through the UX process. We believe content drives design. So, if a client does not already have content, we use our content writers to help craft the content that works for the brand voice.



**3. Lo-Fi Wireframes.** After brand voice has been established and content has been clarified, we move into creating low-fidelity wireframes. This can be thought of as a grid system in which we layout the placement of boxes, helping us understand where the content within the application will be placed.

**4. Hi-Fi Wireframes.** After building out the low fidelity mockups, with an understanding of where the content will be placed, we move into high fidelity mockups. This will now include mocking up the application with different brand colors, design elements, selected imagery and additional components to create the look and feel. After the high-fidelity mockups are complete, we move to the Developer Phase.

Next is the Development Phase, which includes three important steps:

**1. Front-End Development.** The team meets with the UX designers to outline the project requirements. Then, they prepare the development environment, code repositories and any CI/CD tools. The team will work with the Project Manager to set up a tool for managing the process (e.g., GitHub Projects). Our front-end team works with leading technologies, such as React and Vue, to implement the UX designs.

**2. Back-End Development.** Our team uses various codebases and Content Management System platforms to create and build a project based on your needs. Code repositories are prepared, and new Jira projects are created to manage the development and fix bugs. If applicable, the existing application will be reviewed to identify any module that may be reused in the new build. If modules are reusable, they are imported.

**3. User Acceptance Testing (UAT)/Client Demo.** When the project is finished, we demonstrate the system with the client, incorporate feedback with a comprehensive UAT process and then iterate until the system delights you and your users.

Beyond these offerings, System Soft is pioneering new HCRS methods to ensure our clients can rapidly adapt in a changing market. Our team has determined research and strategy are a bottleneck in the development process. Yet, speeding up these processes damages the quality of the data and findings, resulting in poor outcomes (e.g., increased development revisions).

To combat this, a periodic analysis is designed to capture prevailing and changing long-term and short-term sentiments toward an existing organization or brand, providing valuable insights into users' experience—both the employee's and customer's experience.



Card Sorting



Competitive Benchmarking



Contextual Inquiry



Design Thinking



Eye Tracking



Omni-Channel Research



Personas



Stakeholder Interviews



Our approach uses analytics, user behavior invoked site intercept surveys, web scraping, network analysis and psychographic surveys. With this approach, we can identify changes in market sentiment and experience and encourage our clients to quickly engage the research and strategy teams. Because experiences and sentiments are always changing, both in the workplace and marketplace, periodic analysis allows organizations to keep improving in a way that is meaningful to the user.

This approach allows you to gain a wide range of insights, including what is working and what is not working, identify the strengths and weaknesses of your product or service, help assess your position in your industry, avoid costly mistakes, gain a better understanding of what your target audience wants, and enhance your brand image. This method is a prime example of using a design thinking approach to understand the human-centered interactions of employees and customers.

Our team of human-centered strategists, researchers and designers have demonstrated proficiency in taking a design thinking approach to solve problems for clients. Often, clients come with abstract or intangible problems. It is System Soft's job to design and apply an approach that hones in on what the core questions are, needing to be asked, to understand the client's user and how we can deliver an experience to meet user's needs.

Recently, our team was given the task of designing the digital experience for an innovative, future-forward, multi-use community. To understand what the needs are of the people who will live, work and recreate in this community, we applied a design thinking approach, which allowed us to get inside the minds of the users to identify their key pain points and motivations and then turn those into opportunities for innovating existing digital and physical experiences, and into solutions to meet their needs.

System Soft Technologies applies a human-centric approach to solve our client's challenges, whether it is a challenge with the relationship of the user, customer or employee. Design thinking is one method key to understanding the needs of employees and end users and creating a space for innovative solutions to address those needs.

System Soft is also focused on a human-centric approach to help our clients solve their technology challenges. Every client has its set of unique challenges and customers. We focus on solving those unique human-centric opportunities, using our custom design process.



Ethnography



Focus Groups



Heuristic Evaluation



Ideation



Journey Mapping



Standard Usability



Usability Testing



By focusing on the client's customers first, we ensure the time and money spent on technology and solutions are valuable to our clients. We help our clients build a strategy based on their customers' needs, opportunities in the market, and technology and business goals. Our clients realize successful products through our approach through us building a competitive advantage with products' user experience, using our design, research and technology expertise.

Are you ready to learn more? Please contact **Imran Riaz** for a complimentary UX audit.



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# ABOUT SYSTEM SOFT

**OUR SUCCESS STARTS WITH YOU**

At System Soft Technologies (SSTech), we are a family unit powered by diversity, inclusion, transparency, respect, integrity and passion for our clients and our people. Our business growth depends on your professional development, as we collaborate, share ideas and innovation, and invest in our future. By forging a meaningful partnership with our people, we come together with the same purpose, exceeding our goals. This keeps us nimble, ahead of the competition, and on top of our industry. Our continued success begins with you.

**ACCELERATING INNOVATION.  
EMPOWERING PEOPLE.**

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