



Aston Business Review

RESEARCH > THEORY > IMPACT

 ASTON
BREAKTHROUGHS

Welcome to the third edition of the Aston Business Review



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This issue is published at an important and exciting moment for Aston Business School. As we continue to advance our Research & Enterprise Strategy 2025–2030, our direction is clear: to build a thriving research culture, produce world-leading research, turn knowledge into impact, and grow our research and enterprise success.

The theme running through this edition is research that means business. Across the School, our colleagues are producing rigorous, relevant and internationally connected research that addresses the challenges facing organisations, policymakers and communities. The papers featured in this issue show the breadth and depth of that work, covering family business succession and ownership, servitization and advanced services, foreign direct investment and entrepreneurship, platform governance in informal markets, tax havens and corporate reputation, coopetition among SMEs, supply chain analytics and resilience, charity fraud, and innovation through collaboration and proximity.

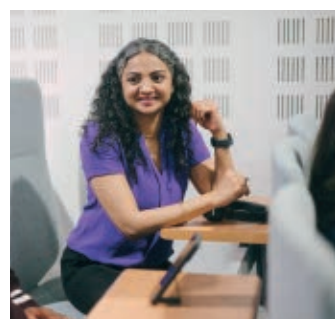
This issue also reflects our growing commitment to responsible, inclusive and impactful research. Aston Business School's recognition as a United Nations PRME Champion for 2026–2027 is a significant achievement and places us within a global community of institutions helping to shape the future of responsible management education. It reinforces our commitment to embedding responsibility, sustainability and ethics across our teaching, research, enterprise activity and partnerships.

We are also proud to showcase examples of research and enterprise in action. The industry-facing projects featured in this edition demonstrate how Aston University's expertise is helping organisations respond to real-world challenges: supporting Protaform to unlock productivity through digital transformation, helping Stagecoach prepare for the Depot of the Future and fleet electrification, using CyberDIVA to address hidden online harms against women and girls, and turning SME energy data into practical net zero action through a major decarbonisation programme.

These stories highlight the distinctive role of Aston Business School: connecting excellent research with meaningful external engagement. Our work is helping businesses become more productive, resilient and sustainable; supporting public and third-sector organisations; informing policy and practice; and creating opportunities for staff, students, partners and communities.

I would like to thank all colleagues whose work is featured in this edition, as well as the wider Executive Team, research centres, professional services colleagues, doctoral researchers and external partners who continue to strengthen our research and enterprise environment.

We hope you enjoy this third edition of Aston Business Review and find inspiration in the ideas, evidence and impact showcased across these pages.



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Research that means business

How Aston Business School is building world-leading knowledge, stronger partnerships and real-world impact.

At Aston Business School, research and enterprise are not separate ambitions. They are part of the same purpose: creating knowledge that helps organisations, policymakers and communities make better decisions.

Our Research & Enterprise Strategy 2025–2030 sets out how we will strengthen our research culture, increase the quality and reach of our scholarly work, deepen our engagement with external partners, and grow the impact of our research across regional, national and global settings.

This is a strategy built around four connected priorities.

1 Build a thriving research culture

We are creating a collaborative, inclusive and ambitious research environment where colleagues and doctoral researchers can develop bold ideas, build meaningful partnerships and contribute to a shared research community.

What this means:

- > Supporting Early Career Academics through mentoring, development and opportunity.
- > Strengthening Research Centres as platforms for collaboration, visibility and impact.
- > Creating a research environment where staff and postgraduate researchers feel included, supported and able to thrive.

2 Produce world-leading research

We are committed to research excellence: rigorous, relevant and internationally recognised scholarship that advances theory and informs practice.

What this means:

- > Supporting high-quality publications in leading and high-impact journals.
- > Encouraging international co-authorship and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- > Building writing, methodological and review capability through workshops, mentoring and editor engagement.

3 Turn knowledge into impact

Our research is motivated by the real opportunities and challenges facing enterprises, policymakers and communities.

What this means:

- > Working with businesses, government, civil society and communities to address major challenges.
- > Strengthening impact across themes such as productivity, innovation, sustainability, inclusion, digital transformation and regional growth.
- > Developing stronger pathways from research insight to policy, practice and public benefit.

4 Grow research and enterprise success

We will increase our success in securing prestigious research and enterprise awards, enabling us to scale our ideas and deepen our partnerships.

What this means:

- > Growing external research and innovation income.
- > Supporting ambitious bids aligned with national and global priorities.
- > Building on Aston's strength in Knowledge Transfer Partnerships and industry collaboration.

By 2030, we aim to:

- > Reach £4.58m in Research & Enterprise income.
- > Publish 200+ outputs in

internationally leading and high-impact journals.

- > Have 75% of research outputs internationally co-authored.
- > Secure six new Knowledge Transfer Partnerships annually.
- > Support over 40% of Early Career Researchers to be involved in externally funded projects.
- > Achieve 90% satisfaction in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey.
- > Be recognised as a top 10 UK business school for research and innovation income.

Our direction is clear: research that is excellent, collaborative, externally connected and useful beyond academia.

Through our Research Centres, doctoral community, industry partnerships and international collaborations, Aston Business School is building a research and enterprise environment that helps ideas travel further — from journal pages to boardrooms, policy conversations, communities and real-world change.

Responsible Management. Global Impact.

Aston Business School has been recognised as a United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education Champion for 2026–2027. This places the School within a global group of institutions leading the future of responsible management education.

★★★ Recognition at a glance

One of 50 institutions globally selected for the 2026–2027 PRME Champions cohort among over 800 signatories.

The highest level of engagement within the PRME community.

One of ten UK institutions recognised in this cycle.



What PRME means

PRME is a United Nations-supported initiative that encourages universities to embed responsibility, sustainability and ethics into education, research and stakeholder engagement.

For Aston Business School, this means asking a simple but powerful question: How can business education and research help create better organisations, stronger communities and a more sustainable world to facilitate change?

Our PRME focus

1. Responsible education
 - > Preparing future leaders to act with purpose, responsibility and ethical awareness.
 - > Connecting learning to sustainability, social impact and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
2. Equipping graduates with the knowledge, skills and values to create lasting impact in business and society. Research with purpose
 - > Advancing research that addresses major social, economic and environmental challenges.
 - > Strengthening work on responsible leadership, sustainability, inclusion, innovation and decent work.
 - > Sharing accessible insights that support better decisions by organisations and policymakers.
3. Partnerships for impact
 - > Working with businesses, communities and international partners to turn ideas into action.
 - > Sharing practice through the PRME and UN Global Compact communities.
 - > Building collaborations that support responsible management across sectors and borders.
4. Students and community
 - > Creating new opportunities for students to engage with responsible leadership and sustainability.
 - > Connecting students with PRME-related projects, competitions and international networks.
 - > Embedding responsibility into the wider student and School experience.

Where are we going next...

As a PRME Champion, Aston Business School will continue to:

- > Advance responsible management and the UN Sustainable Development Goals across teaching, research and enterprise activity.
- > Share and scale transformational practice with the global PRME community to shape the future of responsible management education.

Strengthen collaboration with local, national and international partners.

Empower students and staff to contribute to a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient future.

Why it matters

Responsible management is no longer an optional agenda for business schools. It is central to how we educate future leaders, advance impactful research, and help organisations respond to complex social, economic and environmental challenges.

Aston Business School's PRME Champion status recognises our progress and reinforces our commitment to embedding responsibility and sustainability across education, research and partnerships to create meaningful impact for business, society and the planet.



Publications



New thinking

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 **ASTON
BREAKTHROUGHS**

Family lives in motion: why ownership transfer is never just succession.

Published in Family Business Review

[Click here for full paper](#)

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Dr Susan Lanz

Susan is an Impact Fellow at the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship, Aston University. Her research focuses on family business, ownership transfer, life course processes and the ways in which family relationships shape business decisions over time.

Susan's work examines how business-owning families navigate complex transitions, including succession, ownership change, intergenerational involvement and changing family circumstances. Her research brings a strong process perspective to family business studies, showing how decisions about ownership are shaped not only by formal governance or legal structures, but also by family histories, relationships, emotions and future expectations.



Issue and importance

Passing a family business from one generation to the next is often treated as a single succession event: one generation steps back, another steps forward, and ownership follows management. In practice, this is rarely so simple. Ownership in family firms is not only a legal or financial matter; it is deeply connected to identity, belonging, fairness, trust and the future of the family itself.

This paper addresses an important gap in family business research. While management succession has received considerable attention, ownership transfer has often been treated as a secondary issue or technical legal process. Yet decisions about who owns shares, when they receive them, and what rights they carry can reshape family relationships, influence decision-making, affect business continuity and determine whether a family firm survives into future generations.

The study asks how changing family lives and events shape intrafamily ownership transfers. It challenges the traditional view that ownership transfer follows a neat, linear path from founder to siblings to cousins. Instead, it shows that ownership decisions unfold through messy, unpredictable and emotionally charged family life courses.



Main findings

Drawing on narrative interviews with 27 members of 12 business-owning families, the study identifies three types of intrafamily ownership transfer.

The first is symbolic ownership transfer. These transfers are usually small, often involving minority shares, and are used to bring family members into the ownership circle. They may not give immediate control or financial power, but they create a sense of connection, belonging and future possibility. Symbolic transfers are often linked to long-term hopes that the next generation will one day become more involved in the business.

The second is protectionist ownership transfer. These transfers are designed to protect family ownership from perceived future risks, such as divorce, conflict, in-laws, external claims or the loss of control outside a preferred family line. They can help safeguard the family legacy, but they can also create tension by signalling distrust or excluding some family members from ownership.

The third is rebalancing ownership transfer. These transfers seek to correct perceived unfairness in the ownership structure. They often arise when family members feel that past contributions, responsibilities or sacrifices have not been properly recognised. Rebalancing can restore fairness and strengthen commitment, but it can also surface unresolved family tensions, especially when different generations disagree about what is fair.

Overall, the paper shows that ownership transfer is often separate from management succession. In many cases, ownership changes happen before, after or entirely outside leadership transition. They are shaped by family events such as marriage, divorce, illness, retirement, children entering adulthood, changing financial needs, sibling relationships and memories of past decisions.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the paper offers an important message for family business owners, advisers and boards: succession planning should not focus only on who will lead the business. It also needs to address who will own the business, how ownership rights will be distributed, and how those decisions will be understood by different family members.

Family firms should treat ownership transfer as an ongoing conversation rather than a one-off transaction. Symbolic transfers can help build next-generation commitment, but they should be explained clearly. Protectionist transfers can reduce risk, but they should be handled carefully to avoid damaging trust. Rebalancing transfers can support fairness, but they require open dialogue about contribution, entitlement and future responsibility.

For advisers, the findings highlight the need to look beyond legal and tax structures. Effective ownership planning requires attention to family history, relationships, expectations and possible future life events. Technical solutions may fail if they do not account for how family members interpret them emotionally and relationally.

Theoretically, the study advances family business research by developing a life course process theory of ownership transfer. It shows that ownership transfer is not a simple linear journey, but a dynamic process shaped by linked lives, family turning points and different temporal horizons. Symbolic transfers look towards distant futures, protectionist transfers respond to anticipated risks, and rebalancing transfers look back to correct historical imbalances.

By separating ownership transfer from management succession, the paper offers a richer understanding of how family businesses evolve over time. It shows that the future of a family firm is shaped not only by who leads, but by how ownership, belonging, fairness and control are negotiated across generations.

Measuring servitization: a practical way to understand how far firms have really moved beyond products.

Published in Production Planning and Control



[Click here for full paper](#)

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THE ADVANCED SERVICES GROUP

The Advanced Services Group

This paper is authored by Tim Baines, Raveen R. Menon, Ali Bigdeli, Andreas Schroeder, Anwar Adem, Dipti Rathi, Mario Rapaccini and Chris Raddats.

At Aston Business School, the paper reflects the work of the Advanced Services Group, a leading centre of excellence in servitization and advanced services. The Group works with manufacturers and technology-led firms to help them move from product-led business models towards service-led and outcome-based models. Its research, training and industry partnerships support organisations to design, implement and scale advanced services that improve customer value, productivity, resilience and sustainability.






Issue and importance

Servitization is now a major route through which manufacturers compete, grow and become more sustainable. Instead of relying only on selling products, firms increasingly offer services, solutions and outcomes, such as uptime, performance, availability or capability. This can create stronger customer relationships, more stable revenues and better use of resources.

Yet one important problem remains: how do we know how servitized a firm really is?

Researchers and managers often use different measures. Some look at how much revenue comes from services. Others count the number of services offered. Others examine how firms describe themselves in annual reports or public documents. Each approach captures something useful, but each is also incomplete. A firm may earn service revenue from basic spare parts, while another may earn similar service revenue from advanced outcome-based contracts. Treating these as the same can be misleading.

This paper addresses a long-standing challenge in servitization research and practice: the lack of a reliable, practical and widely usable way to measure servitization. Without a common approach, it is difficult for researchers to compare findings across studies, for managers to benchmark progress, or for policymakers to understand how service-led business models are developing across sectors and regions.



Main findings

The paper develops and validates a new measurement approach for assessing servitization in industrial firms. It is based on a review of previous studies, pre-pilot and pilot work with senior industrial executives, and a nationwide survey of 701 firms.

The study shows that existing measures of servitization fall into three broad categories. The first focuses on product-service revenue distribution: how much revenue comes from products and how much from services. The second focuses on service offerings: what types of services the firm provides. The third focuses on business descriptions: how the firm presents itself publicly in relation to products and services.

The authors argue that no single measure is sufficient. Revenue alone does not show whether services are basic or advanced. A list of services does not show how important those services are to the business model. Public descriptions may reveal strategic intent, but not necessarily what the firm actually delivers. The paper therefore proposes a sequential three-test approach.

Test 1 separates revenue from products and services. This gives a basic indication of whether a firm has moved beyond product sales.

Test 2 separates services that support products from services that support customers. This shows whether services are mainly there to maintain product sales or whether they are starting to support broader customer needs.

Test 3 separates revenue from different types of service-based value propositions, including base, intermediate and advanced services. This provides a richer picture of the firm's service footprint and the sophistication of its business model.

The paper then introduces the concept of servitization intensity.

This is a weighted measure that captures both scale (revenue share) and service offering advancement (service maturity). The higher the weight, the more advanced the services offered by the firm. Higher intensity typically means stronger customer relationships, stable recurring revenue, and greater differentiation, but also higher responsibility as firms absorb more customer risk.

The study finds that this approach is robust and practical. Different weighting methods produce similar results, suggesting that the measurement system is stable. The findings also show variation in how firms adopt servitization, confirming the need for a more nuanced measure than a simple "servitized" or "not servitized" classification.

The authors also propose a fourth test for future development: measuring the degree of responsibility that providers take for customer outcomes. This would help capture the deeper shift from selling products and services to taking responsibility for customer performance.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the paper gives managers a clearer way to assess where their organisation sits on the servitization journey. Rather than asking only "how much service revenue do we have?", firms can ask more useful questions: What types of services are we offering? Are they supporting products or customer outcomes? How much revenue comes from basic, intermediate and advanced services? Are we moving towards higher-value, outcome-based models?

This makes the approach useful as both a benchmarking tool and a development tool. Executives can compare business units, track

progress over time, identify gaps in the service portfolio and make more informed decisions about where to invest next. For example, a firm may increase its servitization intensity by shifting a greater share of revenue towards services, but also by moving higher up the service staircase towards predictive maintenance, performance advisory, availability contracts or outcome-based offers.

For policymakers and industry bodies, the approach offers a way to compare servitization across sectors, regions and countries. This matters because service-led business models can support productivity, sustainability and industrial competitiveness. A common measurement approach can help identify where firms are progressing, where support is needed, and how advanced services contribute to economic and environmental outcomes.

Theoretically, the paper makes an important contribution by reducing ambiguity in how servitization is defined and measured. It moves the field beyond single-proxy measures and provides a more rigorous way to connect servitization with performance, productivity, sustainability and business model innovation. By introducing servitization intensity, the paper gives researchers a stronger basis for comparing firms and building cumulative evidence.

The proposed fourth test also opens an important future direction. If servitization is ultimately about delivering outcomes, then measurement needs to capture the level of responsibility assumed by the provider. This moves the debate closer to the heart of advanced services: not simply what firms sell, but what they promise, deliver and stand behind for their customers.

Don't stand so close to me: why foreign firms can help new businesses grow - but distance matters.

Published in Journal of Economic Geography

[Click here for full paper](#)

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Professor Tomasz Mickiewicz

Dr Secil Hulya Danakol and Professor Tomasz Mickiewicz

At the time this paper was written, Secil was a Lecturer in Economics and International Business at Aston Business School and a member of the Centre for Business Prosperity. Her research focuses on foreign direct investment, entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation, with particular interest in how international firms shape local economies and new business creation.

Tomasz is Professor of Economics at Aston Business School and a member of the Centre for Business Prosperity, and coordinates the centre's theme of Place, Institutions, and Inclusive Growth. His research focuses on the economics of entrepreneurship, regional economics and international business. His work examines how institutions, ownership structures and regional conditions shape entrepreneurial activity and economic development.



Issue and importance

New businesses are vital for innovation, local renewal and regional economic growth. Yet where new firms emerge is not random. Entrepreneurs are influenced by the firms already operating around them, the workers they can recruit, the suppliers and customers they can reach, and the knowledge they can access.

This paper asks an important question for regional development: do foreign and domestic incumbent firms affect new business creation in different ways, and does their location matter?

This matters because many local authorities try to attract foreign investment and stimulate entrepreneurship at the same time. The assumption is often that attracting large or foreign firms will automatically help local start-ups. But the relationship is more complicated. Foreign firms may bring knowledge, higher standards, supply chain opportunities and access to wider markets. At the same time, they may also compete for skilled workers, increase wages, absorb local resources and push up property costs.

The paper therefore explores not only whether foreign firms help new businesses emerge, but where they help most: in the same municipality or in neighbouring areas.



Main findings

Using a large dataset covering almost all Polish municipalities between 2013 and 2019, the study examines how domestic and foreign incumbent firms influence both domestic and foreign new business births. The analysis uses fine-grained spatial data to capture not only what happens within each municipality, but also what happens in surrounding municipalities.

The core finding is clear: neighborhood matters.

Foreign incumbent firms have a positive effect on new firm formation, especially domestic firm formation, but this effect is stronger when foreign firms are located in neighbouring municipalities rather than in the same municipality. In simple terms, new businesses seem to benefit from being near foreign firms, but not necessarily right next to them.

The reason is the balance between positive spillovers and negative competition. Foreign firms can generate valuable spillovers by transferring knowledge, creating supply chain opportunities, exposing local firms to higher standards and connecting regions to export markets. These benefits can travel across municipal boundaries. However, the costs of being very close to foreign firms — such as competition for labour, wages and real estate — are more localised. This means that the immediate locality may experience both benefits and pressures, while neighbouring areas can capture more of the benefits with fewer of the direct costs.

Domestic incumbent firms show a different pattern. Their positive effect on new domestic firm births is more local. Domestic firms help by acting as role models, customers, suppliers and sources of local entrepreneurial knowledge. But these effects fade more quickly with distance. In contrast to foreign firms, the benefits of domestic incumbents are most visible within the same municipality.

The paper also finds that foreign and domestic new firms respond differently to local conditions. Domestic entrepreneurs are more rooted in place, often shaped by residential location, family ties, local networks and access to local finance. Foreign entrants are less dependent on domestic local networks and are more connected to wider international or regional opportunity structures.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the findings have important implications for local authorities, regional development agencies and policymakers. Attracting foreign investment can support entrepreneurship, but the benefits do not stop at administrative borders. Municipalities should therefore avoid thinking of themselves as isolated economic units. A foreign investor located nearby may be just as important — or even more useful — than one located inside the municipality itself.

This suggests a need for stronger cross-municipality collaboration. Rather than competing aggressively to attract the same investors, neighbouring areas should coordinate around infrastructure, labour markets, supplier development, skills, transport, business support and investment promotion. Regional prosperity depends on how well neighbouring places connect and share the benefits of agglomeration.

For entrepreneurs, the findings suggest that location choices should consider the wider business neighbourhood, not only the immediate town or municipality. Being close enough to foreign firms to access knowledge, suppliers and market opportunities may be valuable, but being too close may expose new firms to higher costs and stronger competition for resources.

For foreign investors, the study also highlights their role as anchors in entrepreneurial ecosystems. Their presence can generate wider regional benefits, especially where they create opportunities for local suppliers, labour mobility, learning and business-to-business relationships.

Theoretically, the paper advances research on entrepreneurial ecosystems, agglomeration and regional development by showing that the impact of incumbent firms depends on ownership type and spatial distance. Foreign and domestic firms do not generate the same effects, and those effects do not travel in the same way.

The study also contributes methodologically by using detailed municipality-level data and spatial modelling to show how entrepreneurship is shaped across local boundaries. Its central message is simple but powerful: when it comes to foreign firms and new business births, proximity matters — but the best position may be nearby, not next door.

Adaptive emergence of platform governance in contexts of underdeveloped markets and informality.

Published in Long Range Planning

[Click here for full paper](#)

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David is Professor of Strategy and Organisation at Aston Business School and Director of the Aston MRes in Business and Management programme. His research focuses on strategy, organisation studies, innovation, process theory, strategic foresight and how practices evolve over time.



Issue and importance

Digital platforms are often designed around assumptions drawn from developed markets: formal contracts, reliable regulation, card payments, clear rules, data-driven controls and predictable user behaviour. But when these platforms expand into underdeveloped markets, they often encounter a very different reality.

In such contexts, markets may be less formal, regulation may be weaker, cash may dominate over card payments, and many everyday practices may operate through informal relationships and unwritten rules. These practices may not comply with platform rules, but they can still be socially accepted and necessary for participants to survive.

This paper examines a critical challenge for digital platform firms: how can a platform designed for one institutional context survive and grow in another, where local practices may clash with the platform's original governance model?

The study focuses on a ridesharing platform in Ghana, where informal transport practices, cash-based transactions, vehicle ownership arrangements and driver–rider relationships all shape how the platform actually works in practice. The paper moves beyond the usual focus on formal market and regulatory voids and asks how platforms adapt to the informal behaviours that sit underneath those voids.



Main findings

Based on a qualitative case study of a ridesharing platform operating in Ghana, the paper shows that platform governance does not simply arrive fully formed. It emerges adaptively as the platform learns from the behaviour of drivers, riders and local market actors.

The study identifies a clash between the platform's organising logic and local practices. The platform initially seeks to impose rules based on its existing digital architecture and developed-market assumptions. However, drivers and other participants interpret those rules through local realities. For example, drivers may prefer cash payments, build direct relationships with riders, or find ways around platform processes because these practices are already normal in the local transport economy.

From the platform's perspective, such behaviour may look like rule-breaking or value leakage. From the participants' perspective, it may look like practical adaptation, survival or common sense. This creates a meaning-making tension: the platform and its participants are interpreting the same practices in different ways.

The paper shows that effective governance emerges when the platform learns from these tensions rather than simply trying to suppress them. The platform adapts through two connected types of response.

The first is digital response. These are changes to the platform architecture, such as adapting payment options, modifying access rules, changing how participants are monitored, or redesigning platform features to fit local behaviours.

The second is non-digital response. These are relational and offline arrangements, such as incentives, communication, local support, engagement with drivers, and efforts to build trust and encourage compliant behaviour.

The key finding is that digital and nondigital responses work together. A platform cannot rely only on algorithms, rules or technical fixes. Nor can it rely only on relationships and incentives. Survival in informal markets depends on the ability to combine both.

The study also shows that platform participants are not merely users of governance; they help shape it. Their everyday actions, resistance, adaptations and informal practices become a source of learning for the platform. Governance becomes an evolving capability rather than a fixed set of rules.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the paper offers important lessons for digital platform firms expanding into underdeveloped or highly informal markets. First, firms should not assume that a platform model that works in one context can simply be transferred unchanged into another. Governance must be designed with local market realities in mind.

Second, platform firms need to listen closely to micro-level behaviour. What looks like non-compliance may reveal deeper problems with the fit between the platform's design and the local context. Drivers rejecting card payments, bypassing the platform, or creating informal rider relationships are not just operational problems; they are signals about how value is actually created, captured and negotiated in that market.

Third, firms should combine digital and nondigital governance. Technical controls, algorithms and platform redesign are important, but they need to be supported by relationships, trust-building, incentives, local communication and offline engagement. In informal markets, governance is not only coded into the

platform; it is also negotiated through social interaction.

For policymakers and regulators, the study highlights the importance of understanding informal practices rather than treating them only as failures of compliance. Regulation that ignores local realities may struggle to improve safety, fairness or platform accountability. Better outcomes require policies that recognise how digital business models interact with informal markets, labour arrangements and everyday economic practices.

Crucially, the study highlights the importance of understanding informal practices rather than treating them only as failures of compliance. Governance that ignores local realities may struggle to capture the value created on digital platforms. Better outcomes require recognising how digital platform business models are embedded within formal and informal institutions, local arrangements and everyday economic practices.

Theoretically, the paper advances platform governance research by showing how governance emerges through adaptation to informal institutions, not only formal market or regulatory voids. It shifts attention from macro-level institutional conditions to the micro-level practices through which platform participants interpret, resist and reshape governance.

The study also contributes to strategy research by showing that adaptive governance can become a strategic capability. Platforms that learn from local practices and redesign their governance accordingly may be better positioned to survive, compete and scale in complex markets.

The central message is that digital platforms do not succeed in informal markets by imposing rules from above. They succeed by learning how local value creation works, adapting both their technology and relationships, and allowing governance to evolve with the realities on the ground.

In a 'bad' place? Location and the relationship between tax haven use and corporate reputation.

Published in Journal of International Business Studies

[Click here for full paper](#)

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Professor Chris Jones

Chris is Professor in Economics and International Business at Aston Business School. His research focuses on international business, international financial flows, foreign direct investment, multinational enterprises and tax havens. His work examines how firms make international location choices, including investment in controversial locations, and how these decisions shape reputation, accountability and responsible business practice.



Issue and importance

Tax havens remain one of the most controversial features of international business. Multinational enterprises may use them for legal tax planning, but they are also associated with secrecy, profit shifting, tax avoidance and, in some cases, the concealment of wider misconduct. For firms, the issue is not only financial or legal. It is also reputational.

Corporate reputation matters because it shapes how investors, customers, employees, regulators and wider society judge a company. In theory, reputation can act as an informal enforcement mechanism: firms that behave in ways seen as socially harmful should face reputational penalties. Yet previous research has often found that the reputational consequences of tax haven use are limited or unclear.

This paper challenges that assumption by asking a more precise question: are all tax havens perceived in the same way?

The study argues that location matters. Stakeholders do not simply ask whether a company is present in a tax haven. They also interpret where that tax haven is, how large it is, what reputation that location carries, and whether the firm is also active in other contested or corrupt locations. These location cues influence whether stakeholders see tax haven use as legitimate business activity or as a sign of potentially irresponsible behaviour.



Main findings

Using longitudinal data from 559 multinational enterprises between 2010 and 2023, the study finds that tax havens are not reputationally equal. Some locations create greater reputational risk than others.

The first key finding is that small "dot" tax havens are more damaging to corporate reputation than larger tax haven economies. Large tax havens, such as major economies with developed markets, can provide stakeholders with plausible "good reasons" for a company's presence, such as access to customers, talent, finance or regional operations. By contrast, small tax havens often offer fewer obvious commercial justifications. When stakeholders struggle to see a legitimate business reason for being there, they are more likely to infer that the location is being used for tax avoidance or secrecy.

The second finding is that country reputation matters. Some tax havens are strongly associated in public and stakeholder perception with facilitating tax avoidance. Where a tax haven has an adverse country reputation for tax avoidance, the negative effect on corporate reputation becomes stronger. In these cases, the location itself becomes a signal. It makes stakeholders more likely to interpret the firm's presence as reputationally problematic.

The third finding is that corruption can intensify the reputational implications of tax haven use. When a multinational enterprise is also present in countries perceived to be corrupt, stakeholders may become more suspicious of its wider international footprint. Tax havens can then be interpreted not only as tools for reducing tax liabilities but as possible mechanisms for concealing other questionable practices.

Overall, the paper shows that stakeholder judgment is shaped by interpretation. Firms are not penalised equally for every tax haven connection. Reputational risk is greatest where there are few

credible commercial explanations, strong negative country associations, and wider exposure to corrupt environments.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the findings have important implications for multinational enterprises, boards, investors and reputation managers. Tax haven use should not be treated as a purely technical tax issue. It is also a strategic reputation issue.

Firms need to look carefully at the geography of their international structures. A subsidiary in a large financial centre may be interpreted differently from a subsidiary in a small secrecy jurisdiction. Even where arrangements are legal, they may still trigger reputational concerns if stakeholders see no convincing business rationale.

Boards and senior leaders should therefore ask three questions. First, do we have a clear commercial reason for operating in this location? Second, can we explain that reason credibly to external stakeholders? Third, does the location carry reputational baggage that could undermine trust in the wider business?

For investors and analysts, the study suggests that tax haven exposure should be assessed in a more nuanced way. A simple count of tax haven subsidiaries may miss important differences. Greater scrutiny should be given to small tax haven locations, tax havens with adverse reputations, and firms that combine tax haven use with activity in highly corrupt jurisdictions.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that reputation alone may not be enough to deter all forms of tax haven use. Large tax havens may be partly shielded from reputational penalties because stakeholders can infer legitimate business motives.

This strengthens the case for greater transparency, clearer reporting requirements and more consistent disclosure of multinational ownership structures.

Theoretically, the paper advances international business research by showing that tax havens are heterogeneous locations, not a single uniform category. It also extends corporate reputation and attribution theory by showing how stakeholders use location-specific cues to make judgements when information is incomplete. Finally, it contributes to work on country reputation by showing that a firm's reputation can be shaped by the reputations of the countries in which it operates. The central message is clear: in international business, being in a "bad" place can matter. But some places are judged more harshly than others.

Alliances with frenemies: capability-building mechanisms linking coopetition to firm performance.

Published in Journal of Business Research



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for full paper](#)

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Issue and importance

For many small and medium-sized enterprises, competitors are not only rivals. They can also be partners, knowledge sources and routes to survival. This is especially true in difficult or resource-constrained markets, where firms may not have the internal capabilities, funding or networks to grow alone.

This paper focuses on coopetition: the situation in which firms cooperate and compete with rivals at the same time. Coopetition can help firms share knowledge, pool resources, solve common problems and access opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. But it also carries serious risks. Rival firms may behave opportunistically, withhold critical information, learn faster than their partners, or use shared knowledge to gain a competitive advantage.

This makes coopetition a “double-edged sword”. It can create value, but it can also expose firms to knowledge leakage, dependency and strategic vulnerability. For SMEs, these risks are particularly important because they often have fewer resources, weaker governance systems and less experience managing complex partnerships.

The study addresses a key question for managers: how does coopetition actually improve performance? Rather than simply asking whether working with rivals is good or bad, the paper examines the capabilities firms need to turn coopetition into financial and non-financial benefits.



Main findings

The study draws on data from 190 Iranian SMEs actively engaged in coopetition. Iran provides a distinctive emerging-market context, where sanctions, economic instability and limited access to international resources make cooperation with local competitors one of the few available ways for SMEs to access knowledge and survive.

The first finding is that coopetition has a positive direct effect on non-financial performance, but not on financial performance. In other words, working with rivals can quickly improve outcomes such as reputation, strategic positioning, customer attraction, network connections and quality of offerings. However, it does not automatically translate into immediate financial gains such as profit growth, revenue growth or cost reductions.

This matters because it challenges the assumption that coopetition always delivers straightforward financial benefits. The costs of managing coopetition — such as coordination, monitoring, protecting knowledge and managing tension — may offset short-term financial returns. Non-financial benefits may appear first, while financial benefits take longer to emerge.

The second finding is that absorptive capacity is the key mechanism linking coopetition to performance. Absorptive capacity refers to a firm's ability to recognise valuable external knowledge, acquire it, understand it, combine it with existing knowledge and apply it commercially. The paper finds that absorptive capacity mediates the effect of coopetition on both financial and non-financial performance.

In simple terms, firms do not benefit from coopetition just because they are exposed to new knowledge. They benefit when they are able to absorb and use that knowledge effectively. The third finding concerns unlearning. The study expected unlearning — the ability to discard outdated routines,

assumptions and practices — to directly mediate the coopetition-performance relationship. This was not supported. However, unlearning was found to play an important indirect role by helping firms develop absorptive capacity.

This means that unlearning does not automatically improve performance on its own. Its value comes from creating space for new learning. Firms need to let go of outdated ways of working before they can fully absorb and apply knowledge gained from rivals.

Overall, the paper shows that coopetition is not simply about partnering with competitors. It is about building the internal capabilities needed to learn from those relationships while protecting the firm's own competitive position.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the study offers an important message for SME managers: do not enter coopetition expecting automatic performance gains. Working with rivals can be valuable, but only if the firm has the capability to capture, interpret and apply what it learns.

Managers should therefore invest in absorptive capacity. This means building systems and routines that help the firm identify useful external knowledge, share it internally, combine it with existing expertise and turn it into better products, services, processes or market strategies. Regular knowledge-sharing meetings, cross-functional teams, learning reviews and clear processes for evaluating partner knowledge can all help.

The study also shows that managers need to take unlearning seriously. SMEs often rely on deeply embedded routines, informal habits and long-standing assumptions about “how things are done”. These may have worked in the past, but they can block new learning. Managers should regularly review outdated

practices, question existing routines and encourage teams to replace ineffective ways of working with more adaptive ones.

At the same time, coopetition requires careful governance. Firms need to decide what knowledge can be shared, what must be protected, and how to prevent opportunistic behaviour. This is particularly important when partners are also direct competitors. Clear boundaries, trust-building mechanisms, confidentiality arrangements and careful partner selection are essential.

For SMEs in emerging markets, the findings are especially relevant. In contexts where resources are scarce and uncertainty is high, coopetition can become a survival strategy. But survival depends on more than access to rivals. It depends on whether firms can transform external knowledge into internal capability.

Theoretically, the paper advances coopetition research by opening the “black box” between coopetition and performance. It shows that the benefits of coopetition are not direct or uniform. Instead, they depend on learning capabilities, especially absorptive capacity.

The study also contributes to the capability-building perspective by showing how learning and unlearning work together. Absorptive capacity helps firms bring new knowledge in. Unlearning helps firms remove outdated routines that prevent new knowledge from being used. Together, these capabilities explain how SMEs can benefit from relationships that are both cooperative and competitive.

Finally, the paper provides a more nuanced understanding of performance. It shows that non-financial outcomes may emerge before financial gains and should not be treated as secondary. For SMEs, improvements in reputation, networks, market position and organisational learning may be the foundations for later financial performance.

The central message is clear: working with “frenemies” can help SMEs grow, but only when firms are ready to learn from rivals, unlearn what no longer works, and turn external knowledge into internal strength.

Entrepreneurial orientation and supply chain resilience: the mediating role of supply chain analytics.

Published in Supply Chain Management: An International Journal

[Click here
for full paper](#)

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Issue and importance

Supply chains are operating in an age of disruption. Pandemics, geopolitical tensions, natural disasters, infrastructure failures, inflation, transport congestion and supplier instability have made resilience a strategic priority rather than an operational extra.

For many firms, the question is no longer whether disruption will happen, but how quickly they can see it coming, respond to it and recover from it. A resilient supply chain is one that can absorb shocks, restore product flow, return to normal performance or transition to a new workable state after disruption.

This paper examines how firms can build that resilience. It focuses on two important capabilities: entrepreneurial orientation and supply chain analytics.

Entrepreneurial orientation refers to a firm's tendency to be innovative, proactive and willing to take calculated risks. Entrepreneurial firms do not simply wait for disruption to happen. They look for new opportunities, experiment with new approaches and seek to act ahead of competitors.

Supply chain analytics refers to the use of data, tools and analytical techniques to improve supply chain decision-making. The paper examines analytics across four key supply chain functions: plan, source, make and deliver.

The key issue is whether entrepreneurial behaviour alone is enough to make supply chains resilient. The paper argues that it is not. Entrepreneurial orientation creates the mindset and motivation for action, but analytics provides the information-processing capability needed to turn that mindset into effective supply chain decisions.



Main findings

Using survey data from 243 manufacturing companies in Pakistan, the study finds that entrepreneurial orientation has a positive effect on all four dimensions of supply chain analytics: plan analytics, source analytics, make analytics and deliver analytics.

This means that firms with stronger entrepreneurial orientation are more likely to use analytics across the supply chain. They are more likely to forecast demand, evaluate suppliers, analyse production processes, monitor delivery performance and use data to support decision-making.

However, not all analytics functions contribute to resilience in the same way.

The study finds that plan analytics, source analytics and deliver analytics improve supply chain resilience. Plan analytics help firms forecast demand, assess variability, model scenarios and prepare for possible disruptions. Source analytics help firms evaluate suppliers, monitor procurement risks and develop alternative sourcing strategies. Deliver analytics help firms track orders, manage fulfilment, improve logistics visibility and respond more quickly when customer delivery is disrupted.

By contrast, make analytics does not show a significant direct effect on supply chain resilience in this study. This does not mean production analytics are unimportant. Rather, the findings suggest that, in disruptive environments, resilience may depend more immediately on planning, sourcing and delivery capabilities than on internal production analytics alone.

The paper also finds that plan, source and deliver analytics mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and supply chain resilience. In practical terms, this means that entrepreneurial orientation improves resilience through analytics. Firms do not become resilient simply because they are innovative or proactive. They become resilient when entrepreneurial behaviour leads them to invest in the right analytical capabilities and use data to make better decisions.

The strongest message is that resilience comes from combining behavioural and technological capabilities. Entrepreneurial orientation helps firms sense opportunities and act boldly. Supply chain analytics helps them process information, reduce uncertainty and make evidence-based decisions.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the paper offers a clear message for managers: resilience cannot be built through technology alone, and it cannot be built through entrepreneurial energy alone. Firms need both.

Managers should cultivate an entrepreneurial culture that encourages proactiveness, experimentation and calculated risk-taking. But this culture must be connected to analytical systems that provide timely, reliable and actionable information. Without analytics, entrepreneurial responses may become instinctive, fragmented or poorly informed. Without entrepreneurial orientation, analytics may remain underused or disconnected from strategic action.

The findings suggest that firms should prioritise analytics investment in three areas.

First, plan analytics. Firms need better forecasting, scenario planning, demand analysis and performance measurement. These capabilities help managers see emerging risks earlier and prepare more credible responses.

Second, source analytics. Firms need to understand supplier risk, alternative sourcing options, procurement performance and supplier interdependencies. This is especially important when disruptions affect upstream supply, materials, lead times or supplier reliability.

Third, deliver analytics. Firms need stronger visibility over logistics, customer orders, inventory flow and delivery performance. In a disruption,

the ability to reroute, reprioritise and communicate with customers can protect both service levels and reputation.

The study also suggests that managers should avoid treating supply chain analytics as a single general capability. Different analytics functions do different jobs. Planning, sourcing, making and delivery analytics should be assessed separately, because their contribution to resilience may vary.

For firms in emerging markets, the findings are particularly important. In contexts where political instability, infrastructure constraints and economic volatility are more common, resilience is not a luxury. It is a daily operational necessity. Entrepreneurial behaviour and analytics can help firms in these environments move from reactive firefighting to more proactive and informed disruption management.

Theoretically, the paper contributes by connecting entrepreneurship, analytics and supply chain resilience in one framework. It shows that entrepreneurial orientation acts as a behavioural capability, while supply chain analytics acts as a technological and information-processing capability. Together, they form a capability bundle that helps firms respond to uncertainty.

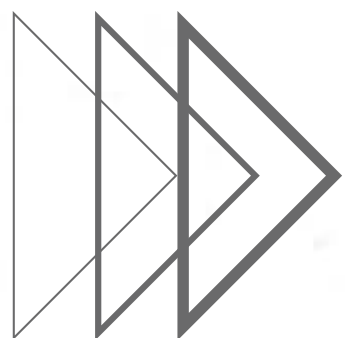
The paper also advances supply chain theory by showing that the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and resilience is not automatic. Analytics is the mechanism that explains how entrepreneurial firms become more resilient. This helps open the "black box" between strategic orientation and operational outcomes.

Finally, the study contributes to research on supply chain analytics by showing that analytics should be disaggregated by function. Plan, source, make and deliver analytics are not interchangeable. For resilience, the most critical analytical capabilities may be those that improve anticipation, sourcing flexibility and delivery responsiveness.

The central message is simple: resilient supply chains are built by firms that are bold enough to act, but disciplined enough to use data before they do.

Charity fraud in focus: protecting trust, donations and public good.

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[Click here for full paper](#)

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Issue and importance

Charities exist to serve public benefit, support vulnerable communities and channel resources towards social good. Their work depends heavily on public trust. Donors give money because they believe their contributions will reach the causes, people and communities they are intended to support.

Fraud in charities is not only a financial problem. It can divert money away from beneficiaries, damage organisational legitimacy, reduce future donations and create wider scepticism towards the charitable sector. Even when fraud occurs in only one organisation, the reputational damage can spread across the sector, making donors more cautious and undermining confidence in legitimate charities.

This paper addresses an important gap. While fraud in the wider non-profit sector has been studied, charity fraud has often been treated as part of broader non-profit misconduct. Yet charities have distinctive features: they rely heavily on voluntary donations, often benefit from tax-exempt status, and carry strong moral and public expectations. These features make them particularly vulnerable to fraud and make the consequences especially serious.

The paper therefore asks: what do we know about charity fraud, how does it happen, why does it happen, and what can be done to prevent it?



Main findings

The paper conducts a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2025. Only 18 studies met the inclusion criteria, showing that research on charity fraud remains limited and fragmented.

The review identifies four main areas: the impact of charity fraud, the methods and types of fraud, the underlying drivers, and the countermeasures available to prevent or detect it.

First, the paper shows that charity fraud has serious consequences beyond immediate financial loss. It reduces donor trust, damages organisational reputation, discourages future giving and can weaken the wider charitable sector. In some cases, fraud leads to public outrage, board resignations, regulatory scrutiny or even organisational closure. In digital contexts, online charity fraud can also reduce people's willingness to share fundraising appeals, because they fear spreading false information.

Second, the paper distinguishes between fraud against donors and fraud against charitable organisations. Fraud against donors includes fake charities, deceptive fundraising, false online appeals, fraudulent crowdfunding and the exploitation of charitable status to mislead the public. Fraud against charitable organisations includes insider fraud, misappropriation of assets, false billing, misuse of restricted funds, financial reporting manipulation, management override of controls and exploitation of weak oversight systems.

Third, the paper identifies the key drivers of charity fraud. These include motives, opportunities, rationalisation, integrity and capability. Most existing studies focus on opportunity: weak governance, poor segregation of duties, limited oversight, excessive trust, inadequate regulation and poor verification systems. Much less attention has been given to motives, rationalisation, integrity and capability. This is a major research gap because fraud is rarely caused by one factor alone. It usually emerges from the interaction between personal pressures, ethical weaknesses, organisational failings and opportunities to act.

Fourth, the paper finds that countermeasures are still underdeveloped and often not empirically tested. The literature points to the importance of strong governance, independent boards, audits, anti-fraud policies,

transparency, communication, stakeholder engagement, education, regulatory oversight and legal safeguards. However, technological tools such as data analytics, artificial intelligence, machine learning and blockchain-based reporting remain underexplored in academic research.

The paper brings these insights together in an integrated framework linking charity fraud typologies, drivers and countermeasures across behavioural, organisational, regulatory and technological levels.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the paper provides a valuable diagnostic tool for charity leaders, trustees, regulators, donors and policymakers. It shows that charity fraud prevention cannot rely on trust alone. Trust is essential to the charitable sector, but it must be supported by governance, transparency, accountability and proportionate regulation.

For charity leaders and trustees, the findings highlight the need for stronger internal controls. This includes clear anti-fraud policies, regular financial oversight, proper segregation of duties, transparent reporting, conflict-of-interest policies and independent board scrutiny. Smaller charities may need particular support because they often operate with fewer resources, informal systems and limited administrative capacity.

The paper also emphasises the importance of ethical culture. Fraud prevention is not only about systems and processes. It is also about leadership, values and behaviour. Charities need to embed integrity into recruitment, induction, training, decision-making and performance evaluation. Staff, volunteers and trustees should understand fraud risks, reporting responsibilities and the importance of speaking up when something feels wrong.

For regulators and policymakers, the study suggests the need for proportionate, risk-based oversight. Regulation should protect public trust without placing unnecessary burdens on small charities. Stronger reporting requirements, better enforcement, improved cross-agency information sharing and closer attention to online fundraising risks could all strengthen the sector's resilience.

For donors, the paper reinforces the importance of transparency and verification. Donors should be able to access clear information about how funds are used, whether charities are registered, how they are governed and how they respond to incidents of fraud or misconduct.

For technology providers and fundraising platforms, the paper highlights the growing need for digital safeguards. Online giving creates new opportunities for fraud, but it also creates new opportunities for prevention. Verification systems, platform reputation tools, data analytics and transparent digital reporting can help protect donors and charities alike.

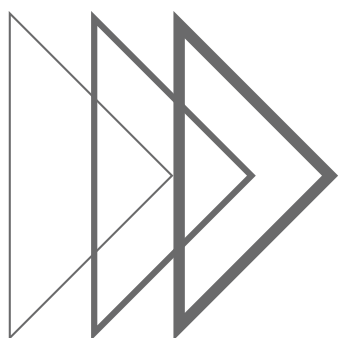
Theoretically, the paper makes an important contribution by distinguishing charity fraud from broader non-profit fraud. It extends fraud theory by showing how established fraud risk factors — motive, opportunity, rationalisation, integrity and capability — appear in distinctive ways in charitable settings. The sector's high-trust culture, moral purpose and reliance on public donations create both strengths and vulnerabilities.

The paper also establishes a clear agenda for future research. More empirical evidence is needed on donor-targeted fraud, insider fraud, fraud in smaller charities, technological countermeasures, cross-national differences and the behavioural drivers of fraudulent conduct.

The central message is clear: protecting charities from fraud is not simply about preventing financial loss. It is about protecting trust, safeguarding beneficiaries and preserving the public confidence on which charitable giving depends.

Geographical and cognitive proximity effects on innovation performance: Which types of proximity for which types of innovation?

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Click here
for full paper

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Issue and importance

Innovation rarely happens in isolation. Firms increasingly depend on external partners — suppliers, customers, universities, research centres, consultants, competitors and sister organisations — to access new knowledge and develop better products, services and processes.

But collaboration raises an important strategic question: which partners should firms work with?

Managers often assume that close partners are easier to work with. Geographical closeness can support face-to-face interaction, trust and tacit knowledge exchange. Cognitive closeness — having similar knowledge, expertise or ways of thinking — can make communication easier and reduce misunderstanding.

However, closeness can also become a problem. If firms work only with nearby partners or only with partners who think in similar ways, they may become locked into familiar ideas, routines and assumptions. Too much proximity can reduce novelty, limit creativity and prevent firms from accessing more diverse knowledge.

This paper examines how two types of proximity — geographical proximity and cognitive proximity — interact to shape innovation performance. It asks whether firms need different types of partners for different types of innovation: radical innovation, which creates products new to the market, and incremental innovation, which improves or adapts products new to the firm.



Main findings

Using data from Spanish manufacturing firms between 2008 and 2016, the study examines four types of collaboration partner.

The first type is cognitively close but geographically distant partners, such as suppliers, customers or sister organisations located outside Spain. These partners may be far away, but they share enough knowledge and understanding to make collaboration possible.

The second type is cognitively and geographically close partners, such as domestic suppliers, customers or sister organisations. These partners are both nearby and familiar.

The third type is cognitively and geographically distant partners, such as international universities, research labs, consultants or competitors. These partners bring more distant and potentially novel knowledge, but collaboration may be harder to manage.

The fourth type is cognitively distant but geographically close partners, such as domestic universities, research labs, consultants or competitors. These partners are nearby, but they bring different knowledge bases and perspectives.

The study finds that proximity matters, but not in a simple way. In most cases, the relationship between proximity and innovation follows an inverted U-shape. This means that some proximity is useful, but too much can become harmful. Firms benefit from partners who are close enough to communicate and collaborate with, but not so close that they offer little new knowledge.

The paper finds support for what it calls the “proximity paradox”. Too much closeness can create lock-in. Firms may become too inward-looking, too dependent on familiar networks or too focused on existing knowledge. At the same time, too much distance can make collaboration difficult because partners may struggle to understand each other, coordinate effectively or absorb knowledge.

The findings also show that cognitive proximity can sometimes substitute for geographical proximity. Firms can collaborate successfully across long distances if they share enough knowledge, experience or understanding with their partners. In other cases, geographical proximity can compensate for cognitive distance by making it easier to interact, build trust and transfer more complex knowledge.

Importantly, the best partner configuration depends on the type of innovation. For radical innovation, cognitively close but geographically distant partners are especially valuable because shared understanding can support long-distance collaboration while still exposing firms to wider international knowledge. For incremental innovation, cognitively distant but geographically close partners can be useful because they help firms access different perspectives while still benefiting from local interaction.

The paper also finds that organisational innovation matters. Firms that introduce new organisational practices, such as new ways of organising work, decision-making or external relationships, are better able to manage the challenges of distance. Organisational innovation flattens the inverted U-shaped relationship, meaning that firms with stronger organisational innovation are less damaged by the downsides of too much distance or too much proximity.



Practical and theoretical implications

Practically, the study gives managers a clear message: do not choose innovation partners only because they are nearby, familiar or easy to work with. The best partners are not always the closest. They are the ones who provide the right balance between shared understanding and new knowledge.

For radical innovation, firms should look beyond local networks. International partners can bring fresh knowledge and access to new markets, technologies and ways of thinking. But long-distance collaboration works best when partners have enough cognitive similarity to communicate effectively. This means firms should assess not only where a partner is located, but whether the partner shares enough technical, market or operational understanding to make collaboration productive.

For incremental innovation, firms should not underestimate the value

of nearby but cognitively different partners. Universities, research labs, consultants or competitors in the same country may help firms improve products and processes by bringing different expertise, while geographical closeness makes interaction easier.

The findings also suggest that managers should actively avoid innovation lock-in. Relying too heavily on the same local networks or familiar knowledge sources may reduce creativity over time. Firms need to refresh their collaboration portfolios by mixing local and international partners, similar and different knowledge bases, and familiar and unfamiliar perspectives.

Organisational innovation is critical. Firms that invest in better ways of organising collaboration are more able to benefit from diverse partners. This includes cross-functional teams, knowledge management systems, digital collaboration tools, open communication channels, flexible decision-making and routines for absorbing and sharing external knowledge.

For policymakers, the study suggests that innovation policy should not focus only on local clusters or internationalisation in isolation. Both local and distant collaboration matter, but in different ways. Policy should help firms build the capabilities needed to work across distance, absorb external knowledge and avoid becoming trapped in narrow networks.

Theoretically, the paper contributes to innovation and proximity research by showing that geographical and cognitive proximity do not operate independently. They can substitute for one another, complement one another, or create lock-in when taken too far.

The study also advances understanding of the proximity paradox by showing that the “right” level of proximity depends on both the type of partner and the type of innovation. Radical and incremental innovation require different knowledge inputs, so they benefit from different collaboration configurations.

The central message is that innovation requires balance. Firms need partners who are close enough to work with, but distant enough to challenge them.

Knowledge Transfer Partnership

Work with industry:
Ideas in Action

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What is an Innovate UK Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)?

A Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) funded by Innovate UK is a national programme that helps businesses innovate and grow by connecting them with universities and highly skilled graduates. A KTP places a full-time specialist (the KTP Associate) inside the company, supported by academic experts, to deliver a strategic project that accelerates innovation, productivity and commercial performance. Projects typically run for 12–36 months and focus on building long-term capability in areas such as digital transformation, advanced manufacturing, sustainability, data and AI, and new product or service development. The scheme is part-funded by Innovate UK, with the business contributing the remaining cost, making it a highly effective and accessible route for organisations to access world-class expertise, cutting-edge research, and future talent while delivering measurable business impact.

Aston University: a national leader in KTP excellence

Aston University is a nationally recognised leader in the Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) programme, delivering some of the highest-quality business-university collaborative innovation projects in the UK. The University currently hosts the largest live KTP portfolio in the country, with more than 40 active projects at any one time. More than 80% of Aston University's completed KTPs have been graded "very good" or "outstanding" by the national funder Innovate UK, underlining the university's consistent ability to translate academic expertise into commercial impact.

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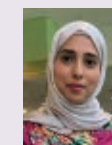


We are sector leaders for the quality of our KTP applications.

Core team supporting KTP projects at Aston Business School



John Richards,
Director of Knowledge Exchange, Aston University



Zaheda Teladia,
Senior Business Development Manager, Aston University



Project 1.

Making legacy machines smarter

How Aston Business School is helping Protaform unlock growth through digital transformation, systems thinking and people-centred manufacturing

The story

Protaform is a long-established manufacturing firm based in Redditch, West Midlands (UK), producing bespoke metal components including springs, press work and multiform items. The company also assembles components using both its own fabricated parts and customer-supplied items. Its customers operate across a wide range of sectors, including defence, construction, horticulture, stationery supplies, agriculture, electrical and white goods, and automotive. Most of these customers are based in the UK, placing Protaform in a strong position to benefit from the growing interest in reshoring supply chains and strengthening domestic manufacturing capability.

But Protaform faces a challenge familiar to many established manufacturers: how do you grow when you cannot physically

expand? The company wants to improve productivity, increase capacity and respond to new opportunities in existing and emerging markets. However, its factory footprint is fixed. Growth, therefore, needs to come from smarter use of the space, people, machines and data already available.

The challenge

Protaform has invested in new equipment, but many of the machines on the shop floor have been operating successfully for many years. These machines produce high-quality components, but they were not originally built for a digital manufacturing environment.

This means that they generate very little usable production data. Without reliable data on throughput, bottlenecks, machine performance, capacity and progress, it is difficult for the company to know where efficiency can be improved or how best to plan future growth. The challenge is not simply to add technology. It is to create a smarter, more connected production system that helps the workforce make better decisions,

improves visibility across the factory, and supports productivity without placing unnecessary pressure on staff.

Protaform's ambition is clear: to help its people work smarter, not harder.

Who is involved from Aston Business School?

The academic lead is Professor Ben Clegg from the Operations and Service Management Department at Aston Business School. Professor Clegg has a background in engineering and extensive experience working with organisations to improve productivity through better use of people, processes and technology. He is also known for developing Process Oriented Holonic modelling, a methodology designed to understand complex organisational systems and support better decision-making.

For Protaform, this whole-systems perspective is essential. The aim is not only to digitise machines, but to understand how people, data, machines, planning routines, materials, customer demand and management processes interact.



The other team members include Professor Donato Masi with expertise in mechanical engineering, engineering management, digitalisation and Industry 4.0. His research examines how digital technologies can enhance the sustainability and performance of operations and supply chains.

Dr Amar Al-Bazi is a Senior Lecturer in Operations and Supply Chain Simulation. His expertise includes simulation, optimisation, statistics and operational research, with a focus on using digital technologies to solve real-life operational problems such as scheduling, inventory control and productivity improvement.

The team at Aston University works closely with KTP Associate Miss Anuradha Kamble, who is based primarily at Protaform. Her background in mechanical and aerospace engineering gives her the technical capability to customise and implement digital solutions on the shop floor, while working directly with Protaform's employees and managers.

From the company side, the project is supported by Group Finance Director Paul Taylor and Production Manager Mark Lovett,

alongside the wider Protaform management team.

Expected impact

The KTP is expected to help Protaform increase productivity, improve efficiency and expand capacity within its existing factory footprint. For the business, this means being able to service more orders, respond more effectively to customer demand and maintain a competitive pricing structure. This is particularly important at a time when many companies are considering bringing supply chains back to the UK following recent global disruptions. For the workforce, the project is designed to support rather than replace people. By introducing digital tools in a practical and inclusive way, the KTP will help employees develop new skills, benefit from better production information and work within a smarter manufacturing environment.

For customers, the project should support better planning, improved reliability, stronger responsiveness and more efficient delivery. The project also has sustainability benefits. More efficient production can reduce

waste, improve energy use and support progress towards net zero. Shorter, UK-based supply chains can also contribute to lower emissions and greater supply chain resilience.

More widely, the KTP has the potential to create a blueprint for other traditional manufacturers. Many UK manufacturers operate with a mix of long-serving machinery, skilled workforces and limited physical space for expansion. This project shows how digital transformation can be introduced in a practical, affordable and people-centred way, helping firms improve productivity without losing the strengths that made them successful.

Project 2. Driving the depot of the future

How Aston Business School is helping Stagecoach turn fleet electrification into organisational transformation.

The story

Stagecoach is one of the UK's largest bus operators, connecting people and places through local and express bus services across the country. The business operates 17 regional companies, around 120 depots and a fleet of approximately 8,250 buses and coaches. It employs around 25,000 people and carries around 2.5 million passengers each day.

Like many transport operators, Stagecoach is undergoing one of the most significant transformations in its history: the transition from diesel vehicles to an all-electric fleet. This is not simply a technology project. Electric buses, charging infrastructure and low-carbon depot facilities require new ways of working, new operational routines, new workforce skills and new leadership behaviours. A depot designed for electric vehicles cannot simply reproduce the habits, processes and performance measures of a traditional bus depot.

This KTP is designed to help Stagecoach make that transition successfully. The project will develop a Performance Value System for the decarbonised bus "Depot of the Future". Stockton will act as the pilot site, creating a model that can be tested, refined and later adapted across Stagecoach's wider depot network.

The challenge

Decarbonisation is one of Stagecoach's five strategic priorities. The company has set ambitious targets: 31% of its fleet to be all-electric by 2025, 50% by 2032, and full electrification by 2035. However, electrification creates a major organisational challenge. A depot built around electric vehicles needs different processes, different scheduling, different maintenance practices, different performance measures and different workforce capabilities.

The challenge is therefore not just to build a new depot, but to build a new operating model. Stagecoach needs to move away from manual, paper-based and legacy processes towards digitised, data-informed and streamlined operations. It also

needs to ensure that employees, leaders, passengers and wider stakeholders understand and adopt new behaviours that support the transition.

Without this organisational transformation, there is a risk that new electric buses and low-carbon infrastructure could be managed through old assumptions and outdated routines. That would reduce the return on investment and limit the wider benefits of decarbonisation.

Who is involved from Aston Business School?

The Knowledge Base Lead is Dr Jonathan Crawshaw, Senior Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management at Aston Business School.

Jonathan has over 15 years' research experience in organisational justice, behavioural ethics, leadership and workplace relationships. His expertise is particularly relevant to this project because the transition to an all-electric depot depends heavily on fairness, trust, employee engagement and effective organisational change.



He will support Stagecoach in understanding how people respond to change, how leadership shapes culture, and how new ways of working can be embedded across a large and complex organisation.

Professor Ben Clegg is the Knowledge Base Supervisor. Ben is a Professor in Operations and Information Management at Aston Business School and has extensive experience helping organisations improve productivity through smarter use of people, processes and technology.

His research focuses on systems thinking, operational process improvement, operations strategy, supply chains and digitalisation. For this project, he will bring his Process Oriented Holonic modelling approach, known as ProH, to help Stagecoach understand the depot as a complex system and identify the factors that will make the transition successful.

Together, the team at Aston University combines two critical forms of expertise: the people and culture side of transformation, and the operations and systems side of transformation.

Anticipated impact

For Stagecoach, the KTP is expected to improve return on investment in electric vehicles and depot infrastructure by ensuring that new technology is matched with new processes, behaviours and operating models.

The expected business benefits include more streamlined operations, reduced maintenance and repair costs, improved workforce efficiency, better



employee engagement and greater reliability of service. Over time, these improvements are expected to support patronage growth, strengthen Stagecoach's reputation and help the company compete for future transport franchises.

The project is also expected to support the roll-out of electrification beyond Stockton. The pilot depot will act as a blueprint for future depot transitions, helping Stagecoach accelerate progress towards its 2032 and 2035 electrification targets.

For employees, the project aims to make the transition positive and empowering. Rather than simply introducing new technology, the KTP will help Stagecoach create new opportunities for skills development, role redesign and workforce engagement. This is expected to support wellbeing, reduce absence and attrition, and make Stagecoach a more attractive employer.

For passengers, the project should contribute to a more reliable, modern and sustainable public transport service. Better depot operations can translate into improved service quality and a stronger passenger experience.

For communities, the Depot of the Future creates opportunities beyond bus operations. The

Stockton site is expected to include significant electric charging capacity, with potential to support local community and business use. This could help expand access to clean energy infrastructure and support wider electric vehicle adoption.

For the environment, the project contributes directly to decarbonisation. It supports cleaner public transport, reduced emissions, improved air quality and progress towards net zero.

The wider significance

This project is important because it addresses a challenge many transport operators will face in the coming years: how to make electrification work in practice. Buying electric vehicles is only one part of the transition. Organisations also need the systems, people, processes, data and leadership capability to operate them effectively.

By working with Stagecoach, Aston Business School is helping to create a UK-first model for managing the organisational transformation behind an all-electric bus depot. The project demonstrates how academic expertise can support real-world decarbonisation, not only by improving technology adoption, but by changing the way organisations think, work and lead.

Project 3.

CyberDIVA: Making hidden online harms visible

How Aston University is helping turn dark web intelligence into practical tools for safeguarding, policing and policy

The story

CyberDIVA is an Aston University-led research and innovation project tackling cyber violence against women and girls across visible, encrypted and dark web-enabled environments.

Led by Dr Anitha Chinnaswamy, the project builds on earlier Aston University research on cyber violence against women and girls and moves the discussion into less visible digital spaces, where abuse can be coordinated, coded, anonymised and difficult for institutions to detect. CyberDIVA treats technology-facilitated abuse not simply as an online safety issue, but as a cybercrime, digital forensics, safeguarding and policy challenge.

The challenge

Online abuse is increasingly complex. Harmful activity can take place in encrypted spaces, hidden forums and dark web-enabled communities, where perpetrators may use coded language, emojis,

slang and anonymised networks to avoid detection.

This creates serious challenges for young people, parents, educators, safeguarding professionals, investigators and policymakers. Traditional keyword searches and standard awareness campaigns may miss the hidden signals, patterns and pathways through which abuse is organised. CyberDIVA responds to this challenge by making hidden harms more visible, understandable and actionable.

Who is involved from Aston University?

The project is led by Dr Anitha Chinnaswamy from Aston Business School, whose research focuses on cyber violence against women and girls, online harms and the institutional responses needed to address them.

Aston University worked in partnership with Forensic Pathways, which provided the technical foundation for the project, including DarkSearch integration, an LLM-enabled investigator interface, semantic search capability and an indexed corpus of 844,255 posts from four Tor-based forums.

The project also used a cross-sector co-creation model, bringing together academic research, forensic technology, policing insight, safeguarding expertise, education partners, lived-experience perspectives, industry input and public engagement.

Contributors included West Midlands Police and the Regional Cyber Crime Unit, BT, UKTL, Roshni Birmingham, Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid, and education partners including University of Birmingham School, Bishop Challoner Catholic College, Bournville School and Swanshurst Sixth Form College.

Impact and visibility

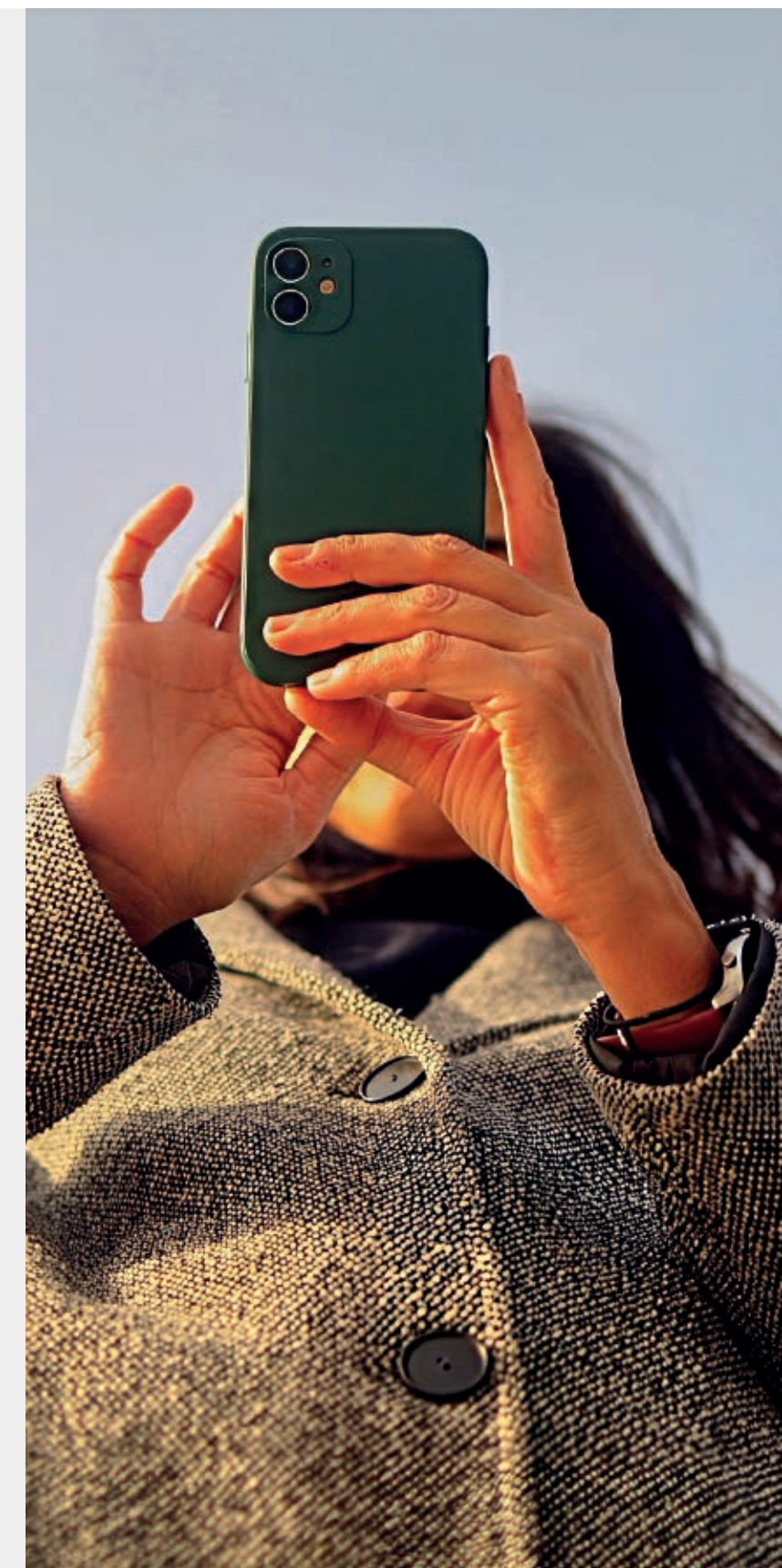
CyberDIVA has generated significant public, practitioner and policy engagement.

The CyberDIVA Conference at Aston University in February 2026 brought together around 140 attendees from approximately 35 organisations across academia, policing, safeguarding, industry, third sector, policy, education, media and the wider community. The event included the toolkit launch, policy input, lived-experience contributions, panel

discussion, immersive cyber challenge and live demonstrations of the project's forensic tools.

The project also secured wider visibility through Aston University media activity and BBC coverage, including the BBC News article "University fights abuse of women on dark web". This positioned CyberDIVA as a public-interest project supporting young women and girls, parents, guardians and frontline professionals. A further milestone was the CyberDIVA Policy Roundtable at the House of Lords in April 2026, hosted by Baroness Lorely Burt. The roundtable brought together senior stakeholders from academia, policing, government, industry, civil society, survivor advocacy and frontline practice to discuss how cyber violence against women and girls can be addressed through policy and innovation.

The project's policy contribution was strengthened further through Dr Chinnaswamy's Science in Parliament article, "Cyber violence against women and girls must be treated as a national strategic priority", which helped position CyberDIVA within a national science-policy forum.



Project 4.

Turning SME energy data into net zero action

How Aston University is helping businesses cut energy use, reduce carbon emissions and shape future energy policy

The story

Small and medium-sized enterprises are central to the UK economy, but many face rising energy costs, limited time, and uncertainty about how to reduce carbon emissions in practical and affordable ways. The Business Energy Advice Service Decarbonisation Net Zero research pilot programme was designed to address this challenge at scale. Funded by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and facilitated by the West Midlands Combined Authority, the £9.7 million programme investigates how SMEs can be supported to reduce energy consumption, lower emissions, and cut operating costs.

Led at Aston University by Professor Prasanta Dey and Martin Grant, the programme has operated across the West Midlands from September 2023 to June 2026. During this period, it has provided energy audit reports to more than 3,500 SMEs and supported many businesses to

access implementation grants worth over £20 million in total. The project is not only about helping individual businesses. It is also about generating the high-quality primary data needed to inform future net-zero policy, energy infrastructure planning and SME decarbonisation support.

The challenge

The programme was commissioned after government analysis identified a major evidence gap. There was not enough high-quality primary data on SME energy use, energy reduction opportunities and the practical support needed to help businesses reduce emissions.

The West Midlands was selected as the pilot region because of its diverse business base. The region includes a wide mix of SME types, from highly energy-intensive businesses such as forges and foundries to more typical energy users in retail, offices, services and smaller manufacturing. This made the region an ideal testbed for understanding how different types of businesses consume energy, where savings can be made, and what support is needed to turn recommendations into action.

Delivering the programme across such a broad geography and business base required close coordination between Aston University, WMCA, 12 local authorities, Coventry City Council, the Black Country Industrial Cluster, external telemarketing support and a wide range of delivery partners.

Impact and future potential

The early impact figures are substantial.

For SMEs receiving grants in the WMCA area, early analysis indicates projected annual energy savings of approximately 34.9 million kWh. This equates to an average annual saving of around 112,290 kWh per SME. The projected annual carbon reduction is approximately 6,183 tonnes CO₂e.

To put this into context, the average home in England and Wales consumes around 14,500 kWh of energy per year. The projected energy savings from the grant-supported SMEs are therefore equivalent to the annual energy consumption of more than 2,400 homes. For businesses, the benefits include lower energy

bills, reduced operating costs, improved resilience and progress towards net zero. For government and regional partners, the programme provides valuable primary evidence on how SME decarbonisation support can be designed, delivered and scaled.

The Aston University team is now reviewing the programme data to support impact assessment, research publications and policy papers. The work is also opening commercial possibilities linked to the energy data portal and the wider insights generated through the programme.

Why it matters

This project shows how Aston University research and enterprise can support practical action at the intersection of business, policy and net zero. It has helped thousands of SMEs understand where they can reduce energy use and access support to make those changes. It has also created one of the most detailed SME energy datasets of its kind, offering new insight into how decarbonisation support can be delivered at scale.

The wider potential is significant. The findings can inform future



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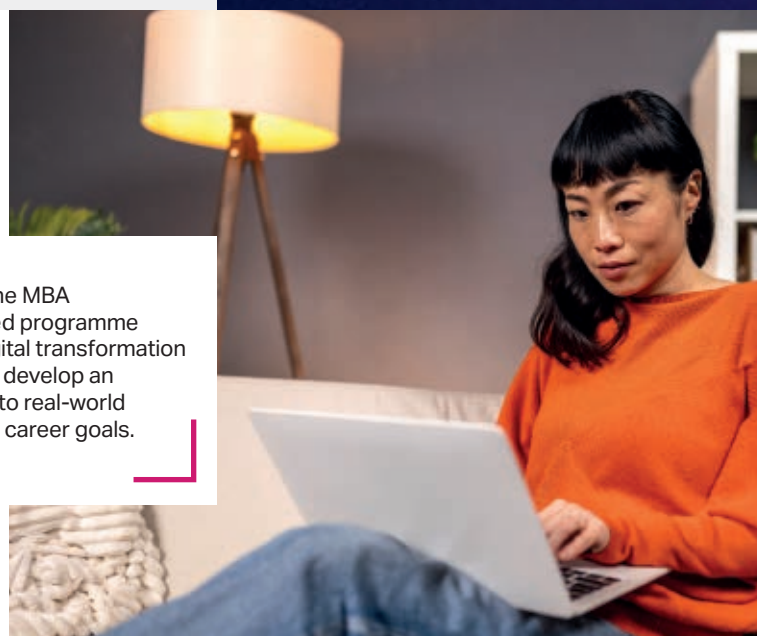
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