

Fireside Chat with Microsoft Corporate VP Noelle Walsh-Elwell



Our April 22nd Global Member Summit featured a powerhouse lineup of speakers and panelists, including Microsoft Corporate VP [Noelle Walsh-Elwell](#), who joined iMasons founder and chairman [Dean Nelson](#) in a virtual fireside chat. They talked about the impact of COVID-19 on digital infrastructure, iMasons’ new sustainability vision, and how Microsoft is, in Nelson’s words, “not just raising the bar but blowing off the ceiling” with its sustainability commitments. Watch the full conversation and read the highlights below.

Highlights from the fireside chat

(Dean Nelson’s questions are in bold. Noelle Walsh-Elwell’s responses are in quotes, which have been edited for clarity and length.)

Dean Nelson asked about how COVID-19 has spiked demand for digital infrastructure: Noelle Walsh-Elwell explained, “We’re being counted on a lot more now as business essential. Microsoft Teams, for example, supported 44 million users and 4 billion meeting minutes in a single day. Healthcare providers, education systems, and others all around the world are clamoring to use this capability. We’ve seen a huge spike in demand. From an infrastructure delivery perspective we had our best week ever with new capacity we were able to bring online. We hit about 100 MW of new capacity globally within a couple of weeks. Even given social distancing and other protective measures at construction sites. It was a cheer-me-up moment that we could deliver.”

On Infrastructure Masons’ new sustainability vision “Every click improves the future”: “I like the concept of iMasons and the collective effort it will take to impact the planet as we aspire to. It means a lot to me. I love being part of this industry, the growth, the technology. Our vision is to inspire every person and organization on the planet to achieve more. It’s not just what you do but how you get there. I aspire to do so safely and sustainably. To leave the planet in as good if not a better place because we do consume considerable power, land, and water.”

On previously working for a 100-year old chemical company: “I’m a chemical engineer. I’m relatively new to the digital infrastructure industry. I worked in the chemical industry before this, which is quite different but with some similar threads. It was a 100-year old company. I’ve been through so many restructurings, [which are] tough. So for me it’s a privilege to have the challenge of hiring so many people, to be part of this huge growth.

“I also love being part of an innovative industry. The chemical industry learned a lot in 100 years, including how to operate effectively at scale. So I bring that here. At a certain stage we have to run

each data center as a fleet not as individual start-ups. There's continuous learning to raise the bar across the fleet. A lot of companies can do efficiency, others can do innovation. Not many can do both."

"A lot of companies can do efficiency; others can do innovation. Not many can do both." [Click to tweet](#)

How do you make innovation happen? "Microsoft is an inherently innovative company. Satya [Nadella, Microsoft CEO] has driven a growth mindset approach versus a know-it-all approach. Within infrastructure it takes innovation every day. I have an advanced development team [run by IM Advisory Council member [Christian Belady](#)] looking at quantum, fusion, hydrogen. Having that closely coupled will enable us to commercialize effectively. We can't just stay in firefighting and day-to-day."

On Microsoft's sustainability commitments: Nelson said Microsoft is "not just raising the bar but blowing off the ceiling." The company's sustainability commitments are three-fold: 1) 100% renewable by 2025; 2) carbon negative by 2030; and 3) pay back all carbon the company has directly emitted by 2050. Walsh-Elwell explained, "The most challenging part is that those commitments include our supply chain. We're expecting the same of our suppliers as we do of ourselves. By 2030 we'll be net carbon negative across our supply chain. Then we want to make sure that we're net negative since the company's founding in 1975. We want to leave the planet in a better place and make up any use of its resources (land, power, etc.) It's a big challenge. I'm feeling it. It's not that we have 100% of the answers but we're certainly committed."

"The most challenging part of our sustainability commitments is that they include our supply chain. We're expecting the same of our suppliers as we do of ourselves." [Click to tweet](#)

These commitments are about operations? "Yes. It's not taking credit for moving from enterprise into the cloud. It is the cloud as it is today and all that it takes to build that infrastructure and those servers. That is the entire supply chain. It's travel, moving our fleet of cars to electric, composting in our canteens, the power that we use. So meeting our commitments will depend on working with our suppliers. We're even looking at the concrete in our buildings and what are the materials and what was the supply chain. To ensure that it's overall net negative."

On the \$1 billion Climate Innovation Fund: "Our CFO, Amy Hood, has committed \$1 billion to 'accelerate the global development of carbon reduction, capture, and removal technologies.' In terms of going public with our strategy, as a team we had our own goals to achieve. My approach was one of 'let's just do it, we don't need to make fanfare of it.' Amy challenged me appropriately saying, 'It's the entire supply chain. Why not go public and change the world?' It's hard to argue when someone's asking you to be part of changing the world." (Explore more: [Microsoft will be carbon negative by 2030.](#))

[Microsoft has welcomed Infrastructure Masons members to contact them for more information about the Climate Innovation Fund.](#)

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How are you going to achieve 100% renewable by 2025? "We've been carbon neutral since 2012 and on a path to be 100% renewable by 2025. There will be a number of renewable energy facilities built on our behalf in different parts of the world. That's all a work in play because they will have to

be built ahead of time. We are on track on that goal. Now that oil prices have changed it might impact the economics of that but we're just as committed as ever."

What is involved in being carbon negative by 2030? "So that is us being carbon negative but predominantly working with our suppliers. A lot of those conversations are happening: What energy and materials do they use? How do we create that circular economy? We've started some of that already with recycling of components. That will be myself and my peers working collectively within the company and with our suppliers. We have done the math whereby our suppliers will also need to improve by at least 55% by 2030 to enable us to achieve net negative. We have different tools and capabilities now built to track and monitor that."

How are you going to pay back all carbon emitted by Microsoft since 1975 by 2050? "That is with carbon removal. We have 80% of the answer and I'm comfortable with that. We have a decade to go. With our carbon innovation fund now we'll be able to accelerate a number of technologies. I expect some to work, and some won't and that's fine. That's why the investment is needed to accelerate fast failures and successes. There's no one silver bullet. It wouldn't be aspirational otherwise. The \$1 billion is for the out-of-the-box ideas."

Is there a message you'd like to share with our industry? "Well, it's a fantastic industry. I love how smart, intelligent, progressive we are. If we can take all that 'what' we are doing and leave a legacy of 'how' we are doing it, that would be super. We could be the industry to leave the planet in a better place."

"We could be the industry to leave the planet in a better place." [Click to tweet](#)

Get involved

If you're interested in participating in Infrastructure Masons' sustainability initiatives – either providing your feedback during an upcoming Summit or as a member of the Sustainability Committee – you can do so via the new iMasons app. (If you don't yet have the app, [learn about it here](#). It's free for all members.)

Learn more

Check out our other posts from the Spring 2020 Global Member Summit:

- [The Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Infrastructure](#)
- [Our Sustainability Vision: Every Click Improves the Future](#)
- [Fireside Chat with Google's Sustainability Officer Kate Brandt](#)

And there's more to come, so check back soon!