

Sustainability Spotlight

Balancing privacy and transparency in the world of big data: a path to a sustainable future.

Big data. The words are small, but the implications are huge. As vast new streams of information become available, data has taken on new importance. Big data makes patterns visible, revealing connections we've never been able to see and understand before. The new insights are delivering new generations of value, enabling smarter decisions and promising to help us solve some of our biggest economic, environmental and social challenges. It's also offering innovation potential at an unimaginable scale.

At the same time big data is offering tremendous up-side benefits, it is also demanding we give something up in return: information that previously may have been hidden or considered private. There are strong signals that people are conflicted.

Consumers are willing to give up some personal information privacy if their gain is strong enough, but resist the transparency if the sharing goes too far. Demand is growing for services where personal information and privacy are exchanged for the cost savings and sustainability gains. Yet the same consumers are driving demand for new generations of privacy-based products—like “black” smartphones that cloak, or encrypt, what is considered open in other mobile operating systems.

In business solving for the inherent tension between the desire for information privacy and the need for transparency is key to taking advantage of big data and leveraging other emerging technical advances in analytics. Finding the sweet spot in the tension is also at the very heart of sustainability.

At Steelcase we experience the tension between information transparency and privacy in our disclosure of the chemical makeup of materials in our products. Because our simplest product can easily involve at least 50 different suppliers, and a cascading numbers of sub-suppliers, full disclosure requires close cooperation across our entire supply chain.

This means our supply chains must be willing to give up closely held information about the chemical inventory of products. Most often, we must negotiate non disclosure (privacy) agreements with suppliers in order to gain the proprietary information (transparency) we need. This means we can have access to the chemical make-up of materials, we just can't reveal the information to others.

In the end, the materials assurance comes in a less transparent form than customers might expect. As we work to detect and eliminate materials of concern, everybody gains by giving up a little information. This exchange benefits human and environmental health and delivers material and design innovation.

You might say that sharing information has become the new currency of sustainability. Capturing data, analyzing it and making what's happening transparent allows us to fully define social, economic and environmental problems and opportunities. Transparency identifies shared ground and opens doors to new modes of co-creation, collaboration and design partnership.

At the same time, solution developers like us have an obligation to manage the information we acquire in ways that protect individual interests. People must be comfortable with the tradeoffs of sharing more about their workstyles in order to help us transform their work environment. By working together, we can innovate the work experience while conserving what is precious to each of us and what makes each of us unique.

In the era of big data, the question is not whether to create transparency or preserve information privacy. The real question is: How can we create an abundant and sustainable future by finding a place where information transparency and privacy meet—a place where they co-exist and everyone benefits?

Angela Nahikian
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I know that our job will never be “finished.” As citizens of a world that keeps getting smaller, we face tremendous environmental, economic and social challenges, and the scope of our efforts must always be expanding. The future will be about designing for a holistic system in which business embraces its role as a positive change agent, and realizes the full benefit of sustainable business design. The challenge will be in the scope of the opportunity; it's all-encompassing. The good news? It's scalable. I'd love to learn your perspective and ideas. Email me at: anahikia@steelcase.com

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