



In Conversation with Naveed Sultan: “The World Is Changing...We Want to Help Clients to Adapt.”



Naveed Sultan
Chairman,
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In November 2020, Naveed Sultan moved from his role as Global Head of Treasury and Trade Solutions to become Chairman of Citi's Institutional Clients Group (ICG), with a mandate to build and lead a new Digital Policy, Strategy and Advisory Practice across all client segments. Here, Michael Guralnick, Global Head, Marketing, Proposals, Intellectual Capital Management and Digital Client Advisory at TTS talks to him about the new Practice and what it aims to achieve.



Michael Guralnick
Global Head, Marketing,
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Michael Guralnick (MG): Congratulations on the new job. As Chairman of ICG you'll be driving the creation of a new Digital Policy, Strategy & Advisory Practice. Why is Citi establishing this Practice now?

Naveed Sultan (NS): You and I know from our long years spent working together that we are at a crucial moment in time – for financial services and for the clients that we serve. The nature of the world is that it is always changing. But the pace of change has increased exponentially, and is occurring across multiple fronts simultaneously. There are a number of megatrends underway that are reshaping our world and elevating the importance of digitization.

Firstly, we are seeing globalization, which has been the critical imperative for decades, come under pressure in the face of greater nationalism and authoritarian leadership, but also as a result of wider concerns about inequality. Secondly, geopolitics is in flux, with China becoming more assertive globally and the US – at least until recently – becoming more inward looking. Despite a scaling down of the rhetoric, a ‘cold war’ over technology is emerging; there is a real prospect of the digital worlds in the West and in China becoming fundamentally separate.

Thirdly, it’s evident that monetary and fiscal policy is under stress and reaching its limits. Central bankers and governments are running out of traditional tools to stimulate growth and productivity. Monetary policy is losing steam due to protracted low interest rates and aggressive quantitative easing. At the same time, fiscal policy is constrained due to budgetary pressures and high debt. Fourthly – as we’ve seen painfully over the past year with COVID-19 – infectious diseases pose a real threat to the world’s ability to function effectively.

Finally – and perhaps most importantly – technology is reconfiguring everything in our personal and business lives. All of these other trends have to be seen through the lens of new technologies such as the internet of things, artificial intelligence, big data, robotics, autonomous vehicles, nanotechnologies, 3D printing, biotechnology, material sciences, and quantum computing to name but a few. Technology has the potential both to exacerbate and alleviate many of the challenges we face.

MG: Why are these trends important and what do they mean for our clients?

NS: Digitization is prompting major changes across industries and companies, economies, and societies. It helps to effectively create a new world, with new opportunities – and risks. Businesses must respond to new business models, disruption by new entrants, and the emergence of virtual infrastructures and new ecosystems. Societies – how people work, communicate, and live their lives – face similar upheaval. Governments and institutions need to reconsider how areas such as education, healthcare, transportation, and financial systems will function in the future.

For companies and societies to prosper in this new environment, agility, responsiveness and resilience are critical. Our public sector clients need support to help enable policymakers and regulators develop and implement digital policy that complements monetary and fiscal policy and facilitates sustainable growth. Corporates need help to understand digital trends and the opportunities (and threats) they represent. And financial institutions need advice on how digital transformation can help them address regulatory pressures, increased competition and tighter margins, while making them more relevant to the digital economy.



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MG: And this is where the Digital Policy, Strategy and Advisory Practice fits in?

NS: Exactly. We've been thinking about these issues for years because our job is to anticipate challenges and opportunities for our clients. But we came to the conclusion that we needed a new forum for policy advocacy that would allow us to formulate and share Citi's point of view on key policy areas related to technology and digital developments, such as crypto currencies, cyber security, AI, data and ESG. It will give us a more effective way to engage with policymakers and participate in key debates.

The Practice gives us an opportunity to create an advisory framework that is informed by what we call the 'digital paradigm'. This framework seeks to enable all economic participants – such as governments, corporates, financial institutions and households – to use digitization to create value, achieve sustainable growth and productivity, and mitigate the risk of disruption. For example, digital-driven financial inclusion might be leveraged for households, financial institutions might investigate platform models, governments could deploy digital identity solutions, and corporates may seek to commercialize new tech such as robotics.

MG: What form will client engagement with the Digital Policy, Strategy and Advisory Practice take?

NS: We aim to develop a strategic, coherent and holistic approach that gives our clients and other constituencies, including policymakers, actionable insights to help them respond to new technologies and the other megatrends changing our world: we're here to help them adapt. In day-to-day terms, the new Practice will offer advice to governments on developing policies that digitize their economies, including their financial systems. It will also offer guidance and thought leadership to corporates and financial institutions to help transform their businesses and operating models in order to stay relevant in an increasingly digital world.

We want to help clients to get ahead of the curve. Everyone knows that new business models are emerging, but we want to make it easier for clients to identify the implications of those models – and most especially the opportunities and potential risks they present – early on. We don't want change to happen to our clients – we want them to be in position to drive and control change so that they can actually participate in the economic value being generated. Our clients are smart but they can't know everything about new technologies that could impact them. And putting new technology developments into a broader economic and geopolitical context can be especially tough.

MG: Why is Citi well placed to play this role and help clients navigate their digital transformation journey in a fast-changing world?

NS: First and foremost, Citi is undergoing a bold transformation itself to help position the firm to win in a changing world. We are therefore well positioned to offer practical insights and suggestions. We're also in a unique position to offer advice and guidance to our institutional clients for all the reasons that make us the leading global bank. Our scale, client base, the huge volumes of data that our clients generate, and cutting-edge technology give us unique insights into the world. We connect with our clients at multiple points every single day, have vast operating and business experience, and a wide range of banking and financing solutions that enable us to help clients actually deliver change. And our global network is a key differentiator; being on the ground in dozens of countries around the world helps to give us a feel for the realities of digital transformation as it affects our clients. ■

