Oral History of Nicola Acutt

Interviewed by:
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Morris: Nicola, thank you so much for being with us today. I'm going to ask you a very easy question to start. What is your name, and when and where were you born?

Acutt: Hi, Kris. My name is Nicola Acutt, and I was born in South Africa in October 1973, which means I just celebrated a big birthday!

Morris: <laughter> Congratulations. Before we go further, I do want to say, for the record, that this interview is being conducted at the Computer History Museum on November 30th, 2023, and this will become part of the VMware Founders Collection here at the Computer History Museum. So today we'd like to talk with you about your journey in this field of sustainability and its connection to the technology world, and the technology world's connection to it. So to start, can you tell us where your interest in this began?

Acutt: Sure. I think my interest in sustainability and the environment goes right back to my roots. I was born on a farm outside of Pretoria, about 100 kilometers from the capital, and I think my land ethic really came from those early formative days as a child of a farmer and a schoolteacher. I recall holidays, we would go to the bush, which was like going on a safari. I think probably one of the most formative experiences was in the equivalent of the fourth grade, when we had a field trip to the Kruger National Park, and I absolutely loved it. I think I won the bird spotting competition. <laughs> It really started there, and that land ethic and sensibility about the environment comes from my early days in South Africa.

Morris: When this interest began for you, what kind of path was there for you to take? Was it in sciences? Where did you go?

Acutt: It's so interesting, because at the time, our education system was very rigid, and in high school, kids were put into either a humanities track, or a science and math track. I was put in the humanities track, and it really wasn't until I got to university at the University of California, Berkeley, that my passion around the environment and sustainability and science was ignited. Back then, there was no such thing as STEAM —the "A" in STEM. But I was really that person who had a natural inclination to the arts and humanities, but a passion for science and research, and the environment and ecology.

Morris: So how did you find your way to Berkeley? That's a long journey.

Acutt: Yes, that is a <laughs> very long journey from Johannesburg, South Africa to Berkeley, California. It was the tail end of apartheid in South Africa during that time, and I was very fortunate in that my parents, and my mom in particular, wanted to give me the opportunity to expand my horizons. I had an aunt in California, and so they put me on an airplane when I was 18 to California, and I made my way to UC Berkeley, and ultimately graduated with an interdisciplinary degree from Cal. That set me on this career journey.

Morris: So, in those days, this would be the early '90s, this field of environment and conservation was developing as an academic discipline, but it was sort of rootless. Different departments might be involved. So what was your program like?

Acutt: Absolutely true. When I think about the arc of my life and my career, it was [in parallel with the environmental movement starting in] the early '70s [when] the Clean Air Act was passed. Fast forward to today in California, we've got SB 253, which is about regulating and requiring disclosures [for] companies to disclose their impact on the environment, specifically with respect to carbon emissions. That arc is amazing to think about, [in terms of] where education and university training courses and curriculum fall into that. So, I was very lucky, I think, at the time, to be at Berkeley when this was bubbling up, and being the University of California, Berkeley, was so forward-looking, and there was a number of different paths and options. What resonated with me was the opportunity to do an interdisciplinary undergraduate degree, which is quite-- you think about the time, that was quite unique. So, I loved it. I got to take classes in ecology and math and science, but then I also took economics and geography and business, and politics, and all of that together. At the time, maybe, on paper, didn't really make sense, but it did, because it created the foundations for the work that I do today, which is about really trying to create solutions to complex interconnected issues. I take my hat off to the faculty at Berkeley in the early '90s, who saw that, and knew that it was important to give students a well-rounded interdisciplinary training. I feel like I've benefited from that, and from the amazing faculty back in the '90s.

Morris: So where did you think this was going to lead you, this broad-- and really, it sounds like something that just drove your passion so much. But then you have to go out into the "Real world." <laughs> Where did you think it was going to take you?

Acutt: Yeah, I was one of those students who was very passionate and just hungry for learning and knowledge, and wanted to go straight from my undergrad into a master's degree. I have to give credit to my advisor at Berkeley, the dean at the time, Sally Fairfax, who sat me down one day and said "Nicola, you need to go into the real world. Just take a year and go and explore the real world before you decide on your path for a master's degree." That was the best advice, I think, one of the best pieces of advice I got, and so I did. It turned out to be an incredible opportunity. You asked me where did I think it was going to go, I definitely had an interest in advocacy and policy. So that led me back home. I went back to South Africa, and the timing was amazing because I had the opportunity to work—now, this is after Mandela had been elected president, and the country was in the process of a huge, massive policy reform, and I had the opportunity to work on natural resource policy for coastal management, which led to the legislation that exists today for managing those resources in a sustainable way. Something I think people aren't aware of is that in South Africa, in the Bill of Rights, has a right to a clean and healthy environment. I spent two and a half years, longer than my advisor had recommended, <laughter> but it was an incredible experience to get the opportunity to work in the real world, but to be part of history, to be part of creating the new frameworks and policy and regulation for an emerging democracy.

Morris: How did you find this new environment for you, and as a young person, navigating your policy interest with the real world? How these things are actually going to be put into practice, into legislation, into real world, everyday use?

Acutt: It was a wake-up call, actually, in many ways —[for] my very passionate and naive, newly minted Berkeley graduate [self]. I was humbled in seeing how complex creating sustainable change was. What was really critical during that time—a couple of things. First, understanding, on the policy side, the democratic process, and the importance of capacity-building in order to create legislation that has legitimacy and is grounded in a broader stakeholder input. That piece was just incredibly eye-opening. We would go into communities that have never been involved in the policy process before. I had been trained as a scientist, and I had to learn how to speak differently to community people around their use of natural resources. That was one side. The other really important eye-opener during that period was the fundamental role of the private sector and business in creating sustainable livelihoods. That was a powerful insight, and in fact what triggered the next phase of the journey in many ways, [was] an appreciation that policy and regulation is not enough. You have to build sustainable businesses to create sustainable livelihoods, and ultimately the kinds of outcomes that lead to people living in a healthy environment.

Morris: So, I wanted to follow up on that a little bit, and maybe that does kind of then take our discussion into your doctoral work. What would you say were the important roles that corporations were playing in South Africa at that time, in terms of this policy building effort?

Acutt: I was part of the policy committee. In fact, I ran it. [In my role] I was the secretariat. <laughs> There's a whole other side story on gender and equity and inclusion there, but we won't go there today. But what was important and what I learned was having all the voices at the table. There were, at the time, very powerful industry associations. It was important to have that voice at the table, but also to have civil society and representatives of civil society organizations, as well as scientists and biologists at the table. At that time—it's a complex history, of course, in South Africa, and mining and agriculture [were] the biggest industries. Mining clearly has had an enormous impact on the environment and on communities. Notwithstanding the environmental aspects of impact, there was also this new era in South Africa, and a different conversation around what corporate responsibility needed to look like in the post-apartheid era. So, to answer to that question: what was the role of South African companies? Really, that was a pivotal time [and] you can go back and look at the King report, for example, [because] there was a lot of really progressive work done to reframe what corporate responsibility was like in this new era.[1]

Morris: So then you did eventually make it back into academia, and being able to dive into your passion. But it sounds like you had a bit more focus then?

Acutt: Absolutely. My undergraduate advisor was absolutely right, and I made my step back into academia, which was really what I was passionate about. I was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to the United Kingdom to pursue my studies in sustainability and sustainable business. That had really sparked during my time in South Africa, [and] this was an area that I wanted to research and to understand. That was the next phase of my journey, doctoral work. My time in South Africa was really

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[1] The King Report on Social Governance, the first corporate governance code for South Africa, was first published in 1994. A revision of the Report was issued in 2002 and included a section on sustainability; that revision is known as King II.

influential, and it led me to this question around what are the best structures to create sustainable change in business and society? At the time, there were really three kind of bodies of thought, or three approaches. One was around policy and legislation, which is what I was familiar with, having come out of Berkeley, and my early work in the Policy Committee for the Coastal Zone Management Program in South Africa. So that was one. The second was a body of work around market-based instruments, in other words, providing signals in the market, incentives to drive changes in behavior. Think about a carbon tax, for example. The third area was voluntary instruments, often industry-based frameworks, around which companies set standards of operations and behavior. That third area was the least well-understood and the least researched. So of course, that piqued my interest <laughter> and I was like, "Okay, that area needs work, and I'm fascinated, because I'd seen it in South Africa with a lot of mining companies and chemical companies. I'd been introduced to a concept called "Responsible Care", which was a voluntary framework that came out of the chemical industry in response to the Bhopal accident in India in the mid-1980s [1984], where people were killed, and half a million people's lives were impacted. So it was a huge moment of awakening and awareness for that industry, and this framework came out of it. I was really curious to understand how it worked and if it drove change inside petrochemical companies in particular. So that was what I went off to do in my doctoral work.

Morris: I mean, did you come to a conclusion about how potentially successful this approach could be compared to the others?

Acutt: Yeah, I did, and ultimately, my conclusion was that there's no silver bullet [structure for sustainable change], and that, really, it's a combination that's needed to drive systemic change. When I looked at voluntary instruments in the petrochemical industry, it became really clear to me, it wasn't necessarily the frameworks themselves that determined the successful outcomes, it was the culture of the company inside that determined progress, or the level of outcomes. In the end, I concluded that, really, if we're to address the systemic challenges, we need to have a mixed bag of tools and instruments, including policy and regulation that sets a level playing field for companies, then market-based instruments that create incentives, as well as these voluntary frameworks. Ultimately, I concluded you can't rely purely on voluntary frameworks to drive the kind of scale of change that we need.

Morris: It seems to me, too, that the voluntary component, like you said, if the success of it is so reliant on the company culture, then how do you know that it's going to be long term? How do you know it's going to stay?

Acutt: Yes. That is a huge question, and one that I didn't get to in my research, and I believe many others have picked up on that thread and looked at that from an academic perspective. There are management conferences today, and journals, all about exactly that topic. I know we're going to get further into the arc of the story, but maybe we'll come back to that question, because I got to see and live it--

Morris: Yes.

Acutt: -myself <overlapping conversation> here in Silicon Valley <laughs>.

Morris: Yes, this is my thought, exactly. We're going to come back to that question of sustainable company culture and how that lasts over a long time, and through changes in management, and through changes in technology.

Acutt: I have much more clarity now about that than I did when I was a student, because I got to see it. Maybe I'll give you the headline now, we'll come back to it, but it's really two things. It's not enough to change hearts and minds. You have to change systems and processes inside a company, and those two things work together, and that is what's going to set up a company for long-term sustainable change.

Morris: Good. Let's talk a little bit about your career in academia, that trajectory, that then eventually does get you to VMware. So, you went from the doctoral work into an academic position, correct?

Acutt: I did, with a little bit of a kind of bumpy journey in between. Not really bumpy. But when I finished my PhD in the UK, I came back to California. I think it's something important to say in the context of this oral history about that kind of time and moment in a young academic's life. At that time, I was in my late 20s, and for many women, we're getting married, we're having children. It's also the most critical point in your academic career, when you finish your PhD, to get on a tenure track. Those two things colliding together make the conditions to be successful in both really hard, and I ultimately decided that was not my path][— and it's a combination of things. [Part of it], maybe a little bit of impatience for impact that took me on a different path. So, I continued my academic career, but in a very non-traditional environment. I joined a startup school—classic California—<laughter> a startup based out of the Presidio in San Francisco, with this crazy idea to design principles of sustainability [in] to the entire MBA curriculum. That was really exciting to me because it was academic, but it was pragmatic, and it was about changing the world through business school education. Given everything I had done up to that point, it was perfect, and so exciting to be part of this startup. I joined the faculty in the first year with 20 students, 20 brave souls who signed up for this very non-traditional MBA at an unknown school called the Presidio—the Presidio Management School. Today, it's the Presidio Graduate School. That was the beginning of a very interesting and important journey. Presidio was one of the first graduate schools in the country, and probably around the world, to boldly and intentionally integrate sustainability in every single class, whether it was finance and accounting, to operations, supply chain, to management, strategy, and communications. Every aspect really taught students how to think differently and how to think about the discipline of business, the practice of business, with a lens of sustainability.

Morris: So what were some of the things that you thought were most important for students to take into the business world?

Acutt: Yeah, absolutely critical was this combination of core business competencies, and in many ways, that was the easy part. The much more important part was what I call the human dimension of being a leader in sustainability in business. Because these students were often either-- [on] two paths. One was entrepreneurial, where they would set up a sustainable business. The other was going into corporations to lead change. Fundamentally, those roles are change management roles. So those soft skills, communication skills, stakeholder engagement skills, those were probably, I would say, the most important, and I learnt it myself <laughs> when I stepped into that role. Those are the things that often, I

think, get skipped over in business school education, [that is] so technical. But that's what makes leaders, their ability to connect with other people and to create change through collaboration, through relationships, through strategy, where you're in partnership with others. Because sustainability is not a single discipline. It's not like marketing or finance. It runs through everything. Obviously, there're core principles and it's based on ecology, of course. But it's a very interdisciplinary field of work.

Morris: When you were training those students—I guess my question is, was there a market demand for those skills? Were there corporations saying, "We want people to work in this area, we need to do better"? Or "We don't even know what this is, but we feel like we should be starting something"? Was there a market demand for those skills?

Acutt: Again, this was really early. This is early 2000s, and there really wasn't. So we were part of training students for the future, and I remember a really important concept as educators was this idea of pragmatism, but also service-based learning, or hands-on learning, if you like. One of the programs that we created was almost like a mini consulting, where we would put students into companies to do a project. A lot of what I had to do was reaching out to people in business and convincing them to take on these students to do these projects. In the early days, it was really forward-thinking companies, [or] a lot of it was students then making changes within their business. A lot of times, in fact, they were in a business role and wanted to get these sustainability skills to create that function and opportunity. Back then, like I said, we were one of the first, [among] a handful of educational institutions even offering this kind of education. Fast-forward to today, pretty much every business school, certainly in the US, has at least one class on sustainability or corporate responsibility. So, that market has shifted and evolved during that 20-year period. But back then, it was early days.

Morris: <laughs> Is there more that you'd like to say about the work that you did in training students, and how that prepared you to then go back into the real world? "Real world", with quotation marks, of course.

Acutt: Right, absolutely. At the time, like I said, my mission in life was to have an impact on the world through education and through the next generation of business leaders. In that process of teaching, I learnt some critical skills, and a mindset and a perspective that I don't think I could have gotten any other way. That then has become part of my repertoire, a core part of what I have been able to do in the corporate environment, in the last part of my career. There's a great saying, "If you ever want to learn something, teach it," and that certainly was true for me.

Morris: So what brought you then to VMware? How did that evolve?

Acutt: My journey from academia to VMware and Silicon Valley was really serendipitous, one of those things in life that I wasn't expecting. Honestly, if you'd asked me a month before I joined VMware that I would have a 14-year career in tech, I would have said "You're crazy." <laughs> Because I am not a technologist. I am not an engineer. I did not know anything about software [then]. I was an academic. I didn't know how to actually do what I was teaching. So, <laughter> the fact that I ended up in that role is a great story, and in fact, it says a lot about what we'll talk about; VMware and the company and the culture. I was encouraged, by a mutual connection, to put my hat in the ring for a role. VMware at the time had--

now, this is 2010—had just funded a foundation. Paul Maritz was CEO, and they were looking for a foundation director. A mutual connection had encouraged me to put my hat in the ring, and so with some arm twisting, I said "Okay, I'll entertain this." After my first interview, I remember distinctly driving down from the Presidio to Palo Alto, and driving into the VMware corporate campus, which is beautiful, and walking into this lobby that was a mix of a mid-century modern aesthetic, with beautiful hardwood floors and recycled logs as seats, and just really fascinating. I met Betsy Sutter, who was the Chief People Officer, and during that interview, I learned that the campus, the building that I was so intrigued by, had been [designed] by William McDonough, who was one of the world's leading green architects. My jaw literally dropped, <laughter> and at the end of that conversation with Betsy, I was absolutely convinced that I needed to do this [because] this was an incredible opportunity to do what I was teaching. Now, [that was my] introduction to the culture of VMware—the fact that they chose me is a testament to the culture of innovation and non-traditional thinking, [to] looking for people who think and see the world differently, and I think that's why I got the role.

Morris: Right, they weren't necessarily looking for someone who had been the director of three other foundations, right?

Acutt: Right, which is amazing. In most companies, when you're hiring for a director role of a brand-new foundation, you're hiring for experience, someone who's done it a couple of times. And they took a risk on someone like me, who'd never done it before. Maybe my curiosity and love of learning and perspective was intriguing. And here we are, 14 years later <laughs>.

Morris: So what was the charge that they gave you on day one? "Start a foundation."

Acutt: Yes.

Morris: "Go."

Acutt: Day one. [After] the initial endowment, and I really remember— [these] three very important people and leaders who are part of this journey and story at the time. I already mentioned Paul Maritz was CEO. He was very supportive and absolutely committed to creating this foundation. There's Betsy Sutter, Chief People Officer. Bill Heil — I was intrigued when I read his title, "Chief Bottle Washer," and maybe we'll come back to that. And then Mark Peek, who was the CFO at the time. On my day one, after talking to the three of them, it was really clear that the three of them had different perspectives, but a really common view. For Betsy Sutter, it was all about the values, making sure that this foundation reflected the people and was something that was resonant with the people of the company. Mark Peek was clear that the foundation needed to be financially sustainable, and we needed to think about our model and how we were going to fund it, and how we were going to sustain it over the long term. Bill Heil was all about impact. He was very clear that this was about creating impact, creating a legacy. So, with that, I remember going back to my desk and thinking "All right," and obviously, I'd done a lot of homework <laughs> between when I got the job and when I started. I read as many books as I could about corporate philanthropy, and I was sure that we needed to do something strategic. My [in] mind at the time, that would be something related to STEM, something around engineering and technology. But, I think the

academic in me and the perspective of those three leaders made me pause and think about "Okay, what would that mean if it was to reflect the values of the company, to be financially sustainable, to drive impact?" So I went on a listening tour — [ ] to me, [the listening tour] it was grounded theory, what I'd done in my PhD. I went and spoke to as many people as I could, and I literally, in the first 30 days, I think I did 60 interviews with people across the business. I would go home at night and I would type up my notes and put it into my old phone. <laughs> I know there's much more complex systems today to do content analysis. But I basically did a little bit of a content analysis, and I was sure that I was going to get the answer by talking to as many people as I could. Ultimately, after about six weeks, what became clear to me is that when I asked people what they feel the VMware Foundation should stand for - there were different answers. Everyone had a different idea. So, this idea that I was going to get clarity out of my research [interviews] made me realize, actually, the answer is in the data. The answer was that while people had a different perspective of what it [the Foundation] should stand for, and what-- what I realized is they were reflecting back to me their own values, what they cared about, and that was my "Aha!" The thing that was common across all of those conversations was that everybody had something that they were passionate about, and everybody cared about something in their community, but they were all different. So that was the seed of the idea that became the VMware Foundation, and that is that everyone has something to contribute, and that our foundation should be about the people and the impact that we can create through our army of employees, as opposed to a top-down focus on a specific STEM issue. What I didn't realize at the time, because I had no experience, that that was really weird. <laughter> [It] was really different. No one was doing that. I would go to these philanthropy meetings, and everybody asked, "What's VMware's strategic issue?"

Morris: "What's your issue?"

Acutt: "What's our issue?" I was like, "Well, our issue is everything. Our issue is what our people care about." People would scratch their heads and go, "Okay, I think she's weird." <laughter> No, I don't think anyone said that. But it really was like swimming upstream, in the beginning. But it was so powerful, because ultimately, we landed on this idea that the foundation was about Citizen Philanthropy. It all kind of ties back to some of my earlier work. One of the things we didn't talk about in my PhD work that inspired me was the impact of Citizen Science in driving and motivating corporations to change. There was this organization out of Berkeley called the Bucket Brigade, and they would literally take buckets [outfitted] with air sampling capabilities and tools in this bucket, and go and sample the air around the refineries in the north part of the Bay here. They were doing the same thing, the Bucket Brigade, had gone to South Africa and the petrochemical industry [with] this idea of the citizen collecting data and being part of the process. [That] really was resonant for me. So, I thought about, "Well, what would that mean if the employee was a citizen philanthropist?" You know the origins of the word "Philanthropy"? The etymology of the word "Philanthropy" is, in essence, "The love of humankind." That just was perfect, because everything that I'd heard from [VMware] people was that they cared about something, and they cared about their community, people, the environment. That was, to me, the essence of philanthropy, the love of humankind. You add the citizen piece of that, and [now] it was about, as a corporate employee, you are also a citizen in your community, and the [VMware] foundation then became a platform to give employees the tools and the resources to activate that philanthropist in them. So, that was really, the essence of it, and what it became, what our mission became <laughs>.

Morris: So, could you state the mission or the founding mission?

Acutt: Yeah, the founding mission was to give more than we take, and to empower employees to contribute their time, talent, and resources to the causes they care most about. tThat was the long version. The short version was to be an active citizen philanthropist in your community.

Morris: So what were some of the programs that you and your team developed to enable employees to be citizens and philanthropists?

Acutt: In addition to the standard things like disaster relief and matching gifts, which I'll tell you a little bit about how we put a spin on that. One of the most powerful programs that I'm so proud of is our service learning program, which was an initiative to give employees paid time to volunteer in their community. Now, volunteering and volunteer PTO, or time off to volunteer, wasn't new, and at the time, there were a number of Silicon Valley companies doing something similar. But our approach was different in that we intentionally didn't call it volunteer time off, we called it service learning. That is reflective of, again, [inspired by] my time in education around recognizing, when I was an educator, that the most powerful learning our students had was when they were in those companies doing a project, learning hands-on. When I thought about that, "How does that translate into business and into a corporate experience?" It became clear that there's sort of a humility that's important to really create an exchange of value, and that's what we wanted to create. We wanted volunteering not to be the sort of hero notion where the corporate executives sort of parachute into a nonprofit project, and then they parachute out and they're the hero because they volunteered their time. To me, that wasn't resonant of the kinds of values that Betsy, and Bill, and Mark, and others, and Paul had talked about. So we were really intentional in creating a program that was about service and about learning. So, as part of the deal in getting paid time off, 40 hours of paid time to go and volunteer for whatever cause sung to you, or spoke to you, we asked our employees to come back and reflect on what they learned. It was simple, one question: "What did you learn?" Kris, I tell you, that was incredible. It was like we'd given people a gift to open up their stories. Over the years, I mean, we've built up-- and maybe that's part of what is VMware's legacy, is this incredible anthology of people's stories, of being empowered by their company and paid to go out and do something that matters, and what it meant to people. It really touched a chord. It touched a chord with people, and at the time, I don't think I really appreciated this yearning and sense of purpose that citizen philanthropy and service learning created for people.

Morris: It seems to me, it also gives people just a sense of freedom, that they could go and really try something that maybe they've always wanted to do--

Acutt: Oh, absolutely.

Morris: -that they've always been interested in this field, or a cause, or they really wanted to learn a skill, or to try to use skills that were rusty. I mean, it opens that door so wide, that it's a learning experience for you. It's a service to the entity that you're supporting, but it's a learning experience at the same time.

Acutt: Absolutely, and that's why this service-learning part was so important, because it not only gave people exactly what you just said, this opportunity to go and explore their passion, and to give in a way that-- there was a freedom in it, and a huge learning, personally. But I will tell you probably the most powerful stories were the ones where people learnt about the "other". I think in corporate volunteering, sometimes we get so-- there's so much sort of energy around these big group activities, and the photo op at the end, not in the relationship, and this idea of the person that you are working with, or the nonprofit, coming into that relationship as an equal, and learning as much from them as they learn from you. That's transformative, and the stories that people would tell about how-- that experience, and the sense of humility that was important in going into it, created for them in their lives. I think those will live on. Of course, there's the wonderful nonprofit, Thousand Points of Light. But that's it. It's these touches, and they amplify, and you think about VMware's employee base, and each one of those people is a little light that then lights other lights.

Morris: So how did this approach become-- I don't want to say how did it become part of VMware's culture, because I think, from what I know of VMware's culture, it grew out of it--

Acutt: Yes.

Morris: -very naturally. What you brought really expressed something that was already there at VMware.

Acutt: Absolutely.

Morris: But talking about how you have to have that company culture to sustain a sustainability focus, how do you think the foundation and its development, and the idea of citizen philanthropy helped build this platform for--

Acutt: The culture?

Morris: The culture?

Acutt: Oh. So, this is very important, and I say this all the time, that the VMware Foundation didn't create the culture of community that we have at VMware, but it brought it out. It enabled, and I think it fueled what was already there. I think back, and, of course, I joined in 2010, so there's already a very important-- the early phase of VMware's culture, that was the roots. What we did with the VMware Foundation was we created some structure, and we watered those roots, and from that emerged this incredible culture of service, and culture of community.

So, I'll just give you kind of a tangible example of how I saw that happen. So, we spent the early parts of building the foundation, and we didn't do any sponsorships, no sponsorships. We didn't do big events. We spent the first two years working on enabling culture. Maybe later we can talk about how you do that. But we spent a lot of time for example, we did a service-learning fair. I remember, I think it was in the first eight months, where we brought non-profits from around the Bay Area to VMware campus, and we had this big event where we invited everyone. It was like a two-hour period over lunch, and we brought in

food. <laughs> That's one thing I learnt in Silicon Valley, if you wanted people to show up, make sure there's food, and it worked. But what was so amazing was our big hall was packed with people.

So we did things like that and created the infrastructure, the backend systems of how we were going to approve time off for people, our matching gifts, and then we worked on another program, which we can talk about later, called Citizen Philanthropy Impact Grants. But that was in the first two years, and then during that period, we had a CEO transition, and Paul Maritz left, and Pat Gelsinger became CEO. One of the great things about Pat is in his first 60 days, maybe 90 days, he kicked off a project around values, because he wanted to understand what the company values were. I was very lucky to be part of that project. Again, we took a sort of a grounded theory, although I wouldn't say that <laughs> in the boardroom, but that's really what it was, and talking to employees. We went through a process to identify what the company's values were. Because up until that point, the company values were written, and I still have it, this piece of paper that Diane Greene had written, with what the company stands for, and the core values. I'll never forget, humility-- humility and humor were on that list. So this exercise was Pat's opportunity to establish what is here, and establish what is going to be. Out of that, we identified what now is the infamous EPIC2 Values. You ask any VMware employee what the company values are, and it's EPIC. And then you ask them, "Well, what does that stand for?" and it rolls off the tongue: Execution, Passion, Integrity, Customers, and Community. So, through that process of defining what the values are going to be, we engaged employees around the world, and "passion" was very, very clear, and clearly around innovation, and what VMware stands for. Of course, "execution", getting stuff done."Integrity," that has always been a part of the company's values. And then "customer", of course, <laughs> who we serve. But what was amazing is that "community" was up there. It was one of the top values when we looked across all of the feedback from the various sessions that we did. Community, and giving, and service had become so important that when Pat came on board, there was no way that community could not be part of our core values. So, that's just a little short, I think, description of how that came to be, and it wasn't by accident, it was by intention. Taking what was already there, creating structure around it, watering it and allowing that to seed and emerge. So much so that people, you ask any VMware employee what community is about at VMware, and they will tell you about the kinds of things that the company stands for, the way that we create this platform to give and contribute and be active citizen philanthropists.

Morris: The last thing I want to ask you about on that note is about how you disseminate, or build, I guess, or water, nurture this sense of community across a company that is tens of thousands of people all over the world?

Acutt: Yes, and, I mean, it--

Morris: And growing, growing, growing.

Acutt: From 2010 to today, we went through massive growth. That's a really important question, because that, to me, is the difference between talking the talk and walking the talk, and it has to do with kind of what I said earlier around creating change. There's really two fundamental pieces to it, or two sides of the coin. One is hearts and minds, which we did really, really well at

. The other is systems and processes. So, how we did that, and this is sort of the I used to, with my team, we used to talk about our *actual* jobs. Anyway, we had our job titles, director of this, and blah, blah, blah, but our *actual* titles were "undercover change agents", <laughter> and what we did was we really tried to understand the systems within the business and integrate into them. So, for example, communications— we looked at and we worked with our communications team to make sure that we integrated into every possible channel that we could opportunities to raise awareness with employees around what the programs were. Around-- oh gosh, when was it? It was probably around 2012, 2013, we also came up with this idea to kickstart that, values, at the very beginning of the employee journey. At the time, of course, I was working under Betsy Sutter in HR, and we talked a lot about the employee journey, and the employee cycle, from before you even come to interview to when you become an alumni, an employee alumni, and the touch points in the employee experience. So, we as the team, my team, would think about those employee life cycle touch points, and where we could integrate and infuse service learning, volunteering, and citizen philanthropy. One great one was this initiative to give employees the gift of giving on their first day. When they joined the company, all employees were given a $25 gift card. We created a partnership with GlobalGiving to do that. So, that was a powerful impression. On your very first day, one of your tasks was to be a citizen philanthropist, to donate-- it's a small amount, $25—to a cause that resonated with *you*. I think that was probably one of the most effective things we did, because it set that tone and it established that culture.Through onboarding, we introduced people to the different kinds of programs. As I said, we would find all sorts of ways to connect. At all-hands meetings, we would do little infomercials, or we would tell stories. I'll never forget, another really important thing that we did in the early days was we took all of our executives to volunteer, and they spent a day in south San José at a school, volunteering. We told that story to employees, and it was important to create permission. Because that, I think, is another thing that can be a real barrier, is permission to actually use work time to go and volunteer. Doing that set the tone from the top, that "No, no, no, we're serious about this. We are giving you paid time to go and do something that's important to you."

Morris: And you have to set that tone at every level of management, right?

Acutt: Yes.

Morris: So that the managers say "Yes" when the ask comes in. They say, "How can we make this happen in our work cycle?"

Acutt: Yeah. What is amazing is that it was sort of like a flywheel, and you asked me,"How did you sustain that?" At some point when you do that, when you focus on both, integrating into systems and processes, and using communication and demonstrating those values, they build a life of their own, and that flywheel starts to take off. The next thing you know, I'm turning around like, "Oh, so they're doing this incredible program in APJ." So this was a global initiative, and it became just part of our global culture, just was kind of who we are.

Morris: So, at some point, the word "Sustainability" does end up in your job title.

Acutt: <laughs> Yes.

Morris: I know job titles are not always the most reflective of what we actually do. Certainly not in my case.

Acutt: So true <laughs>.

Morris: Okay, so let's talk about that evolution now.

Acutt: Yeah, and that's, again, I think, a testament to VMware and the kind of company that VMware created, was really an opportunity for people to build their career and have different kinds of experiences. So, I often sort of try to explain my tenure at VMware in three chapters. So, we just talked about the first chapter, which was leading the VMware Foundation, and the second chapter is where sustainability came in. Again, it was a really interesting moment, and things kind of came together. I'll just tell you the story. So, at the time, I was sitting in Prom [Promontory] A, which for folks who are familiar with the VMware campus, was sort of the corporate center. I happened to sit next to the head of IR, and he knew my background in sustainability because we were cubemates at the time. He got a letter on his desk one day that had made its way from EMC—and now remember at this time, VMware had been acquired by EMC. So, it had been addressed to the chairman of EMC, and it was requesting-- the letter was from the Carbon Disclosure Project, which is a nonprofit in the United Kingdom, and the letter requested that VMware disclose our carbon emissions independently of EMC. My colleague at the time was really perplexed by this, and he showed me the letter, and really, that was the moment—because I knew, and I said to him, "Oh, my gosh, <laughs> I know exactly what this is, and I think I know how to do this." So I took the letter to Betsy Sutter, who was my boss at the time in HR, and I asked permission to work on it, to put together a sustainability strategy for VMware. Because at the time, the company didn't have any sustainability goals or policies. However, there was always what I call a sensibility about sustainability, and that goes back to Diane Greene in the early days, and I described my experience walking into the campus on that first day, and it being built by this famous architect, an environmental architect. So there was this sensibility and responsibility already there, but there were no formal goals. So I got the green light to go and do this sort of side project while running the Foundation, and that led me to many interesting conversations, and I'd love to relay a story now. Probably one of the most important was with our CTO at the time, Steve Herrod, and I'll never forget it, because I was curious. Even though my job was leading the Foundation, I really wanted to understand the business and the technology. So I had this conversation with Steve Herrod, and he explained virtualization to me, and a light went off, and I realized, "My word, the core value proposition of this company is about energy efficiency, and that's sustainability." The fact that you can shrink the footprint of the physical infrastructure and gain all of this advantage in terms of pure energy was like, "Oh, my goodness, why aren't we talking about this?!" So that inspired this strategy work that I was doing on the side, and we came up with-- this is so-- <laughs> I mean, I look back at it now, and it was really forward thinking—that had two components. One was we needed to get our house in order as a public Silicon Valley company on basics. We needed to get an environmental management system. We needed to be able to measure our carbon emissions. We needed to be able to report on them. So that was part one. But the other part was really kind of-- it piqued my interest, and I think when you start down-- and maybe that was the researcher in me coming back—when you start down a path, and you have more and more questions. So I wanted to understand from Steve and others, "Well, what is that impact? Is anyone measuring it?" And we weren't. I did find someone who had built a

carbon calculator, which is another part of the story. But we went back and put the strategy together, and the plan was to set big goals, ambitious goals to reduce our car first of all, to understand what our carbon footprint was in the first place, and then to reduce it to become carbon neutral. In some ways, we were catching up to many of our peers in being carbon neutral. But then we made the bold goal by 2020 to be 100% renewable energy powered. At the same time, we set this kind of-- it was a little bit, as some of my colleagues would say, "fluffy" at the time. <laughter> But to figure out what the environmental impact of virtualization was, and that's what led to then my full-time job, and getting <laughter> the title of-- at the time, it was vice president of sustainability. Well, let me pause there, because there's the next chapter, which starts with innovation, and the office of the CTO.

Morris: So let's talk about that first sustainability agenda. First of all, the measuring VMware's impact of its products and its technology, right? So--

Acutt: Yeah.

Morris: -what kinds of tools and approaches did you use to try to get a handle on that?

Acutt: Yeah, that was a challenging project, and I remember asking a big brand consulting firm if they could help me with it, and they turned the project down. So then we kind of went back to the drawing board and brought in a bunch of legendary VMware people and put our heads together around how we could do this. Now, the challenge wasn't just at the individual sort of virtual machine level, but was at the industry scale, and ultimately, that led us to doing our own sort of back of the envelope calculations. I have to give a shout out to business development team, and to folks in the office of the CTO, and a really brave group of people who did a RADIO project—which is our R&D Offsite—project, on how did we calculate this? That led us then to getting sort of an internal ballpark around what we thought we had enabled. I remember taking it to Ray O'Farrell, who was the CTO at the time Of course, everyone's aware of this legacy, but we'd never documented it. When Ray first looked at the data, he kind of looked at me sideways. <laughs> He's like, "Are you sure about this?" Because we'd come up with a really big number. He said, "Nicola, you need to go back and check this, and then you need to validate it." So what we did was we then sponsored a project with IDC [International Data Corporation], and they helped us [validate] from a credibility perspective, because they took their virtualization tracker, which looked across the industry at the adoption of virtualization. Based on their methodology, with input obviously from my team and on the-- well, the energy and carbon calculation side—we put together a framework, which then, for five years, we updated every year. The most recent [analysis] was an enormous number that VMware can be very, very proud of, and it's over 1.2 billion metric tons of CO_2 were avoided in the data centers because of VMware, because of virtualization. That's extraordinary. It's an impact that I hope is remembered as part of VMware's legacy. VMware bent [the] curve on data center emissions.

Morris: Were you getting feedback? I've heard from other people I've talked to that one of the feedback points they often got from customers was the cost savings--

Acutt: Yes.

Morris: -which was an energy cost savings. So, did you also come up with, or were you charged with coming up with a dollar amount, or a euro amount, or whatever--

Acutt: Yeah.

Morris: -around that savings as well?

Acutt: Absolutely, and those two things go hand in hand, the business value and the sustainability value. This carbon calculator that we talked about evolved over time, and we built various evolutions of it based on the TCO, the Total Cost of Ownership.And we were able to show, at an individual level, what that economic benefit was, and then energy, and then translate that into carbon emissions. Fast forward— today, that is now a feature that we built into vROps. So that [capability] exists today for customers, and it came [about] out of these conversations with luminaries like Steve Herrod and Ray O'Farrell, [and many others] and today, customers can see [both energy and cost] now.

Morris: What did you do on the side of getting your own house in order?

Acutt: That was the sort of scramble in the middle period of my journey at VMware, to get basic systems in place, and to evolve those from spreadsheets, <laughs> calculating [emissions], [to] working with our real estate team to try to get a handle on our impacts, [through] software-based tools, to enterprise scale tools. That process is so important, because you can't really set ambitious goals until you know what you've got, your baseline. So that was critical, and it improved over time. Like I said, once we had the data, we could figure out a path, and initially, we needed to catch up to be carbon neutral, and we achieved that two years ahead of our schedule, in 2018. And then the next piece of the journey was to power our global operations with renewable energy. So that meant understanding the renewable energy markets, and figuring out how we were going to do that. VMware—people often say, "Well, Nicola, VMware's a software company." And I'd say "Yes, I know, we make ones and zeros. It's not like we're a mining company." But still, in order to have credibility, you've got to walk that talk, and to me, it was really important that we created that house in order]. I think, back to both Mark Peek (and his guidance to me around sustainability of the Foundation) and then later on, Zane Rowe, who was our [most recent] CFO and partnered with me and the team on [the challenge of] how do we build a long-term investment plan, a long-term investment model, to maintain our commitments to being powered by renewable energy and to meet them. Because later on, we set more ambitious targets around reducing [emissions] getting to net zero. That's another phase we can talk about. But [it] was very, very important that we were fiscally responsible about how we approached that challenge, and then ultimately, baked it into our just operating procedures, and baked it into our P&L [profit and loss]. [Sustainability] became part of doing business. Because we were able to do that, we were able to accelerate.

Morris: Whether you are actually building a box or not, you do have a carbon footprint. Everyone has a footprint, so everyone is part of the solution.

Acutt: Absolutely, and I think that [the] concept of the value chain is really only today starting to emerge and become resonant, and part of [the] evolution of sustainability being [only] a real estate [footprint]. I

used to talk about recycling your yogurt cups in the break room. "Super important. Let's keep doing that, everybody." But when we think about the bigger system within which we're operating. Yes, we're a software company. We make <laughs> ones and zeros. But that software [footprint] is fundamentally dependent on reliable power. All the amazing things we can do in software won't happen if we don't have reliable power, and that's where sustainability and climate change integrates or connects directly with technology. So, yes, getting your house in order, making sure that your business—you run a sustainable business and that means everything, like procuring renewable energy, taking care of your waste streams, etc. But then [the footprint] also about, how do you think about the products that you're creating in the world that enable better solutions? So that, I would say, is sort of chapter three.

Morris: Chapter three. <laughter> There we are. Because it seems to me that the role of technology innovation is so vital now, and has been, arguably, all along. But we're seeing it.We're recognizing it now, the innovation it's going to require to keep our planet sustainable. So how did VMware start to move in that direction?

Acutt: Yes. Really important pivot point was the combination of a spirit of innovation that's always been there [at VMware], and that was, I think, ignited, certainly for me, during Pat Gelsinger's tenure. I never forget one random <laughs> meeting, where I was waiting for somebody else, and Pat walked past and came and sat down, and asked me how we were doing on our sustainability goals. I told him [some of] what I've sort of shared with you up to—because that's where we were, chapter two, end of chapter two. Pat paused and looked at me, and he said, "Nicola, can we get there faster? Can we innovate faster? What more can we do?" I said, "Okay, Pat, let me think about it. I'll come back to you." <laughter> I did, and what we came back with was the seed of what became then chapter three, and that was that we needed to think beyond our boundaries as a company, our physical footprint, and the early innovation that I talked about, [including] documenting and creating a framework for capturing the legacy that VMware had created, like the legacy of virtualization—and go to the next level. We came up with this idea, it's <laughs> crazy, to build a prototype community microgrid on the VMware campus <laughs> that was [to be] powered entirely by renewable energy. And that we could use as an incubator to explore the what's going to happen once technology and compute pushes out to the edge, and [when] we're working in environments where compute needs to be out there, not necessarily in a central or an on-prem data center, and the energy needs [associated with edge computing]. Recognizing the fact that the world is going through an energy transition, and computing is going through a massive transition, was really something exciting and an opportunity to think beyond where we were. Pat agreed and greenlighted this crazy idea. <laughter> [This mattered because] I think something we in the technology field take for granted, really, is that fundamental dependence on a reliable energy system, and the reality is that that system was designed over 100 years ago for a very different kind of economy than we have [today]. The promise, to me, of technology and AI, and where we're going, [means] can't be reliant-- that [current energy] infrastructure's not sufficient or reliable, and certainly not green and clean enough for the future that we can imagine, and the kind of future that's possible with technology. So that's what we wanted to do in this project, and we started on that journey. It's maybe a story for another time, Kris, around innovation and how to [execute] that kind of complex multi-stakeholder project on a working corporate campus in the midst of a global pandemic.

Morris: I think this is the perfect place for it. Because we're right down the road from it, first of all, right? Also, this kind of innovation, this kind of thinking is, I think, honestly, where technology companies need to go to help us solve some of these problems. So yes, please.

Acutt: Right. Well, let me try to make a very complex, challenging four-year process succinct. So, we'd got the green light to do this prototype, and the idea was-- the vision was to create an independent system, to connect all of the buildings on the Palo Alto campus, in the Research Park, to a modular microgrid, or energy system, so that the campus could either-- well, A, had renewable local clean energy, number one. Then [B] in the event of an outage, a brownout, or a power shutdown, the company, the entire campus could island off the main grid and function independently, but then also connect back into the grid and provide energy and grid services. There's a whole component of <music in background>-- oh, that was lovely. <laughter> Might be time for me to dance and celebrate! <laughter>

<off topic conversation>

Acutt: No problem. So that was the vision— create this modular system that enables resilience for the business, operating efficiency, because you can manage your energy loads, and, in essence, be much smarter about how you're using energy. Again, this is all dependent on software and technology systems. Then [we also wanted to] be a community partner and an innovation hub. Those were the four components of this project that we set out to accomplish to prove that this was possible. And we did, notwithstanding all of those challenges. For example, we had literally just broken ground when we went into lockdown in March of 2020. Kris, I tell you, my goodness, so many lessons in what we could never have expected. I remember, in fact, when we were in the final stages of the contracting process, I had to ask one of our legal colleagues what the concept *force majeure* meant, and lo and behold--

Morris: It happened.

Acutt: It happened. An event that's completely out of anyone's control. That sort of black swan event, in many ways. But we persevered, and it was through the relationships and the collaboration that we ultimately—we could've given up so many times, but we persevered. <laughs> [Even when] we discovered unmarked utilities underground. We discovered all sorts of things. One of the challenges was there wasn't any regulatory framework for a microgrid of this size yet, and so our partnership with the city of Palo Alto and the Palo Alto utilities was crucial in enabling this kind of new vision. Even though the vision was big, we started small, with two systems. Ultimately, it took-- well, don't quote me on this, but I think it was around two years to get [underway]. Of course, then there were supply chain delays, and getting the batteries, and, oh my word. It took much longer <laughs> than we had expected to get in place. That was [challenge] number one, the technology, using existing technology, bringing it, testing it, and proving that you can make it [work]— so this is a retrofit example. Because a lot of times people talk about these new energy systems only in greenfield, in a new build situation. We proved [retrofit] very difficult, but you can do it. You can build a microgrid in an existing campus and [with existing] infrastructure. The operational efficiency piece around integrating with building management systems [was a challenge] we learned a ton about that. But I would say probably the most-- the part about this project that I'm most proud of, and that really speaks to VMware's culture and that vision of giving more

than we take, was our partnership with the city, and building a solution that would support the community in the event of a disaster. We designed and built the microgrid to enable the City of Palo Alto's Mobile Emergency Communications Unit, the MEOC, which is a big-- I think of it as a big firetruck [but a] communications vehicle that's used in any disaster, in any event, natural or human-made event. Actually, it's used broadly in the Bay Area, because there's just a few of them available, and we're very lucky to have one in Palo Alto. So we designed the system. One of the biggest resiliency constraints is that those vehicles are dependent on fuel, and they only have 72 hours of diesel available. If the diesel supply is interrupted, then you have a point of failure in community support and communications. Our solution was to be a backup because we could plug that, the MEOC, the truck, directly into the microgrid, and that truck would have indefinite power. We proved that that is possible, and that you can do it, and entered into a memorandum of understanding with the City of Palo Alto. That's a legacy, an innovation, a different kind of innovation, and I talk about [it] as public-private innovation, where company and the public sector work together to create solutions to really important issues. Being in the Bay Area, we've all experienced the impact of devastating wildfires and massive rain events that cause havoc, and having resilience is going to be part of the new normal in a carbon-constrained and in a changing climate.

Morris: It's a fascinating story to me because it does absolutely show that trajectory of needing to think about all of the threads, all of the components of the problem, right?

Acutt: Absolutely.

Morris: And also, recognizing that, like you said, that absolute core need for power, <laughs> that we take it for granted so much.And we can reduce power use through virtualization--

Acutt: Absolutely.

Morris: -through new technologies for systems use, for better air conditioning. Whatever it is, right?

Acutt: You name it, yes.

Morris: We can reduce the need, but the need is always there, always there.

Acutt: Absolutely, and so that's where innovation comes in. I appreciate the notion that innovation is about constraints, and we have one *massive* design constraint right now, and that is planetary constraints. We are up against planetary boundaries. To me, that's an innovation problem. It's an innovation question. How do we think about the future of compute in a different energy system? In a distributed energy system, one that is clean, reliable, and renewable. That's massive.

Morris: To me, as a historian, I look at where we were in our energy usage 100 years ago, 50 years ago, when you and I were just new on this planet—

Acutt: Yes!

Morris: -right? That the innovation of all these things, is what has raised the bar, raised—

Acutt: Absolutely.

Morris: -the use of energy, and now it needs to be the innovation that—

Acutt: Sustains it.

Morris: Sustains it, right.

Acutt: Right. Yeah, it goes back to what we were talking about earlier, that the system that we rely on was designed 100 years ago. So we need to fundamentally rethink that system in order for us to solve, actually, many of the problems that we've created now.And technology is crucial. I think about it as sort of this center point in a trifecta of system-level changes. There's policy enabling environment, there's the economic incentives, and then there's technology, and those three things together, to me, is what the future is about, if we're going to unlock a better future that is shaped by technology, but also we use technology to regenerate the system that we live in.

Morris: So now—just to harp on job titles—now your job title—your role in leading the sustainability strategy was in the office of the CTO-—

Acutt: Yes.

Morris: -for several years?

Acutt: Yes, and I think that's actually very important also, as part of the story, because that's unique. I don't know any of my peers who have the lead sustainability job that operate out of the office of the CTO, in the heart of R&D, in the heart of engineering. I think we—

Morris: Most are in—

Acutt: Now, it's interesting.

Morris: -sort of ESG—

Acutt: It's such an interesting field, because there's no one [functional] place [for the role]. But you see a lot—there's actually been a shift. In the early days—I think about like the "1.0" days of corporate sustainability, they were roles in EHS, Environmental Health and Safety, or in real estate.And then you started to see roles in marketing and communications. More recently, you're starting to see chief sustainability officers in either strategy or finance, which, again, is a reflection of this journey of the field. I definitely am an outlier in that my sustainability role, [since] that middle chapter and this last chapter, I've been operating out of the office of the CTO.

Morris: So now you are the chief sustainability officer.

Acutt: Yes.

Morris: So now you have your own office, so to speak. <laughter> You're not sharing a cube anymore.

Acutt: I do, yes. I graduated to an office, <laughter> and then I graduated to a virtual—

Morris: To your home.

Acutt: -home office <laughter>.

Morris: To the desk next to the dishwasher, right?

Acutt: Yes, precisely <laughs>.

Morris: So, I guess what I want to ask is, from this platform, what is the drive? We've talked all about it already. We certainly touched on this already. But just what is the drive forward from this platform now?

Acutt: So this platform, I describe it as wearing two hats, and the first is the enterprise role. That's my corporate—my chief sustainability role, where I am responsible at the corporate level for VMware's strategy around sustainability, and our long-term vision. We can talk a little bit about what that is, and how that has evolved from our previous 2020 goals to, our mission around sustainability, equity, and trust. That's part one of the portfolio.And then the other piece [hat] is more of a functional role, and that is oversight of all the components. We've brought together in the office the chief sustainability officer, or the ESG office, those components. Within that is corporate social responsibility, the Foundation, the ESG operations team, the reporting team, the carbon accounting and finance, as well as our renewable energy, procurement, supply chain, and then [the] sustainability innovation engineering team. — [ ], the chief sustainability officer role is [ ] T-shaped, where you've got to have—you have the enterprise breadth across strategy and long-term planning, and then the operational functional depth, which is focused around more your short-term execution against specific goals.

Morris: So let's talk about the 2030 goals, is what you call it, yes?

Acutt: Yes.

Morris: So what's this next step forward—-

Acutt: Yeah, and—

Morris: -to 2030?

Acutt: -That step was, as we talked, inspired by the end of that second phase, and Pat Gelsinger's challenge to innovate faster and set more ambitious goals. So, we had started that process in 2019 to re-look at our strategy with fresh eyes. That's important, and I think it's another part of a CSO role, is that strategy isn't static. It has to be dynamic, and it has to evolve with the business. Now, VMware's business had evolved very rapidly from the four years prior, when we'd originally set those sustainability goals.And I think going forward, chief sustainability officer's [are] going to be challenged with the speed and the pace of change, especially in technology, to be adaptive. So [ ] the call to action was to reset our goals. But fundamentally, [ ] the holy grail of sustainability in ESG, [is] [ ] integrating into the business strategy and where the company is going. That's what we set out to do, align our social and environmental aspirations and goals with what we were trying to accomplish [as a business]. During this period was VMware's evolution from this software-defined data center to multi-cloud, and obviously more recently, AI. So we underwent a process of re-looking at what are the most material issues to VMware stakeholders— so our customers, our suppliers, our employees, etc.—and where is the business going, and what is the greatest impact on the business? Through that classic strategy setting process, we identified three fundamental outcomes. And those were environmental sustainability through decarbonization, or decarbonizing digital infrastructure. That's our bread and butter. [But] how do we make digital infrastructure of the future carbon free? Both through making it radically efficient, [including] our own software, but also the environment around which that infrastructure works.[That's] number one. [Outcome] number two was about equity and outcomes around how do we play a role, VMware, in enabling a more accessible digital future? A key part of that was [ ] accelerated in the pandemic, and that's the digital infrastructure for remote working. Workspace ONE, for example, became fundamental to everyone's success in quickly pivoting to that distributed work environment. Thinking about it through the lens of equity, and how do we make [computing] work and digital experiences more accessible around the world? The third piece of the [203] strategy is [the outcome] around trust, and trust earned not only through compliance with privacy and data security, which is a massive issue in software and in tech, and for all companies, all of our customers, but also trust earned through resilience and product security. Those are the three components of what we then built out as our long-term strategy, and what was beautiful about that is it dovetailed right into our business strategy. One of the biggest compliments is, without prompting, [when] our CEO, Raghu Raghuram, he talks about how sustainability is—our business strategy because we focused on those three outcomes for our customers. In addition to enabling that multi-cloud infrastructure and AI capabilities, we're doing it in a way that's sustainable, that's equitable, and engenders trust.

Morris: <laughs> It's a big job.

Acutt: It is. I think people really underestimate the scope of a—and I would say a truly business-focused Chief Sustainability Officer role.

Morris: I think a lot of people outside of the industry see it as a mouthpiece role, and don't understand that the role is, in its best way, meant to impact all of the company's operations and drive a strategy towards achievable goals. That it's not just someone who's going to be available for interviews—

Acutt: One hundred percent.

Morris: -or sign the ESG report <laughs>.

Acutt: One hundred percent. As I said, I think [ ] the holy grail —[ ] the real work, is organizational change and transformation. Sustainability is a transformation agenda, and that's not going to happen if your role is just a spokesperson, and the proof will be in then the outcomes. This sort of takes us full circle, back to—I think about the early days of my graduate work, and thinking about "How do you drive real change?" There is the voluntary piece, there is obviously a regulation piece, and then there's the market-based piece. It's no longer going to be sufficient to just talk the talk, [we've] got to walk the talk by executing and building it into the business. It's no longer enough to have a little CSR team that does a report off to the side of the business. That's not going to cut it. It's not going to get to the long-term value, and it's not going to get to those complex challenges that we face as a society.

Morris: That's all the questions I have. Are there things that we haven't touched on that you'd like to share?

Acutt: This has been a great conversation.

Morris: I'm so glad.

Acutt: We covered an arc of—

Morris: We sure have.

Acutt: -certainly my story. But I think more importantly, [my arc reflects] the [bigger] story of sustainability in technology and in the [Silicon] Valley, and how it's really matured. It's grown up, in a way, from being this afterthought to something that's now at the top of the agenda. Having this conversation with you has given me pause to think about wow, we've come really far, but we haven't come far enough. Maybe I think what we haven't talked about is where to from here? Where do we go from here? What does that look like? What does the future look like? I'm excited about it, I think, with full humility and understanding what we're up against—the scale, the planetary scale of change. But being here [at the Computer History Museam] is also really inspiring because of the spirit of innovation, that we, with intention, can direct innovation for large-scale, positive impact.

Morris: Thank you.

Acutt: Thank you.

Morris: It's been great talking to you today.

Acutt: It's been my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Morris: Thank you.

END OF THE INTERVIEW