

# The Emerging Enterprise



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In a future marked by climate change, recurring crises, and technological transformations, how will the very nature of enterprises, their business models, and ways of operating transform? What role could companies play with regard to these changes?

This reflection is rendered all the more necessary as virtually no foresight on the future of corporations exists. The Emerging Enterprise project aims to fill this gap.

Project information sheet: See page 7

To answer these questions, from 2020 to 2022, The Emerging Enterprise brought together representatives from more than 40 businesses operating in France, as well as one trade union (CFDT), the National Agency for the Improvement of Working Conditions (Anact), and researchers, to imagine 12 companies of the year 2050 with the help of 5 science fiction writers.

The methodology blended classic foresight elements with the use of imagination and fiction. Together, participants imagined what companies of the future might look like and brought back challenges, avenues for action, and points of debate relevant today.

Within certain organizations, “landing workshops” enabled us to link this work to each firm’s current strategic challenges.

The 12 composite texts that arose from these workshops contain numerous ideas and points for consideration – some already known but here placed in a foresight context, some truly new.

Out of these stories, we have then extracted 10 “Archetypes” of businesses of the future.

By publishing this work, our intention is to create a space for inventive and open discussion about the transformation of organizations, and to do so with the people that comprise them.

# 1. The 12 Fictional Companies

## How were they created?

Between 2020 and 2022, 12 groups composed of representatives of businesses and other organizations met at various points and in diverse contexts—some online and some in person; some ad hoc gatherings of various corporations, others stemming from an existing network.

Each group consisted of at most 12 people from different organizations and met during four half-day workshops. During the first day, group members shared their own fictional references in relation to businesses of the future, before working on “change factors” (see appendix 2) that describe why (although not how) businesses operating in 2050 will differ from those of today. The second and third meetings took the form of writing workshops led by professional, the majority of whom come from the science fiction. Finally, on the last day the group reflected on their work, in order to deepen certain ideas and identify avenues for further discussion.

The groups were not instructed to imagine desirable companies. Instead, the intention above all else was to allow their imaginations free rein, with the help of the writing team under the sole constraint of the change factors they themselves had selected. The companies of 2050 that emerged from this work are therefore generally neither wholly ideal nor wholly objectionable, and very often (as is the case today) grapple with challenges, moral dilemmas, conflicts of interest, and contradictions – which make their stories interesting.

## The fictional texts

The texts produced by the groups, edited by each writer, generally take on a “mosaic” form, reflecting their multiple authors. In some cases, the writers have also contributed a personal text inspired by the group’s work. All of these texts are available online under the same Creative Commons license. They are, however, written in French

## And the 12 fictional companies are...

- CLEANWAY: “Facilitating thoughtful, ecological, collective daily mobility”
- DRIVE TO THRIVE: “Coalitions for transitions”
- ECOBREIZH: “Repairing life”
- EQUAL!: “The market for (in)equality”
- FUNGI: “Bubble Management System”
- HEALTH’R: “Occupational health insurance in Space”
- KNOWMAD: “Global support network for migrant populations”
- LACTERRE: “Decarbonizing food, a job for pros”
- LUCI: “A luminous, but opaque company”
- MAXIMUS: “A cooperative conquering the world, but at what price?”
- OAZO: “The swarming community”
- TANGO: “A paste to connect with all living beings”

## 2. From Fiction to the Archetypes of the Businesses of the Future

What can we draw from this “creative foresight” work in terms of ideas, questions, action points, and possible projects, looking at the future and the possibly radical transformation of what we currently call corporations?

For ease of reading, we have identified:

- **Two structuring axes:**  
Politicization / Autonomization of companies  
The company as a collective project / The company as a system.
- **Ten “archetypes” of companies of the future:**  
The Corp B, the Enterpocene, the Commons Manager, the Reactivator, the Guild, the Automated Autonomous Organization, the Societor, the Private Public Service, the Marketrix, the Zomblnc.



# TWO STRUCTURING AXES

## Axis 1: Politicization / Autonomization of corporation

The ecological challenges (climate change, loss of biodiversity, etc.) have had a profound impact on the participants' creations. Together, they are seen not as a set of technical problems to be solved, but as a fundamental discontinuity that demands reconsideration of, among many things, the place and role of companies in society.

Discontinuity #1: the availability of resources that are essential to the operation of enterprises is no longer certain. Energy, water, and some raw materials may be in short supply. Global supply chains are weakened, as are digital networks.

Discontinuity #2: the growing awareness, both inside and outside of companies, that they bear (at minimum collectively, but often also individually) a significant responsibility in the current environmental crisis, and that they must now shoulder it. This realization is accompanied by a "demand for meaning," or the desire among corporate employees to more closely link their day-to-day work with their values: ecology, but also justice, equality, participation in decision-making, etc.

Underneath this lies the widespread feeling within The Emerging Enterprise's groups that public institutions will not be able to make or enforce decisions commensurate with the stakes, requiring other societal actors, including companies, to share the responsibility.

On the one hand, the narratives of the EQV groups are based on signs that these realities and aspirations are being taken into account: the development of purpose-driven companies and B Corps, the rise in importance of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria, the reorientation of certain companies... But they also reflect the expected difficulty of such a transition, whether due to systemic inertia (coming from shareholders, or from legal, accounting, technological, or cultural obstacles), or to more explicit opposition, for example the fight against "woke" ESG criteria in several North American states.

For decades (with the exception, of course, of lobbying activities), companies have attempted to stay as far away as possible from political debate, reflected in the famous Friedman doctrine<sup>1</sup>: "The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits." The drive to take on ecological and social problems brings them back into politics. And if our speculative stories are to be believed, this changes everything: their governance, business models, even the life cycle of companies, from birth to development to death. Thus our first axis, which contrasts the "politicization" of companies that intentionally assume responsibility for addressing economic or social challenges, with their continued or even reinforced "autonomization."

1 Milton Friedman, "A Friedman doctrine—The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits," New York Times, September 13, 1970.

## Axis 2: The company as a collective project / The company as a system

In their book “Refounding the Corporation” (2012)<sup>2</sup>, Armand Hatchuel and Blanche Segrestin describe the company as “the first organism that engages simultaneously in innovative activity, its organization, and its marketing.” But in recent years, a growing tension has emerged between two poles: on one side the collective adventure that the enterprise could represent, and on the other, the optimization of the organization and the creation of economic value.

At their inception, companies tend to focus on a common goal, usually centered around one or several innovations, embodied in a “corporate project,” a brand, and values, updated with more or less regularity. With employees, the organization promotes its corporate culture and “employer brand,” which establishes the company as a human collective in which each person has a meaningful place. This collective nature is also expressed, somewhat paradoxically, through the valorization of the leader or founder: their vision, their ability to rally the enthusiasm of employees, and even forms of participative management, which, very often, rely on the existence of a strong leadership.

This conception of the company as a collective project is at the heart of a more recent trend (and, in the case of France, partly inspired by the work of Hatchuel and Segrestin) to form a concrete *raison d’être* (or purpose) through which the company expresses what it intends to bring into the world (e.g. the PACTE law in France, American “Benefit Corporations”). However, companies can have a corporate “mission” without the intention of changing the world—for example, around an innovation, a form of “disruption,” a specific human collective, a particular mode of organization or management, etc.

On the other hand, over the past century, the business world has seen a staggering development of theories, practices, and tools designed to optimize all aspects of the company. Strategy, design, marketing, operations, logistics, business models, finance, management, individual attitudes, and more recently, environmental and social impacts: there is no facet of the enterprise that has not been investigated by management sciences and consulting firms—formalized, quantified, and supported by specialized software tools or platforms.

Corporate Governance in the 1980s gave shareholders priority over managers—and, therefore, over the rest of the company’s human resources. The power of optimization tools has made possible the automation, outsourcing, contractualization of relationships (even within the organization), and increasing formalization of tasks and reporting—to the benefit of profitability, but often to the detriment of meaning. Thus, the two dimensions that together constitute a company, the collective project and the organizational and valuation methods, find themselves at odds with one another, or at minimum the object of a tension that constitutes our second axis.

2 Blanche Segrestin, Armand Hatchuel, *Refonder l’entreprise*, Paris, Seuil, 2012; in English, see Blanche Segrestin, Kevin Levillain, Armand Hatchuel, “Rethinking the Purpose of the Corporation with the Creative Power of the Enterprise”, in *The Corporation: Rethinking the Iconic Form of Business Organization*, Emerald, 2022

## TEN ARCHETYPES OF EMERGING ENTERPRISES

The Emerging Enterprise's stories, including at times through what they do not contain, suggest a number of clear-cut, significant forms, some new, others substantially transformed, that could shape the corporate landscape of 2050: we call them "Archetypes." The map on page 4 situates them along the two structuring axes described above.

- **The Corp B:** A firm whose existence is entirely defined and conditioned by a public interest mission.
- **The Enterpocene:** A company that does not set out to change the world, but aims not to damage it.
- **The Commons Manager:** A firm that dedicates its organizational expertise to the management of Commons.
- **The Reactivator:** A business dedicated to managing the breakdowns, shortages and other interruptions inherent in the "permanent crisis" of the 2040s and 2050s.
- **The Guild:** A company that focuses on the personal and professional development of its members, leaving production to others.
- **The Private Public Service:** An organization that provides essential services that other actors are unable or no longer able to provide.
- **The Automated Autonomous Organization (AAO):** A company designed to operate and fulfill its missions as automatically as possible.
- **The Societor:** An enterprise that provides the tools and infrastructure for groups of people to create human societies on their own terms.
- **The Marketrix:** A firm that believes that all problems, even the most serious, and all needs, even the most basic, will find the best possible answers in the marketplace.
- **The Zomblnc:** A business whose activities no longer correspond to the needs of the time, but which continues to operate nonetheless.

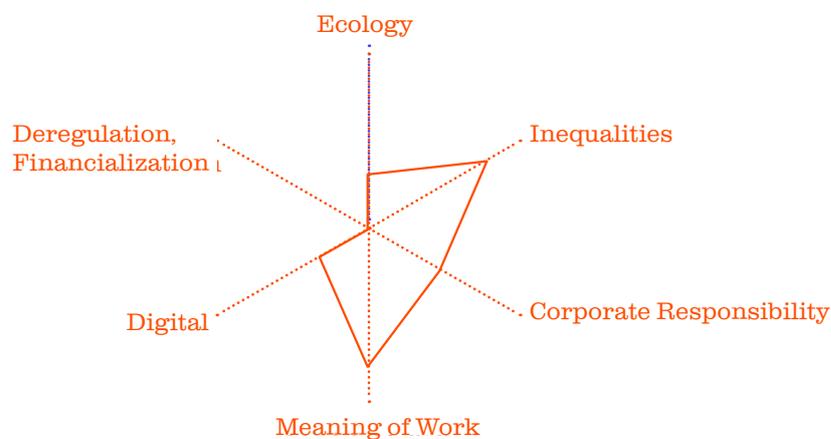
These archetypes should be thought of not as predictions, but rather as consistent forms that emerge from speculative accounts drawn from today's companies.

They are not always pleasing, nor are they easy to evaluate. As with the realities of businesses today, they include their fair share of contradictions. Not everyone will share the same opinion of each archetype. They should be taken as an invitation to debate, to react, and to situate and project oneself within those different scenarios.

## The Archetype “Radar”

Each archetype will be described in a summarized form, as well as in more detail: What these companies typically produce, what their business model is, who owns them and how their governance works, how they are organized, who works for/with them and how...

The archetype is also situated on a “radar map” of the change factors (Appendix 2). The “score” on each axis does not reflect a value judgement, but rather indicates the importance of each factor for that archetype. For example, the Guild is primarily formed around the “Inequality” and “Meaning of Work” factors, secondarily around the “Digital,” “Environment,” and “Expanded Responsibility” axes, and not at all around the “Deregulation and Financialization” factor.



The Guild archetype’s change factor map

## Appendix 1: The Emerging Enterprise Project Fact Sheet

<https://www.plurality-university.org/projects/lentreprise-qui-vient>

A project of the Plurality University Network (Daniel Kaplan, Chloé Luchs), with Ingrid Kandelman (L'Onde Zéro) and Philippe Hagman (Le Travail Redistribué).

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### Researchers

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### Participating companies and organizations

2050.do	Air Liquide	Syny&Ooko
Exco	Geodis	Coopérer pour entreprendre
Le Labo de l'ESS	Lippi	Inspirience
Olvo	Scoping	Metalaw
French Development Agency (AFD)	Atimic	Thales
Expanscience	Green & Blue	Décathlon
Les Relais Solidaires	Machin Bidule	La Maison de la Conversation
Plateau Urbain	Sharers and Workers	Michelin
National Agency for the Improvement of Working Conditions (ANACT)	Axa	Tri-Cycle
Fifteen	Groupe Vyv	Engie
Libertalia	Maif	La Poste
Radiall	Solvay	Movin'On
	CFDT	Ubisoft
	IMA	
	Makesense	

### Partners in the organization of some workshops

Accélérateur ESS of HEC Paris

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Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD): Clément Paurd, Juliette Mancini, and Martin Maeder.

## Appendix 2: The Six Change Factors

By “change factor,” we mean a factor (internal or external to the business “system”) that significantly impacts the corporate landscape in one or more of the dimensions studied: corporate purpose and governance, organization, work, production activities and business model, and geographic presence. A change factor is at odds with the status quo, but does not necessarily determine the effects of change—rather, that depends on the interactions between the change factor, corporate choices, the actions of other players (in particular the public), etc.

### Environment

Average temperatures, biodiversity, water use, soil erosion—several thresholds that regulate the stability of the planet have now been exceeded. We are beginning to feel the consequences: heat waves, extreme weather events, insufficient natural pollination, health crises...

All scientific reports agree on the life-threatening risk that inaction would represent for mankind.

Companies are directly affected:

- They must adapt to an environment in which it is not always possible to do “business as usual.”
- They must limit their negative external impacts and/or attempt to generate positive ones.

Possible consequences and controversies:

- Weakening of infrastructure, risk of disruption to value and production chains (resilience/scarcity issues).
- Challenging working conditions and lower productivity (occupational health).
- Changes in professions, skills, and practices (greening and green professions, obsolete professions).
- Tensions for companies between addressing ecological issues and financial imperatives...

## Inequality

Following a sharp decline in inequality that began during World War I, income and even more so wealth inequality began to rise again in Western countries starting in the 1980s.

Poverty has been on the rise since the 2008 financial crisis. Since 2020, the richest 1% have collected 63% of the wealth produced. Further, social mobility seems to have broken down in Western countries: young people have less and less hope of achieving a better social and economic situation than their parents.

Possible consequences and controversies:

- Political pressure, either in the form of taxation or redistribution, or companies being pushed to act on inequalities and the sharing of value.
- Societal and/or market fractures, dividing groups such as urban vs. rural, natives vs. immigrants, or those at the “bottom of the pyramid” vs. the top.
- Ecological challenges can not be dissociated from demands for social justice.
- The rise of social conflict and emergence of new activist groups, for example the Yellow Vests in France.
- Political opposition to economic liberalism converges with environmental opposition...

## Digital

An ever-increasing number of business processes are being digitized and computerized.

Interactions with companies, as well as within them, increasingly take place through digital channels and even robots, for example chatbots.

Automation is affecting new manual tasks (e.g. warehousing), intellectual tasks (e.g. medical exams), and relational tasks (e.g. customer service). Digital is also spreading to the scale of complex systems like “Smart cities” and “Industry 4.0”. With artificial intelligence, it is advancing up the ladder of modeling and decision-making processes.

Possible consequences and controversies:

- A reduction in the number of jobs for humans.
- Polarization of the labor market between low-skill, substitutable, precarious jobs and high-skilled, more stable jobs.
- Job content often determined by the company’s information technology system, itself managed by sub-contractors far outside of the business.
- For some, a liberating effect, while for others, a loss of freedom and meaning in their work.
- Rising cybersecurity issues.

## Deregulation and Financialization

Between 1980 and 2020, global trade grew twice as fast as GDP, and financial flows nine times as fast.

Deregulation in the 1970s transformed capitalism, enabling large corporations, and even some small ones, to distribute tasks around the world. The increasing sophistication of financial products often makes it more profitable (and not necessarily more risky) to invest in the financial market rather than in industrial or service enterprises. Shareholders, led by a few large funds, dictate companies' priorities.

Possible consequences and controversies:

- Reorientation of companies towards maximization of short-term profits, which prioritizes cost-cutting and flexibility and makes an environmental transition more challenging.
- Pressure on public budgets, leading to the “commoditization” of public goods and services.
- Increasingly opaque and complex financial instruments, amplifying fears of massive systemic crises.

## Expanded Corporate Responsibility

“Expanded responsibility” towards stakeholders, but also society and the planet: the company's mission is no longer limited to maximizing profit, as in the Friedman doctrine. The law extends corporate social and ecological responsibility (e.g. polluter-payer). Diversity, gender equality, and the protection of privacy occupy a growing space in social dialogue. Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investment criteria are used to assess the extent to which businesses take these issues into account. On top of minimizing their negative impacts, some companies adopt a “raison d'être” by which they pledge to focus on several collective challenges.

Possible consequences and controversies:

- Questions around whether a company has truly reoriented vs. green- or social-“washing”.
- Potential transformations of how business performance, accounting, governance, the business model, organizational choices, suppliers, etc. are measured.
- Development of new legal statuses (Benefit Corporations, etc.), labels (e.g., B Corps) and criteria, which can also become factors of complexity and opacity.
- Inherently more difficulty for small businesses to achieve the same goals.
- Counter-offensives by governments and lobbies against “woke” businesses.

## Meaning of Work

According to an Opinion Way survey conducted in France by Anact in 2022, although 8 out of 10 employees feel that their work is meaningful, 4 out of 10 would consider leaving their job for a more meaningful one in the next two years, with higher proportions of young people, managers, and women represented in this group.

The “quest for meaning” at work encompasses at least two dimensions:

- The possibility of self-actualization at work: autonomy, responsibility, recognition, development...
- The feeling that one’s work and that of the company are useful to society, along with an alignment between one’s personal values and those of the company.

Possible consequences and controversies:

- Phenomena like the “Great Resignation” after COVID-19 and the “call to desert” among business school students in France and elsewhere, which, even if they are statistical outliers, worry certain recruiters.
- The increasing importance of questions of quality of life and meaning in labor negotiations, to the potential detriment of salary.
- Is the quest for meaning at work solely a concern for the rich?