

The background of the cover features a photograph of a modern building with a curved glass facade and multiple levels of balconies. A thick red diagonal stripe runs from the top left towards the middle right of the image. The text is overlaid on this background.

The NextGen Narrative

Insights from Across America

2025

Presented by



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Dear Friends, Partners, and Emerging Leaders

Over the past year, the NextGen Chamber of Commerce embarked on a national Listening Tour to hear directly from the voices shaping the future of our economy. From Phoenix to Charlotte, Philadelphia to Denver, Minneapolis to Seattle, we sat down with hundreds of entrepreneurs, business leaders, students, policymakers, and community advocates. Each conversation offered a unique window into the challenges and opportunities facing the next generation of leadership.

What we heard was clear: while technology, globalization, and shifting demographics are transforming our economy at an unprecedented pace, there is also a strong and growing desire for inclusive growth, digital equity, entrepreneurial opportunity, and civic connection. Emerging leaders are not only navigating disruption – they are building solutions, and they are asking institutions like ours to meet this moment with courage and collaboration.

This report is more than a reflection of those conversations; it is a roadmap. It distills the insights we gathered into actionable themes and policy priorities that will guide our work – and, we hope, inspire business, civic, and philanthropic leaders across the country to join us in centering the voices of the rising generation.

We are deeply grateful to the many partners, funders, and participants who made this Listening Tour possible. Your commitment to dialogue and discovery has helped us capture the wisdom and aspirations of a new generation of business leaders.

The work ahead is ambitious, but it is also filled with promise. Together, we can ensure that the future economy is not only innovative, but also inclusive, resilient, and fair.

With gratitude and determination,



Gil Pontes
Executive Director

Who We Are



2019

NextGen Chamber
Launch



100M

Workforce
Representation



06

Staff and Board



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Core Priorities

We ensure that emerging business leaders have a seat and voice at the table with policymakers, market-shapers, and advocates for the future economy.



Our Mission and Vision

We are the **leading voice** for emerging business leaders

The NextGen Chamber of Commerce empowers emerging business leaders by generating insights, encouraging engagement, and nurturing leadership development to shape the future economy.

Policy Priorities



The Future
Economy

Strengthening the
economy for long-
term growth



The Future of
Work

Preparing for the
evolving future of
work



Business Leadership
and Innovation

Driving business
leadership and
innovation with a
focus on
responsibility and
sustainability



The Listening Tour focuses on the issues most critical to emerging business leaders: digital equity and infrastructure, the future of work and automation, entrepreneurship and access to capital, sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and civic leadership in a rapidly changing economy.

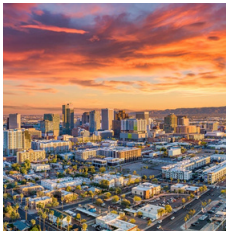
The Listening Tour

Our research centers on digital equity, future of work, inclusive growth, and business + civic leadership—key priorities shaping the next generation of business leaders.

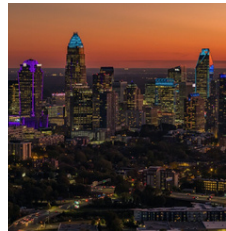
**Future
Solutions
Start Now**

The Cities

We selected cities that reflect the diversity of America's economic landscape—ranging from fast-growing hubs to legacy industrial centers—ensuring a mix of regions, industries, and perspectives to capture a truly national picture.



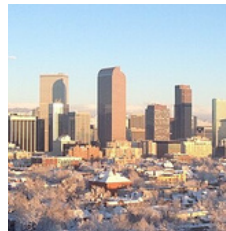
Phoenix,
Arizona



Charlotte,
North
Carolina



Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania



Denver,
Colorado



Minneapolis,
Minnesota



Seattle,
Washington

What Emerging Business Leaders Said

Emerging business leaders across the country are voicing both urgency and optimism. They recognize the rapid shifts underway in technology, markets, and demographics, and are calling for stronger pathways to participate fully in the future economy. From broadband access to fair capital flows, they are clear that inclusive infrastructure and opportunity are essential for growth.

At the same time, they bring fresh ideas and solutions. Leaders we spoke with are reimagining entrepreneurship, prioritizing sustainability, and pushing for more equitable civic and business leadership. Their insights underscore that the next generation isn't waiting for change – they are building it.

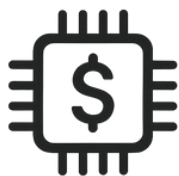


In the Future Economy section, we explore how emerging leaders are navigating and shaping rapid change. Topics include the impact of AI and automation on work, the role of digital infrastructure in expanding opportunity. These conversations highlight both the risks of disruption and the innovative strategies young leaders are bringing forward to ensure long-term growth and resilience.



80%

Believe that digital connectivity remains a core barrier to equitable growth



82%

Believe that public-private partnerships are essential for sustainable progress in expanding digital access



79%

Believe that reliable internet access remains a significant challenge for underserved communities



79%

Express optimism that emerging technologies like 5G and satellite internet can help bridge the divide



82%

Believe that policy reforms are needed to reduce the student debt burden

The Future Economy

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The Future of Work

In the *Future of Work* discussions, emerging leaders spoke candidly about the changing nature of jobs and careers. They raised concerns around automation, AI, and workforce displacement, while also pointing to opportunities for new forms of entrepreneurship, skills development, and flexible work arrangements. Participants emphasized the need for stronger pathways into quality jobs, more equitable access to training, and policies that prepare workers not just to adapt, but to thrive in a dynamic economy.



89%

Agree that data protection laws must evolve to meet the privacy challenges of advanced AI technologies



87%

Say clear ethical AI guidelines are essential



76%

Agree that policy incentives should encourage companies to provide retraining programs for workers affected by automation



82%

Support updating social safety nets to protect gig and nontraditional workers



83%

Agree that affordable housing policies are essential for sustaining workers in high-cost areas

Business Leadership & Innovation

In the *Responsible Business Leadership & Innovation* conversations, participants called for companies to go beyond profit and lead with purpose. They highlighted the importance of ethical decision-making, transparency, and accountability, while also stressing the need for innovation that addresses real community challenges. Emerging leaders see responsible leadership as inseparable from long-term business success and are urging businesses to embrace diversity, sustainability, and civic engagement as core drivers of innovation.



88%

Agree that increasing the presence of young, diverse leaders on corporate boards positively impacts company values and decision-making



77%

Believe that companies should prioritize long-term ESG commitments over short-term financial goals



80%

Say emerging business leaders can effectively advocate for greater ESG accountability



89%

Agreeing that cross-border collaboration in AI and green technology is essential for tackling global challenges like climate change



89%

Agree that businesses have a role in promoting flexible work arrangements that prioritize mental health and well-being

Phoenix, Arizona

The first stop of the 2025 NextGen Listening Tour took place in Phoenix, Arizona, gathering a diverse cross-section of small-business owners, emerging entrepreneurs, and civic leaders from across the Southwest.

Participants voiced both optimism and urgency about shaping a more inclusive and resilient economy—one that balances innovation with equity and human connection.

Digital Access and Infrastructure as an Economic Foundation

Phoenix participants identified digital connectivity as one of the most pressing enablers of long-term growth, echoing the national data where more than 80 percent of respondents agreed that reliable, affordable internet access remains a major barrier in underserved areas. Many local entrepreneurs described broadband costs and inconsistent access as direct constraints on business growth, workforce development, and community participation

Preparing the Workforce for an AI-Driven Future

Participants emphasized the need for ethical, transparent, and inclusive approaches to artificial intelligence and automation. Reflecting national sentiment, nearly nine in ten respondents agreed that data protection laws must evolve and that business leaders have a responsibility to uphold ethical standards in AI deployment. Phoenix business owners were particularly focused on retraining and upskilling, noting that technology adoption should create pathways—rather than barriers—for local workers to thrive in the digital economy.

Leadership, Diversity, and Sustainable Growth

The Phoenix conversation highlighted a strong link between innovation, diversity, and community impact. Participants agreed that bringing young, diverse leaders onto boards and into executive roles enhances decision-making and corporate accountability. Likewise, they viewed environmental, social, and governance (ESG) priorities as central to the future of business, with broad support for cross-sector partnerships and green innovation. Participants also emphasized flexible, wellness-focused work models as essential to building resilient organizations.

Charlotte, North Carolina

The Charlotte stop brought together a dynamic mix of small-business founders, financial leaders, and civic advocates from across the Carolinas. Conversations centered on the region's rapid growth and the challenge of ensuring equitable opportunity across emerging industries.

Digital Infrastructure and Access

Participants reinforced that connectivity remains an economic lifeline, particularly as the region attracts tech and finance employers. Echoing national findings, more than 80% of respondents emphasized the need for reliable and affordable broadband access and public-private collaboration to close digital divides between urban and rural communities.

Future Workforce Readiness

Charlotte's business community expressed strong support for partnerships between education and employers to prepare workers for automation and AI-driven change. Participants agreed that retraining incentives, clear ethical AI frameworks, and updated privacy laws are critical for balancing innovation with accountability.

Leadership and Equity

Leaders in Charlotte emphasized representation and responsibility as keys to inclusive innovation. Nearly 90% of respondents supported increasing young and diverse voices on boards and in executive positions, and local participants tied that directly to strengthening community trust and long-term growth.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Philadelphia's emerging business leaders are driven by creativity and community pride, yet continue to face real barriers—especially around access to capital, mentorship, and digital infrastructure. Their voices are helping shape a more equitable future economy nationwide.

Economic Equity and Student Debt Reform

Consistent with national results, over 80% of respondents saw student debt as a major barrier to entrepreneurship. Local participants underscored the need for policy reforms and employer-based repayment support, describing student debt as both a workforce and economic development issue.

Adapting to the Future of Work

Philadelphia respondents called for ethical standards and retraining programs as automation accelerates. There was strong belief in shared responsibility between business and government to ensure AI benefits all workers, particularly those in transitional or gig-based roles.

Leadership and Sustainability

Participants highlighted the city's innovation ecosystem—anchored by universities, startups, and legacy industries—as a model for cross-sector ESG collaboration. Over 80% endorsed corporate accountability on sustainability and diversity, linking inclusive leadership to long-term resilience.

Denver, Colorado

The Denver roundtable captured the unique intersection of entrepreneurship, technology, and outdoor sustainability culture that defines Colorado's economy.

Connectivity and Economic Mobility

Participants stressed that digital inclusion is essential to unlock rural and mountain-area opportunity. Over four in five respondents nationally cited affordable broadband and public-private partnerships as top priorities, sentiments echoed by Denver leaders who called digital access a “new form of infrastructure equity”.

Responsible Technology and Workforce Transition

Leaders emphasized proactive retraining and transparent AI governance, mirroring strong national consensus that ethical standards and privacy protections must evolve alongside technology. Participants also underscored that “future of work” discussions should include small and mid-size firms, not just tech giants.

Leadership and Green Innovation

Denver participants connected ESG principles to climate resilience. Over 80% agreed that tax incentives for green technology and cross-border collaboration are key to long-term business innovation and sustainability.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

In Minneapolis, participants examined how the Midwest's manufacturing and service economy can adapt to emerging digital and workforce transformations while remaining rooted in community.

Equitable Economic Infrastructure

Participants echoed widespread agreement that reliable internet and affordable digital tools remain unevenly distributed, particularly across rural and low-income areas. They emphasized regional solutions that blend philanthropic, corporate, and public investment to build inclusive economic systems.

Future Workforce and Retraining

Local business and education leaders voiced strong alignment with national findings that cross-sector partnerships and retraining incentives are essential to navigate automation and ensure equitable workforce transitions.

Leadership and Wellbeing

Participants strongly supported flexible, people-centered business models—nearly 90% agreed that companies should promote mental health and wellbeing through flexible work arrangements—and saw this as critical to retaining young talent and strengthening community ties.

Seattle, Washington

The final stop in Seattle brought together tech innovators, sustainability leaders, and small-business advocates to reflect on how emerging industries can balance progress with responsibility.

Digital Equity and Access

Echoing national sentiment, over 80% of respondents agreed that digital access and affordability are essential to long-term economic growth. Seattle participants framed this as both an equity issue and an innovation imperative, urging stronger corporate investment in broadband access and digital literacy.

Ethical Technology and Workforce Transition

Participants emphasized that data privacy, transparency, and retraining must anchor the conversation about AI and automation. Over 85% nationally agreed that business leaders share responsibility for ethical AI, a message that resonated strongly in Seattle's tech ecosystem.

Leadership for a Sustainable Future

Seattle participants were especially aligned around climate and ESG leadership. Nearly 90% supported cross-border collaboration in AI and green technology and greater inclusion of young, diverse leaders in corporate governance—tying sustainability and equity together as cornerstones of future business leadership.

From Their Perspective

The Future Economy

Expand Digital Access and Affordability

Create a Digital Equity Compact to align federal broadband dollars (e.g., BEAD, NTIA) with local implementation led by chambers, anchor institutions, and nonprofits.

Encourage Congress to make the Affordable Connectivity Program permanent and expand device subsidy eligibility for small business owners and entrepreneurs.

Incentivize collaboration between telecom providers and local governments to extend high-speed broadband into underserved communities using matching grants and community reinvestment credits.

Establish regional “Digital Hubs” that pair broadband expansion with community-based training in digital literacy, cybersecurity, and e-commerce management.

Address Student Debt as an Economic Barrier

Offer tax credits to employers who contribute to workers’ student loan repayment or provide debt counseling.

Pilot forgiveness incentives for graduates who launch or work in small businesses in rural, low-income, or high-impact areas.

Reform SBA and DOE lending rules to allow student loan debtors greater flexibility when applying for business capital.

From Their Perspective

The Future of Work

Build Ethical and Transparent AI Governance

Develop a voluntary but standardized code of practice for AI governance in business operations—covering data use, bias mitigation, and consumer transparency.

Require publicly traded companies to disclose the social and workforce impacts of AI adoption within ESG reports.

Update data protection laws to ensure individual consent, algorithmic transparency, and cross-sector oversight in the use of advanced technologies.

Support Workforce Transitions and Retraining

Offer tax credits to employers who contribute to workers' student loan repayment or provide debt counseling.

Support regional partnerships between employers, unions, universities, and chambers to forecast future job needs and design portable, credentialed training programs.

Encourage the creation of benefit portability models for gig and contract workers—covering health, retirement, and unemployment protections—to reflect the evolving nature of work.

Strengthen Social Safety Nets for New Work Models

Extend eligibility to independent contractors, freelancers, and gig economy workers.

Develop federal guidelines on remote and hybrid work that promote equity, mental health, and productivity across sectors.

From Their Perspective

Business Leadership & Innovation

Advance Inclusive Corporate Governance

Encourage corporate governance reforms that set voluntary representation targets for young, diverse leaders and measure progress annually through ESG disclosures.

Fund next-generation board training fellowships to connect emerging business leaders with experienced mentors across sectors.

Offer ESG-linked tax benefits to firms that meet diversity, pay equity, and sustainability reporting standards.

Accelerate Green and Cross-Border Innovation

Expand R&D and investment credits for carbon-neutral manufacturing, clean energy, and AI applications in sustainability.

Establish regional innovation pacts among North American partners (U.S., Canada, Mexico) to accelerate AI and green tech solutions that address climate and workforce challenges.

Create a Small Business ESG Fund to help smaller enterprises integrate sustainability reporting without excessive cost burdens.

Foster Wellbeing-Centered Business Models

Support employer adoption of mental health and flexible scheduling programs through tax incentives or federal recognition awards.

Develop federal guidelines on remote and hybrid work that promote equity, mental health, and productivity across sectors.

Encourage the inclusion of employee wellbeing metrics in ESG and DEI reporting frameworks, signaling that human sustainability is as vital as environmental sustainability.

Tomorrow Begins Today

The NextGen Listening Tour reaffirmed a simple but powerful truth: emerging business leaders are not waiting for the future, they are building it. Across six cities and countless stories, participants called for a more inclusive, interconnected economy, one that values innovation and equity in equal measure, and where business, government, and community work as partners rather than in parallel. Their insights illuminate both the urgency and the opportunity before us: to move from dialogue to design, from ideas to implementation.

What we heard across regions is that talent, creativity, and civic commitment exist everywhere, but the systems that support them are uneven. To bridge those gaps, we must strengthen the connective tissue between entrepreneurs, policymakers, and institutions; modernize how we govern and invest; and ensure that young and emerging leaders have a permanent voice in shaping our shared economic future.

As this report closes, it marks not an endpoint but a beginning. The conversations started in Phoenix, Charlotte, Philadelphia, Denver, Minneapolis, and Seattle will continue through upcoming policy roundtables, research publications, and the NextGen Councils on the Future Economy. Together, these efforts will translate the insights of this Listening Tour into action: building a future economy that is more resilient, inclusive, and grounded in the leadership of those rising to meet it.

To ensure a broad and representative understanding of emerging business leaders' perspectives, NextGen employed a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. Prior to each Listening Tour stop, participants were invited to complete a standardized online survey capturing demographic information, business characteristics, and views on the future economy, workforce trends, and responsible business leadership. Surveys were distributed through partner networks, local chambers, community foundations, and direct outreach to small business associations and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Roundtable participants were then selected through an open solicitation process emphasizing diversity across geography, industry, age, race, and stage of business development. Each session convened approximately 15–30 participants for facilitated dialogue around shared challenges and policy priorities. Notes, transcripts, and post-event feedback were analyzed alongside survey data to identify cross-cutting themes and regional distinctions, ensuring that both data and lived experience informed the final synthesis of findings.

Total Survey Sample Size: 212
Margin of Error: +/- 7%



Thank you to Our Partners



The Listening Tour showed us that emerging business leaders understand both the promise and the pressure of a changing economy. Their insights offer practical pathways for how business, government, and community can work together to build systems that actually meet people where they are.

Roy Lee & Adama Iwu, Co-Chairs

NextGen Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors

Roy Lee, Co-Chair
Adama Iwu, Co-Chair
Rhett Buttle
Aram Nadjarian
Casey Oakes

NextGen Chamber of Commerce Contact

Gil Pontes, Executive Director
Email: Gil@NextGenChamber.org
Phone: 508-813-3202