

Banks Urged To Address Inequalities

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Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the digital transformation of the finance sector. That's reflected in the theme of the Sibos 2020 conference, held online this year: "Driving the evolution of smart finance." And that in turn would appear to offer plenty of scope for the conference's 14,000-plus virtual attendees to marvel at how far they've come.

The opening keynote from JP Morgan Chase Chairman and CEO Jamie Dimon hit a more sombre note, however, highlighting how unprepared the world was for the pandemic and the way the global health crisis has exacerbated entrenched inequalities and racial tensions.

Underscoring how engrained these concerns have become, they carried over into a discussion the same day by three leading fintech figures: Leda Glyptis, non-executive director of SimplyPayMe and chairman of the board at findexable; Theodora Lau, founder of Unconventional Ventures and One Vision podcast host; and Louise Maynard-Atem, innovation lead of Experian's Global Data Exchange

team. The pandemic has shown we are not all in the same boat, Lau argued, and that while fintech was meant to democratize, unconscious biases distorted innovation and many solutions are designed to generate revenue rather than improve life for everyone.

"Technology is not the hard part," she said, "connecting people is the hard part and what matters to them."

Overcoming the barriers to human connection will never be easy. "There is always bias in data because we as humans are biased," Andreas Burner, chief innovations officer at SmartStream, opined during a chat on the virtual fringes of Sibos. While a great deal of research is being conducted on how to identify biases in data, the solution is likely to include greater effort to increase diversity. That will require the financial services industry "to focus more on intentionality," Glyptis suggested; in other words, for the industry to hold itself accountable.

That might seem far removed from the drive for digital transformation, but it's all part of the same path into the future of banking and finance, participants suggested. The pandemic had shown that, under pressure, banks can move quickly, Maynard-Atem said, as demonstrated by the momentum that digitalization has picked up in the past few months.

Going forward, she said, financial institutions need "to know how to maintain this [acceleration] in a more sustainable fashion when they are not on a crisis-mode footing."