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N'Conclave

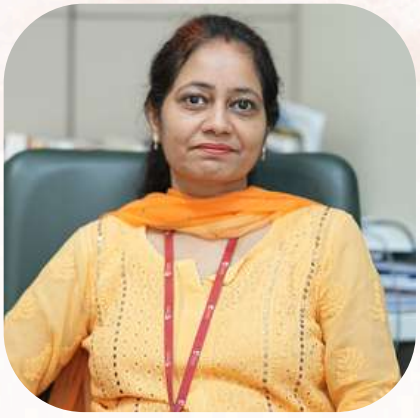
SYNAPSE

Director's Message

"It is with great pride that we present the Discussant Paper for N'Conclave 2025 at NMIMS Bangalore. Rooted in the theme Synapse: Connect Insight. Create Impact., This work captures the critical intersections shaping contemporary leadership where human judgment meets intelligent systems, ambition meets responsibility, and strategy meets consequence. Through the mentioned five pillars, the paper challenges participants to think beyond efficiency, certainty, and motivates to engage with ethics, adaptability, and sustainability as its core strategic imperatives. I am confident that the conversations it sparks will shape thoughtful, responsible, and future-ready leaders."

Dr. Narayani Ramachandran
Professor & Director,
SVKM's NMIMS Bengaluru

Message from Chairperson



Dr. Mallika Srivastava
Associate Professor,
Program Chair (SBM)

"As Program Chair for N'Conclave 2025, I wish to formally acknowledge and thank the faculty members, students, and institutional leadership whose collective effort has brought this Discussant Paper to fruition. The depth, coherence, and intellectual seriousness reflected in this document are a result of sustained dialogue, critical inquiry, and shared academic purpose. I am especially grateful to the faculty mentors for their guidance, perspective, and commitment to scholarly rigour, and to the student team for their initiative, curiosity, and disciplined engagement with complex ideas. This paper establishes a strong foundation for informed discussion, meaningful debate, and impactful conversation."

Curated By

The Student Council

(Left to Right)

Toshak Sharma | Hanshika Relwani | Saumya Saksena | Vyom Mankad | Anurag Dangi

This Discussant Paper represents our collective effort to move beyond surface-level conversations and engage meaningfully with the complexities shaping contemporary business and leadership. Through the theme Synapse, we sought to create a framework that connects diverse ideas — technology, ethics, leadership, adaptability, and sustainability into a coherent space for dialogue. Our objective is not to present conclusions, but to provoke inquiry, challenge assumptions, and encourage nuanced thinking among participants. We hope this paper serves as a catalyst for thoughtful discussion, critical reflection, and responsible action, enabling N'Conclave 2025 to be a forum where ideas intersect, evolve, and create lasting impact.

Discussant Paper for N'Conclave 2025
SBM, NMIMS Bangalore

Why Synapse?

In neuroscience, a synapse is the tiny yet powerful gap across which signals leap from one neuron to another. It is far more than a point of contact it is a site of translation, amplification, inhibition, and learning. Every thought, memory, and action exists because synapses determine what information passes through, what is strengthened, and what is forgotten. As the theme for this year's Business Conclave at NMIMS Bangalore, Synapse captures the liminal space in which modern business now operates.

Organisations today stand at the junction of:

- Human judgment and machine intelligence
- Profit imperatives and planetary boundaries
- Shareholder expectations and societal trust
- Local constraints and global interdependence

Leaders are no longer operators of neatly contained systems. They function as synaptic nodes in expansive networks of people, technologies, institutions, and ecosystems. Their work is to continuously decide which signals to amplify, which to dampen, and which to block choices that ultimately shape culture, strategy, and impact.

The **five pillars** of this conclave represent the key "interfaces" within this synaptic architecture:

- **Agentic AI**
- **Futuristic Leadership**
- **Ethics**
- **Fluid Intelligence**
- **Sustainability**

Rather than offering answers or packaged frameworks, this discussant paper aims to provoke. It presents prompts, paradoxes, and emerging philosophies that stretch the boundaries of conventional discourse. Panellists are invited to treat it not as a script but as an ignition point a space where ideas fire, cross, collide, and evolve, much like the synapses that allow learning and transformation to occur.

Agentic AI: From Tools to Autonomous Colleagues

Agentic AI refers to systems that go beyond predicting or recommending they act. These systems can initiate workflows, make bounded decisions, interact with humans and other machines, and learn continuously from feedback. We are shifting from AI as a passive assistant to AI as an organisational actor that pursues goals on its own. This is not just a technical evolution; it changes how we think about decision-making, responsibility, and even who or what is doing the work inside a company.

A central question emerges: Where does agency stand now?

When AI adjusts prices in real time, triggers discounts, screens thousands of candidates, or negotiates with suppliers through automated interfaces, who is making the decision? Officially, humans still hold agency. Yet in practice, agency becomes distributed across a socio-technical network of people, data, and machine policies. No single individual understands the entire system end-to-end. Consider a simple thought experiment: if an AI agent can optimise a marketing funnel, shift budgets, and update strategy without waiting for `human approval each time, have we effectively created a new, invisible middle manager one who sits in the server room instead of the office floor? Traditionally, organisations treated AI as infrastructure like a smarter spreadsheet. But as AI systems become more adaptive and embedded, they begin shaping much more than efficiency metrics. They influence who gets visibility, which trade-offs get repeated, and what behaviours become normal inside the firm. At that point, AI is no longer neutral plumbing; it becomes a structural force.

This leads to a provocative idea: Should major AI agents be treated as quasi-stakeholders in governance? Not in a moral sense, but because they shape outcomes powerfully. Boards regularly review strategy, risk, and capital allocation should they also review the "values," objectives, and trade-off rules encoded into key AI systems?

As AI takes over monitoring, optimisation, and micro-decisions at scale, organisations inevitably reorganise around it. Some coordination and supervisory roles shrink, appearing like a hollowing out of middle management. But that layer may re-emerge as sense-making roles people who interpret system behaviour, manage exceptions, and ask better questions. Junior employees may gain influence because they can orchestrate fleets of agents even with modest titles. Hierarchies may flatten as information flows through systems rather than reporting lines.

Finally, deeper cultural questions arise. If a firm's "nervous system" becomes AI-mediated, what happens to culture? Does it freeze into the rules encoded in models? Or does it constantly evolve as systems retrain on new data? Companies will need to decide which domains must remain stubbornly human hiring, discipline, creative direction, ethical escalations, or decisions involving dignity and identity. These boundaries signal not just operational choices, but who we choose to be in a world where intelligence and agency are no longer only human.

Futuristic Leadership: Authority After Information

Futuristic leadership begins with an overdue admission: leadership thinking has not kept pace with how radically technology has redistributed information. Traditional models assume leaders sit at the top of an information pyramid. But in digital organisations, that pyramid has inverted. At Amazon, an area manager can see real-time demand spikes, route efficiency, and labour productivity on dashboards that would have been CXO-level insights a decade ago.

At Walmart, frontline replenishment teams work with live weather-linked sales forecasts. In such environments, intuition can be challenged in moments. Information is no longer positional power; it is an organisational common.

This forces leadership to shift from "knowing to sense-making". Consider a marketing team running a Meta A/B test that disproves a senior leader's long-held belief about brand messaging. Or a fintech pricing algorithm that consistently beats the gut instincts of a seasoned revenue leader. Authority can no longer rest on "I have seen more." The futuristic leader becomes a curator of better questions, a designer of guardrails, and a steward of decision systems where humans and models frequently disagree. Hybrid human machine teams are already the norm. Banks deploy AI copilots to relationship managers; e-commerce companies use bots for first-line customer queries; tech teams code with GitHub Copilot; warehouses coordinate humans, robots, and vision systems. The managerial challenge is no longer only "How do I lead people?" but "How do I orchestrate a multi-species workflow of humans, algorithms, and automated processes?"

These tensions play out in real scenarios. Picture a retail sales manager arguing to maintain premium pricing for brand prestige, while the AI revenue optimiser recommends targeted discounts in micro-markets to lift short-term volume. Both positions are rational within their frames. The futuristic leader must interrogate the model's training data, honour the human's contextual intelligence, and craft a decision that integrates both perspectives. Futuristic leadership is also deeply temporal. Leaders must hold three timelines simultaneously.

- **Present**: daily operations, customer expectations, quarterly earnings.
- **Mid-term**: shifts to platforms, supply chain digitisation, reskilling for AI-augmented roles.
- **Long-term**: climate risk, demographic shifts, regulatory pressure on AI, and societal trust.

Companies deploying AI copilots face this daily: immediate adoption metrics, medium-term redesign of job roles, and long-term ethical concerns around privacy, misinformation, and labour displacement often pulling in different directions. Boards are beginning to recognise a structural problem: we reward leaders for operational excellence today, not for the courage to protect the organisation's viability tomorrow. Should a CEO's legacy be judged only by shareholder returns during their tenure, or by the adaptability and ethical integrity of the organisation a decade later? Ultimately, futuristic leadership is not about mastering every new tool. It is about integrating data, time, power, and responsibility while staying accountable for how human and machine intelligence shape the organisation and the world it touches.

Ethics: From Compliance Constraint to Design Principle

For decades, business ethics sat downstream of strategy. Leaders chose markets, designed products, built supply chains and only then invited legal and compliance teams to ensure nothing crossed a regulatory line. That sequencing no longer holds. Today, ethical choices are embedded upstream in how products are designed, how algorithms behave, how workers are treated, and how growth is pursued. The question is no longer "What is allowed?" but "What are we building into the world and at whose cost?" Ethics has moved from the wrapper to the blueprint.

When companies cut corners in labour practices, design incentives poorly, or use opaque data systems, they accumulate ethical debt quiet, compounding risk that behaves much like technical debt. It doesn't damage quarterly numbers immediately but eventually erupts. A low-cost apparel brand's subcontracting chain may look efficient until a fire or collapse exposes unsafe factories. Aggressive sales targets in financial services seem productive until they trigger a mis-selling scandal like Wells Fargo's fake accounts episode. A workplace culture that tolerates micro-aggressions may suddenly spill into public view when a whistleblower posts internal chats online.

Greenwashing, misleading sustainability claims, and exploitative gig-economy models often appear commercially rational until regulatory crackdowns, talent flight, or social backlash reveal their true cost. Imagine if companies had to disclose "ethical debt" alongside financial liabilities. How would board conversations change? Would executive incentives tie solely to near-term profitability survive? Would product, sourcing, and lobbying decisions look different if their long-term ethical costs had to be itemised and defended?

Real-world capabilities have outpaced governance. Fast fashion can move from sketch to shelf in weeks; digital platforms can shape attention ecosystems for millions; F&B companies can engineer hyper-palatable products that exploit human psychology; fintech firms can design legal yet incomprehensible credit products. The barrier is rarely "can we?" technology and capital already make many things possible. The real question is "should we?"

Should a social media platform knowingly optimise for addictive engagement even as its own research shows mental-health harm? Should a quick-commerce firm promise 10-minute delivery that pushes gig workers into unsafe traffic conditions? Should an energy major keep exploring new fossil reserves despite clear scientific limits? For India, these tensions are sharper. Quick commerce, real estate, and infrastructure projects generate jobs yet often create precarity or displacement. Global ESG frameworks may emphasise carbon disclosures while Indian communities prioritise affordability, access, and inclusion. Ethical decisions cannot simply be imported; they must be contextual aligned with universal principles but negotiated with local realities.

The real test for leaders is whether they treat ethics as an ongoing design challenge shaping incentives, data practices, supply chains, and culture or merely as a checklist consulted after strategy is already set.

Fluid Intelligence: Learning, Unlearning, and the Human Edge

Fluid intelligence the ability to navigate unfamiliar problems, spot patterns in ambiguity, and build solutions without a ready-made playbook is becoming the defining human advantage in modern organisations. For much of the industrial era, companies rewarded crystallised intelligence: deep experience, process mastery, and specialised expertise. But as AI systems increasingly take over tasks rooted in memory, repetition, and pattern matching, the value of human adaptability rises sharply.
Recent shocks reveal this contrast. During the pandemic, some retailers and restaurants rapidly pivoted to cloud kitchens, WhatsApp commerce, and dark stores, while others froze waiting for normalcy that never returned. The differentiator wasn't data access; most had similar numbers. The differentiator was the ability to reframe, experiment, and act under uncertainty.

Careers built on narrow expertise are now riskier. A telecom pricing expert or a cement procurement specialist once had decades of stability. Today, roles in marketing, supply chain, product, HR, or sustainability require crossing disciplines, unlearning assumptions, and working with data scientists, designers, and technologists. Companies increasingly prize T-shaped talent depth in one area plus curiosity across many. A software engineer who understands customer behaviour or a finance leader comfortable with UX often outperforms a more technically perfect but context-blind counterpart.

Yet many firms still hire using static checklists anchored in yesterday's world. This raises uncomfortable questions: Are organisations selecting for past fit rather than future fluidity? Do performance systems reward intelligent experimentation, cross-functional moves, and thoughtful risk-taking or merely safe execution of last year's KPIs? Fluid intelligence also operates at an organisational level. Some firms run small, parallel pilots for emerging technologies, shortening feedback loops and scaling only what works.

Others commit prematurely to massive transformation programmes and struggle when assumptions collapse. The contrast is stark in sectors adopting generative AI: while a few companies test multiple use cases simultaneously, many cling to existing workflows, treating experimentation as an optional side project.

A provocative thought experiment: if AI systems become the repository of a firm's crystallised knowledge, do humans become the custodians of fluid intelligence the ones who ask the disruptive questions? "Are we solving the wrong problem?" "Should we enter a different segment?" "What if we partnered instead of competed?" These questions reshape strategy in ways no model can.

This demands epistemic humility leaders who can say, "I don't know yet," revise outdated beliefs, and create conditions where teams can challenge assumptions without fear. Practices like red teaming, decision post-mortems, and investment committees that revisit past bets are early signs of organisations trying to embed this humility. Ultimately, fluid intelligence is not just about thinking differently—it is about recognising, honestly and early, that the environment itself has changed. And in a world where AI can produce answers instantly, the uniquely human edge may lie in stepping back, reframing the question, and daring to redraw the map.

Sustainability: From "Less Harm" to Regeneration

Corporate sustainability has long been framed as a negotiation: grow first, then minimise the harm as much as is "reasonable." This mindset assumes damage is inevitable and merely manages its degree. A newer and more urgent philosophy sees businesses as participants within ecological and social systems, not external actors. The goal shifts from doing "less harm" to regenerating the ecosystems and communities a business touches. Early signs of this shift are visible. Some apparel and agriculture companies speak of being water positive or climate positive aiming to restore soil health, replenish watersheds, and

strengthen community resilience rather than simply reducing impact. This lens forces leaders to recognise they are moving multiple forms of capital:

- **Natural capital** - ecosystems, water tables, biodiversity.
- **Social capital** - trust, cohesion, community wellbeing.
- **Intellectual capital** - innovation toward circularity, low-carbon material, and climate- resilient operations.

A powerful provocation for panels is to imagine a multi-capital P&L. What if quarterly earnings calls required companies to disclose not just revenue and margins, but emissions, water drawdown, labour outcomes, and community impact with equal precision? Would a logistics firm celebrate 10-minute delivery if it had to report, as transparently, the additional emissions and worker strain? Would a fast-fashion brand still optimise for product churn if landfill burden and microplastic pollution were quantified on the same slide as gross margin?

Climate risk is no longer an ESG footnote it is now a core strategic variable. Extreme weather disrupts supply chains, increases insurance premiums, and damages assets. Regulation is tightening through carbon pricing and mandatory disclosures. Consumer behaviour is shifting, especially among younger cohorts. Energy systems are being rewired around renewables, storage, and electrification, forcing automakers, utilities, and logistics companies to rethink their foundations. Some companies are adapting automakers phasing out combustion engines, tech giants committing to renewable PPA agreements, financial institutions limiting exposure to high-carbon sectors. Yet governance often lags. Should climate risk sit in a separate committee or is that itself a silo? If climate is systemic, it belongs inside every strategic, investment, and risk conversation. Crucially, sustainability is not just technical it is also ethical and political. Transition costs fall unevenly. When a coal plant closes, local workers bear the social shock. When plastic bans tighten, small suppliers struggle more than multinationals.

Emerging economies like India balance global climate expectations with local development needs: growth, jobs, affordability. This makes the concept of a just transition central. Companies must support worker reskilling, invest in local supply chains, and engage communities early. The deeper leadership question remains: Are we pursuing sustainability as compliance-led "less harm," or are we willing to build regenerative, justice-oriented models that leave ecosystems and communities stronger than before?

Synapse as an Integrative Metaphor for the 5 Pillars.

The five pillars are not independent tracks. Using the synapse metaphor, we might see them as an interconnected system:

- **Agentic AI** as the electrical impulses traveling through the organisations nervous system.
- **Futuristic Leadership** as the synaptic gating mechanism that decides which signals are amplified, which are inhibited.
- **Ethics** as the membrane defining what is allowed to cross the synapse in the first place.
- **Fluid Intelligence** as the plasticity of the synapse, its capacity to rewire, strengthen, or weaken connections based on experience.
- **Sustainability** as the long-term health of the entire neural network, without which individual synapses are irrelevant

Closing Note

This Business Conclave aims to make Synapse more than a theme on a poster. It invites panellists to inhabit that in-between space where disciplines overlap, where trade-offs are uncomfortable, and where simple answers feel suspicious. The purpose of the discussion is not to reassure the audience that the future is under control. It is to model what serious, honest, intellectually rigorous conversation about that future looks like when leaders, technologists, ethicists, and sustainability thinkers sit together. If this paper leaves you with more questions than answers, it has served its purpose.

Declaration of AI

During the preparation of this discussant paper, the author(s) used "chatgpt_go" ; "gemini" and "google references" to generate holistic summaries, improve phrasing, understand the context and create awareness for an enriched discussion. The AI-generated content was thoroughly reviewed, edited, and validated with credible sources by the author(s). The author(s) take full responsibility for the content of the published article

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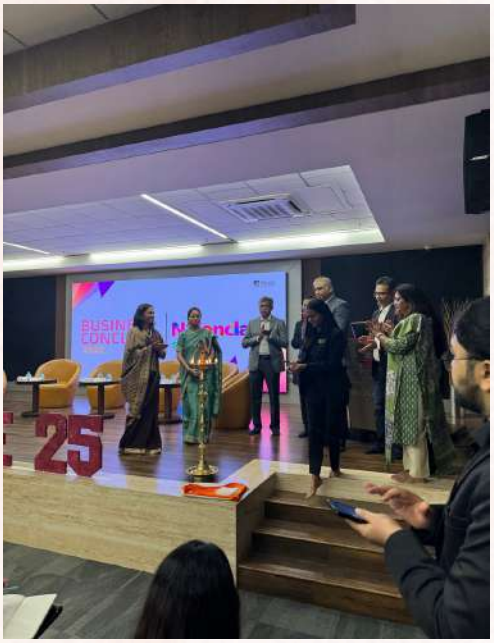
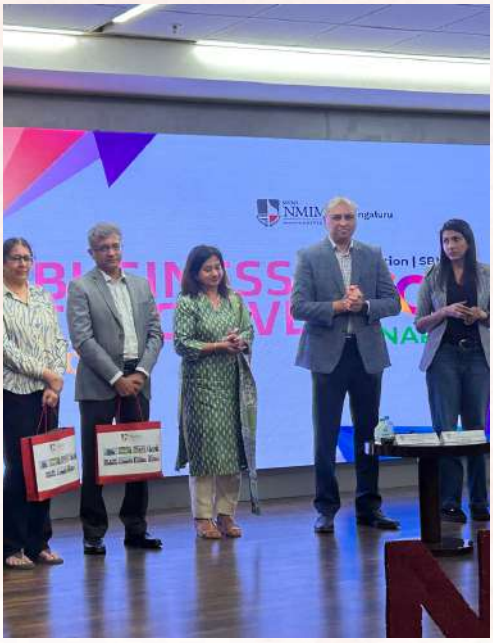
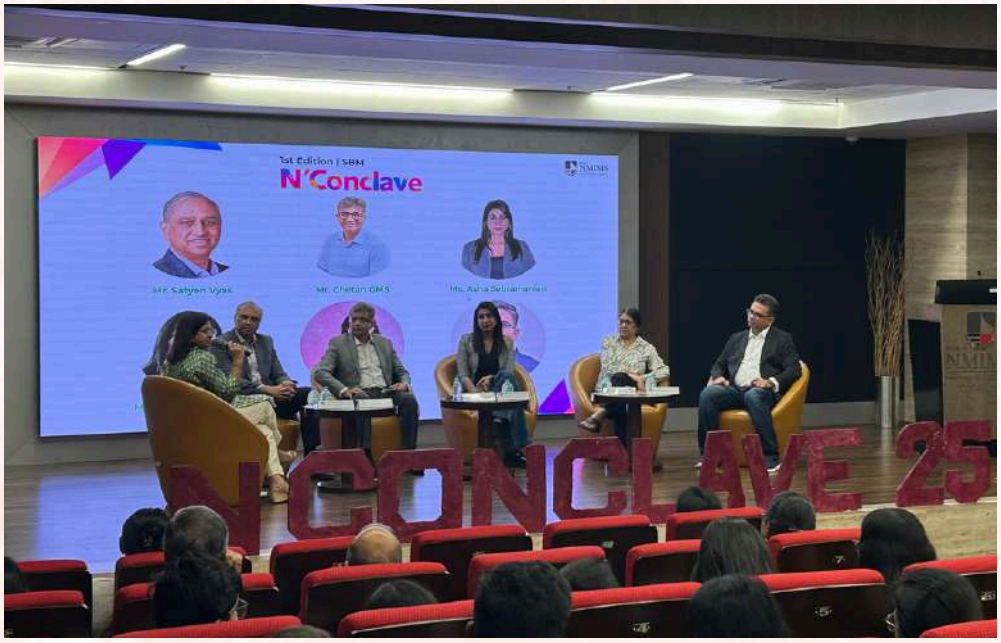
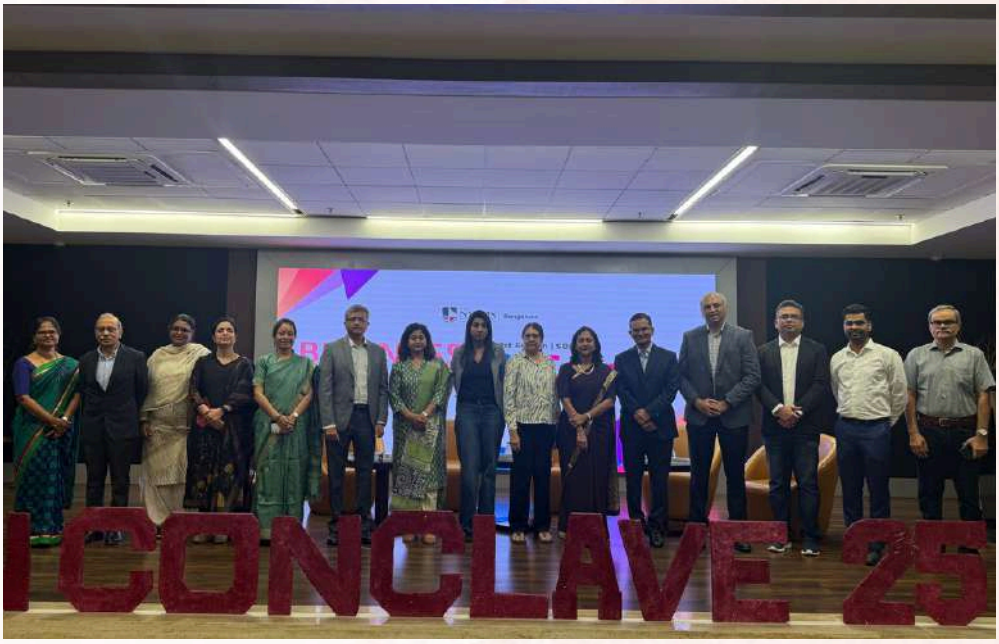
Event Gallery









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