

# CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19

A CX Leader of the Year report examining how leading customer experience programmes and managers adapted during the pandemic - and what we can learn from them.

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**CX LEADER  
OF THE YEAR**

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# Introduction

**By the time MyCustomer launched [CX Leader of the Year 2020](#), the second year of our flagship customer experience award programme, it was already clear that many of the applicants would have been wrestling with an entirely new set of challenges over and above their day-to-day in 2020.**

COVID-19 has thrown business strategies into chaos, and customer experience strategies are no different. Indeed, research indicates that nearly all organisations have made major changes to their customer experience strategy as a result of COVID-19. A [study conducted by Corinium](#), which interviewed 100 CX leaders from around the globe, found that 90% have changed the approach to their CX programme in the wake of the global pandemic. And of these respondents, 25% said they have ‘totally reimagined’ their strategy, with another 33% reporting they have made major changes.

Sure enough, many of the 100+ applicants to CX Leader of the Year 2020 told us about the hard work they had undertaken to ensure that their organisations could respond to the pandemic to protect their own staff and operations, while still meeting the needs of their customers, and their changing requirements and circumstances.


Overall, the picture that emerged was that CX professionals are not content to merely survive during times of instability and change, but that they seek to adapt and thrive. As Ian Golding, the lead judge of CX Leader of the Year, notes: “One of the defining features of the CX professional – and something we’ve seen in all of the applications for 2020’s CX Leader of the Year award – is the ability to deal with everything and anything that is thrown at them, and adapt.”

And so with that in mind, the following report takes a look at some of the ways that COVID-19 has influenced customer experience strategies over the past year and examines how CX managers have responded and flourished.

# Contributors

## CX Leaders




**Antonia Oakes**  
Head of CX, Old Mutual  





**Avis Easteal**  
Regional Head of Consumer, APAC, Luxasia Group of Companies  
**L U X A S I A**




**Claire Carroll**  
Head of Sales and Service, The Co-op  





**David Hart**  
Customer Experience Manager, Kia Motors UK  




**Holly Richardson**  
Regional Digital and Customer Experience (CX) Lead, Unilever  





**Keith Gait**  
Customer service director, Stagecoach  




**KV Dipu**  
President & Head of Operations, Communities & CX, Bajaj Allianz  





**Maya Khalifeh**  
Customer Experience Manager, INDEVCO  





**Sonja Hild**  
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**B/S/H/**



**Stacy Sherman**  
Director, CX & Employee Engagement, Schindler Elevator Corp  


## CX Leader of the Year Judges



**Ian Golding**  
Certified CX leader, international speaker, columnist and writer  




**Colin Shaw**  
CEO and founder, Beyond Philosophy  




**Jeanne Bliss**  
Founder and CEO, Customer Bliss  




**Neil Davey**  
Managing editor, MyCustomer.com  






## How has the pandemic impacted customer strategies?

**The impact of the pandemic on the way customers interact with organisations has been well-documented. [Research conducted by Pindrop and Forrester](#), for instance, indicates that nearly a third of firms have experienced a 50+% increase in call volume since COVID-19 began, with 65% of firms reporting that they have struggled to manage the high call volumes.**

Elsewhere, Corinium's research is one of many studies to have identified that a significant proportion of the disruption to customer behaviour and journeys has been characterised by a huge shift towards digital – with 79% of the research's CX leader respondents reporting that the volume of customer interactions on their websites has increased notably.

Over half (59%) of respondents also reported that they'd experienced more customers using their apps, whilst 57% reported receiving more queries through messaging platforms or chatbots.



But while these changes have been the subject of much focus since the pandemic, the CX Leader of the Year 2020 programme also surfaced a much broader set of challenges that customer experience managers have faced. These include:

- **Changes in customer needs/requirements/demands.** “New consumer segments have emerged,” [Keith Gait](#), customer service director at Stagecoach told us. “Along with this, so have new consumer behaviours, and new expectations.”
- **Highly emotional customers.** “Now, more than ever, organisations need to understand the importance of empathy,” emphasises consultant and CX Leader of the Year judge Ian Golding.
- **The importance of greater support for employees.** Keith Gait noted: “There are a lot of frightened and worried people, staff included. Employee experience is going to be ever more important. The way we lead must change.”
- **Supply chain disruption.** [Avis Easteal](#), regional head of consumer, APAC, at Luxasia, reported how COVID-19 lockdowns caused significant challenges, with disruption to the company’s supply chain, warehouse resourcing (including the closure of warehouses for a sustained period of time) and the closure of stores.

Those with a robust customer experience strategy in place at their organisations have fortunately been able to absorb some of the impact of the challenges being faced.

For instance, [Holly Richardson](#), regional digital and customer experience lead at Unilever, told us: “We had literally just launched our new purpose, brand & CX strategy a few months before COVID hit. This clear and inspiring customer-focused vision made it easy to galvanise the entire organisation around supporting our customers during this challenging time. Everyone felt proud to be working for a company with such a strong commitment to our purpose.”

And Keith Gait has emphasised that even though “the world has changed with coronavirus” the “key elements of our three-to-five year CX strategy still hold true.”

But despite this, CX leaders have still had to adapt - no customer experience strategy could have been able to entirely accommodate the magnitude of disruption that has been witnessed. And our CX Leader of the Year [finalists](#) shared a wide variety of ways that they responded to these challenges to ensure that customers - and staff - remained satisfied and safe. Here are some of the most impressive achievements reported by customer experience leaders.





# Identifying opportunities for additional customer support and assistance

**Many of Unilever's customers were among the worst impacted in the pandemic - such as restaurants and hotels, which had to shut and/or massively downsize. Therefore, Holly Richardson and her team felt that it was more important than ever that the company's purpose and CX strategy should play a leading role in supporting these customers.**

“The first thing we did was activate our salesforce to find out what our customers needed most during this challenging time, as well as engaged with our partner ecosystem about the same,” Holly told us. “Based on what we learned from the feedback, we built and deployed a number of services to our customers, completely free of charge, that addressed their biggest needs.” These actions included:

- Partnering with ministries, chef associations and the chef community at large to offer free bi-weekly webinars on topics ranging from how to lead foodservice teams through unpredictable times, mental health training, diner insights and expectations for out-of-home eating, practical ways to prepare restaurants for the ‘new norm’ and much more.
- Developing a resource centre to help customers navigate their business through COVID-19.
- Launching a social movement in five countries to raise awareness of the importance of ordering takeout/delivery in order to support the restaurant business.
- Developing and putting advertising budget behind a free online portal for restaurants to list their menus for delivery, thus helping them avoiding the margin-corrosive fees of the established delivery aggregators.
- Pivoting its offering to include professional hygiene products in addition to food products.



*“Based on what we learned from the feedback, we built and deployed a number of services to our customers, completely free of charge, that addressed their biggest needs.”*

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Meanwhile, at Old Mutual Insure in South Africa, executive head of customer experience & responsible business, [Antonia Oakes](#) was spearheading the development of a customer relief strategy, with support from a cross-functional team of senior members from the organisation. Looking at small businesses in particular, and specifically those industries which were most impacted by COVID-19, the strategy was designed to explore how support could be provided to businesses and how jobs could be safeguarded.

“The strategy took into consideration the changed SME and customer behaviours, needs and methods of engagement. The challenges which customers faced and the actual space of where the human race found itself,” Oakes told us.

“This strategy looked at principles such as customer value for money, usage-based insurance and the fact that customers were no longer driving to work and using their vehicles as often, required a type of discount of premium compensation.”

Old Mutual Insure has subsequently deployed R40 million to support SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic and supported more than 41 small businesses to safeguard the jobs of over 588 employees. The insurer has also set aside a fund to pay out claims and commercial settlements to its hardest-hit qualifying business clients, to help them to continue operating during these difficult times.





# Keeping staff safe, supported and informed

**For many organisations, the most substantial way to keep their staff safe and healthy has been to enable them to work remotely for the foreseeable future.**

[Sonja Hild](#), director of customer service at BSH Group, for instance, acted decisively as the pandemic worsened, moving staff home, but all the while ensuring that service levels could be maintained, and communication within the team was also satisfactory.

“Early in February [2020], when the pandemic hit south of Europe, I initiated an IT-equipment check with our head of customer interaction to see if we had enough laptops in stock to send our contact centre ‘home’. And indeed, this early action helped to remain available without interruption to our consumers,” she told us. “With regular video messages (never longer than three minutes, but always coming from the heart), we kept our CX team informed about the current status - which changed ever so quickly.”

As a growing number of countries went into full lockdown, some services were still required to continue running, particularly those deemed to be essential services. For BSH Group, a supplier and servicer of white goods and home appliances, that meant its service engineers were required to stay in the field, which presented some challenges.

“Our field service colleagues very well understood their mission to keep fridges, hobs and washing machines running in a world of lockdown and the service management team, CEO and me regularly underlined their importance,” explained Sonja Hild. “Along every step, I clearly communicated what we were experiencing, which decisions were taken and why, what we are expecting to happen and how much I value everybody’s agile, quick and patient reaction to this situation. I am very proud of the team.”

“In the very beginning of lockdown, some field service engineers were afraid of visiting our customers’ homes. My first attention was with their safety, organising personal protective equipment and reducing consumer face-to-face-contact. This meant that as an organisation, we made the decision to put any non-functional or cosmetic repair on hold for a good 6-8 weeks, e.g. a scratched surface or a noisy fridge. This measure was highly appreciated by our field service engineers, as their core task became ‘systemically relevant’ - a matter of national interest.”

Elsewhere, customer experience managers also explored other ways that they could keep their customer service staff happy and healthy. As Holly Richardson told us: “Given that employees are crucial to delivering our purpose, we also focused our energy on employee health (both physical and mental). There were virtual fitness and meditation classes multiple times per week, a huge upskilling programme that was gamified with rewards and recognition, monthly town hall-style check-ins with full transparency on communications, and additional measures were also put into place to help protect our people from burnout.”

*“Along every step, I clearly communicated what we were experiencing, which decisions were taken and why, what we are expecting to happen and how much I value everybody’s agile, quick and patient reaction to this situation. I am very proud of the team.”*



# Being transparent and proactive with customer communication

**Maintaining an open dialogue with customers and being proactive in communicating to them has formed an important component of customer experience strategies for the past year.**

Customers have at turns required reassurance, guidance and honesty from their interactions, and organisations have had a duty to deliver these. This could mean being proactive about informing customers about the changing status of services, or recommending the use of alternative or self-service channels in the event of long queue times.

Avis Easteal ensured that when Luxasia was facing warehouse closures, measures were taken to counteract the disruption it would cause, introducing additional service technology and increasing the size of the company's customer service team. But Luxasia also ensured that there was clear communication about its delivery times. Crucially, customers were informed of the delayed delivery times before they placed an order,

offering complete transparency to the purchasers. And the company found that less than 0.1% cancelled their orders as a result of this candour.

As Colin Shaw, CEO of Beyond Philosophy and CX Leader of the Year judge, notes: "In times of trouble, it is best to start a dialogue with your customers. Moreover, it is better to over-communicate rather than under-communicate. Much of the problem in the current crisis is uncertainty. Communicating with your customers will not reduce the global uncertainty around the health crisis. Still, it will provide some small sense of certainty around how your organisation will react to it. People value predictability in times of uncertainty. So, do your small part: over-communicate and overshare."





# Rethinking how insights and feedback are obtained

**Communication is a two-way street, and so it also means listening to customers. Customer listening has taken on a renewed purpose since the beginning of the pandemic, with customer behaviours and preferences changing dramatically.**

Yet at the same time, customer surveying has been problematic during the pandemic - response rates have understandably dwindled, while there is a sense that at a time when so much is still uncertain, it could be simply 'too soon' to ask direct questions about the COVID-19 crisis.

This has put customer experience managers in a tricky spot, but this has led to some more creative approaches to customer insight. [Stacy Sherman](#), director for customer experience & employee engagement at Schindler Elevator Corporation, acknowledged that a much more 'human' approach was required to stay in contact with customers during a period of unprecedented uncertainty, and gauge their thoughts and feelings in a more direct manner.



“My survey team pivoted to “peace of mind” phone calls. Instead of asking traditional questions that don’t apply right now, we contacted customers to express empathy and inform them that we’re here for them. We authentically asked customers how we can be of help, which has fuelled loyalty. As Maya Angelou says, ‘people will forget what you did and said, but never forget how you made them feel.’”

Meanwhile, Keith Gait was about to launch a trial of Stagecoach’s new Voice of the Customer programme the week the UK went into lockdown in March, something that would eventually reshape the entire programme. The company decided to hold back on the rollout, and despite an “almost total drop-off in passenger numbers for 2 to 3 months”, discovered something new about their customers that fed back into their VoC programme design.

“We were still getting interactions from our previous feedback programme at this time and we found that, whilst our customer base was diminished, those people that were still traveling really, really valued the service, and our NPS went up a further 13 points during lockdown,” Gait told MyCustomer.

“It made me realise that we needed to re-evaluate the VoC programme we were about to rollout, and so during lockdown I spent a lot of time talking to people about how to improve it and make it more actionable.

“The view was we needed to make it more human, so that’s where we have focused. The feedback requests needed to be much more personable, much more about the human characteristics – of the driver, of the cleaners, of the welcome, of the safety – and generally less corporate. But whilst trying to still keep it very short. Our VoC programme is all customer-led, it’s proactive on their part, delivered to them while they are actually on a bus, so we need to be mindful of the short attention frame we have with them.”

Elsewhere, [James Scutt](#), head of customer experience strategy and deployment at the Post Office, and the winner of the CX Leader of the Year 2020, used text analytics to monitor customer sentiment and opinions, and the process uncovered some hugely important insights that enabled the organisation to implement and track performance of an entirely new KPI.

“During COVID-19, by using text analytics, I had identified a new driver: “Keep me safe”. Customers were looking for us to keep them safe when they visit a branch, and they told us so, quickly and clearly,” he told us. “I made performance in this new topic available through our CX dashboards so that all levels of our business could see customers’ feedback that talked about COVID-19, in their verbatim comments. Then, by cross-matching this against customer emotion, giving teams a very rich set of insights to act upon.”





# Accelerating digital transformation

**A recent [McKinsey Global Survey of executives](#) suggests that the pandemic has accelerated the digitisation of customer and supply-chain interactions and of internal operations by three to four years. Some customer experience leaders have reported the delivery of projects in a matter of months in what they had originally envisaged would take years.**

For instance, before the pandemic struck The Co-Op had already decided that it would start exploring how it could move its telephony platform to the cloud, and it had begun the process of scoping requirements and comparing solutions. But when COVID-19 hit, the limitations of the on-premise model became very apparent, in particular that it did not enable home working. The Co-Op subsequently migrated to Genesys Cloud in a matter of weeks.

“We set up a project team to scope and deliver the solution in mid-March. It went live two weeks later on 2nd April,” says [Claire Carroll](#), head of sales and service at The Co-Op. “Four weeks later we successfully switched over half of our total call traffic. By the end of May, we completely re-platformed our service centre, a significant undertaking that frankly had looked to be an impossible task.”



Freed from the constraints of the legacy systems, The Co-Op was able to transition 200 staff to flexible home working, to the gratitude of the employees. “This eased the pressure on resource considerably and made our advisers feel that their safety was being put first, thereby securing their engagement,” notes Carroll.

While necessity may be the mother of invention, some CX leaders have also seized the initiative to develop digital innovations that will support customers through this period of uncertainty. Bajaj Allianz General Insurance, for instance, found itself with a unique opportunity to help its customers; given that it was already offering digital services in the field of health, including apps and bots.

[KV Dipu](#), president & head of operations, communities & customer experience at Bajaj Allianz General Insurance, explains: “When customers were worried about the risk of spread of infection, we launched our contact tracing feature on the app. We also launched a COVID-19 self-assessment AI-enabled bot to help customers evaluate their risk level of exposure. This service identifies risk based on inputs and suggests precautionary measures, and is available for our customers in 10 regional languages.”

*“When customers were worried about the risk of spread of infection, we launched our contact tracing feature on the app. We also launched a COVID-19 self-assessment AI-enabled bot to help customers evaluate their risk level of exposure.”*





## Maintaining focus on customer experience despite the pandemic

**Arguably the most important achievement for CX leaders has been to ensure that momentum and focus on the customer experience is maintained in spite of the dramatic distraction of the pandemic.**

Explaining the Post Office's continued efforts, James Scutt states: "Even during times of such pressure, customers expected us to perform really well in the core areas - friendly, professional, knowledge, understanding, efficiency and expectations."

"To keep the focus on CX during this challenging time I changed the advice I had been giving to our field teams on how to manage CX. Firstly, forget about the numbers and targets, in fact, don't talk about them at all. Metrics could not be the focus during pressured times like this. Secondly, I asked area managers to focus on the great feedback received. Highlighting this to branches meant that they knew their customers really appreciated their hard work in keeping the essential services

they needed available. This had a really positive impact and customers' great feedback became a source of positivity more so than ever before."

Elsewhere, [Maya Khalifeh](#), customer experience manager at INDEVCO Group, explained how she took coronavirus as an opportunity to introduce and plan new customer experience initiatives, including touchpoint surveys ("With the aim of responding to dissatisfied customers within 48 hours"); a customer advisory board ("Gathering 10 strategic customers to share their needs, challenges and aspirations"); and an online enterprise customer portal ("Online access to a portal with self-service features whereby they can place orders, track payments and get status updates").



# Building customer experience's influence within the organisation

**For some enterprising customer experience managers, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to not only maintain focus on CX, but potentially even increase its influence within organisations.**

Capitalising on organisational disruption, some CX managers have seized the moment to demonstrate why customer experience teams should be more prominent and more involved with the rest of the business.

“I’m hearing CX leaders tell me that for the first time in their careers they are seeing siloes breaking down,” Ian Golding told MyCustomer. “People are realising that the best way for them to deal with a crisis is for us all to work together for the good of the organisation. That’s a wonderful thing. Yes it shouldn’t take a crisis for siloes to be broken down, but hopefully organisations that realise that working together actually yields benefit will stay that way once we get to some semblance of normality.”

David Hart, customer experience manager for car manufacturer Kia, notes: “The first phase of lockdown was actually rethinking our CX programme and how we would

re-engage with our customers and how we would use our field team moving forwards. Now it’s about covering all bases to ensure that we remain connected through the organisation as things change. It has sharpened our thinking.

“It’s about trying to make those connections within your business and ensuring that CX is the voice of the customer throughout the business. It should define what a company does and it should be at the centre of a business and inform senior management teams what actions should be taken in terms of listening to customers, evolving to meet their expectations and ensuring that a CX programme remains at the heart.

“CX is now even more important than it ever has been. There’s an emotional engagement and meeting the emotional needs and practical needs of a customer are so important now.”



## An opportunity for CX managers to show their mettle

**As the actions outlined above demonstrate, rather than retrenching, the most dynamic customer experience leaders are adapting to the new landscape and actively seeking new ways to drive customer engagement, improve customer insights and fast-track digital transformation.**

And those organisations that acknowledge the importance of customer experience management during this tumultuous time have the opportunity to build lasting relationships, carve out customer-centric reputations and put themselves in a better position to bounce back when normality returns.


Leadership and customer experience advisor Jeanne Bliss, spoke about this when she was a guest on [MyCustomer's Connecting the Dots](#) podcast: "From a business standpoint, and a business growth standpoint, it is just like when we had the recession in 2008 - organisations have to recognise that the customer is the asset of the business and understand that organic growth from your current customer base is most critical now."



“So what is important and powerful now is understanding your customers... and figuring out how to serve and support them. Because the way that you treat your existing customers is going to have everything to do with your speed of recovery, your word of mouth that comes out of your recovery and the profitability that you can experience as you work your way out of recovery.”

And certainly some of the customer experience leaders in the [CX Leader of the Year](#) programme have already reported that they have witnessed these kinds of rewards.

As Sonja Hild told us: “Consumers have experienced that we are a reliable partner, and our NPS skyrocketed during that time, hitting an all-time high. From verbatims we know that this was because we successfully communicated our intentions (e.g. protecting our field service staff by reducing avoidable contacts), our reasoning (e.g. functional repairs have priority) and our expectations for the future (e.g. we will send you an SMS as soon as we pick up non-functional repairs again). Demand has returned in record-volumes. It is a good sign of trust and a reliable CX, especially looking at current, regrettably unavoidable high waiting times.”



*“So what is important and powerful now is understanding your customers... and figuring out how to serve and support them. Because the way that you treat your existing customers is going to have everything to do with your speed of recovery.”*



## Other best practices

**What emerges here are a number of actions that customer experience managers and CX programmes need to take to ensure that their organisations will be one of those that emerge from the pandemic (and indeed any period of instability) with stronger customer relationships, better reputations and more positive commercial outlooks.**

And if this is achieved, customer experience managers will have also demonstrated their own critical value to their organisations.

As we have seen above, a continued focus on CX is a bare minimum. But ideally, this should also be accompanied by efforts to improve customer insights, an appetite to identify new ways to engage and support customers, and a commitment to driving digital transformation.

Ian Golding also recommends that organisations ensure that their customer experience programmes are underpinned by appropriate structures and frameworks. “The drum I’ve been banging for many years is structure, structure, structure,” he says. “If you have embedded a framework, then maintaining a focus on CX is easier.

So any organisation that has a framework needs to be leveraging that framework to ensure that there is a clear understanding and accountability.”

And Jeanne Bliss adds that it should also be the CX leader’s role during these times to unite the organisation and foster company-wide collaboration.


“It is a chief customer officer’s role to unite the organisation to understand the totality of what is going on and focus on a few things. And there has never been a more important time for this work and there has never been a more important time for these folks,” she explained to MyCustomer.



“We have to come back in with a relevant way of helping organisations to listen to and understand customer needs and then galvanise the organisation to work on a few things. If that work can be done, what it will actually do is prove that focus on these areas will actually drive growth.”

Recent research suggests that CX programmes that are both robust and collaborative are indeed best positioned to enable organisations to deliver success throughout the pandemic. [A SurveyMonkey study](#) of 1,777 professionals involved in the CX or Voice of the Customer programmes at their organisations found that companies with no formal CX programme had the lowest rate of financial growth (33%), while organisations with established (50%) and advanced (62%) CX programmes were much more likely to experience growth.

Meanwhile, the same study found that respondents who rated their companies as the most collaborative on CX insights were 67% more likely to say they have experienced financial growth since COVID-19, compared to those that collaborate infrequently or not at all.



*“It is a chief customer officer’s role to unite the organisation to understand the totality of what is going on and focus on a few things. And there has never been a more important time for this work and there has never been a more important time for these folks.”*



# Raising the hand for CX

**MyCustomer's CX Leader of the Year programme demonstrates the influence that customer experience managers and their programmes can have on their wider organisations and ultimately on their commercial fortunes - both current and future.**

For those organisations that are marginalising their CX programmes, there has never been a more important time to embrace customer experience management as a company-wide initiative.

“The role [of customer experience leader] needs to become more prominent because decisions are being taken right now, in panic, in reactive mode, that are being made without any understanding of the customer journey,” warns Ian Golding. “Unfortunately, most of us are still working in or with businesses whose priority is to maintain the balance sheet and deliver a return to shareholders. Those organisations need to understand that that is not sustainable in the current environment and it may not be sustainable going forward.

“Unless we focus on doing what’s right for the customer and the business at the same time, then we might not have a business at all. And so it is now more than ever, really critical for businesses to listen to customer experience professionals to ensure that their voice is at the top table.”

And for those customer experience leaders that have yet to seize the moment and increase the influence of their customer-centric thinking in the organisation, the time is now.

“Be a contributor,” Jeanne Bliss advises. “Find ways to contribute to what is going on inside your organisation. Cross the boundaries of projects, people and divisions. CX is really around improving the operations, the processes and the practices of the company, so get a seat at the table where those things are going on. Worry less about CX and more about yourself as a contributor, because you are automatically going to bring that customer focus to whatever you do.

“We’re seeing that this is a moment inside organisations where boundaries are being torn down and people are saying ‘OK we need to solve this, so let’s all come to the table and who wants to participate?’ Raise your hand right now.”



# About Genesys

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Sharing news, advice and resources on topics ranging from customer engagement to CRM and the contact centre, MyCustomer is a vital hub for business leaders aiming to enhance every facet of the customer experience they deliver.

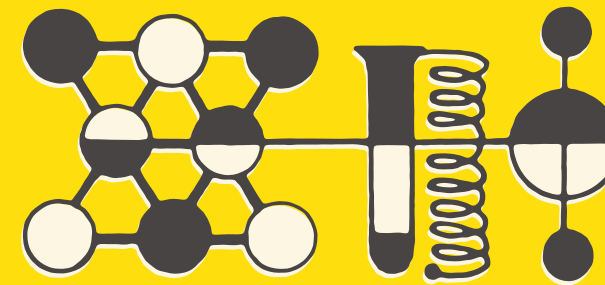
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