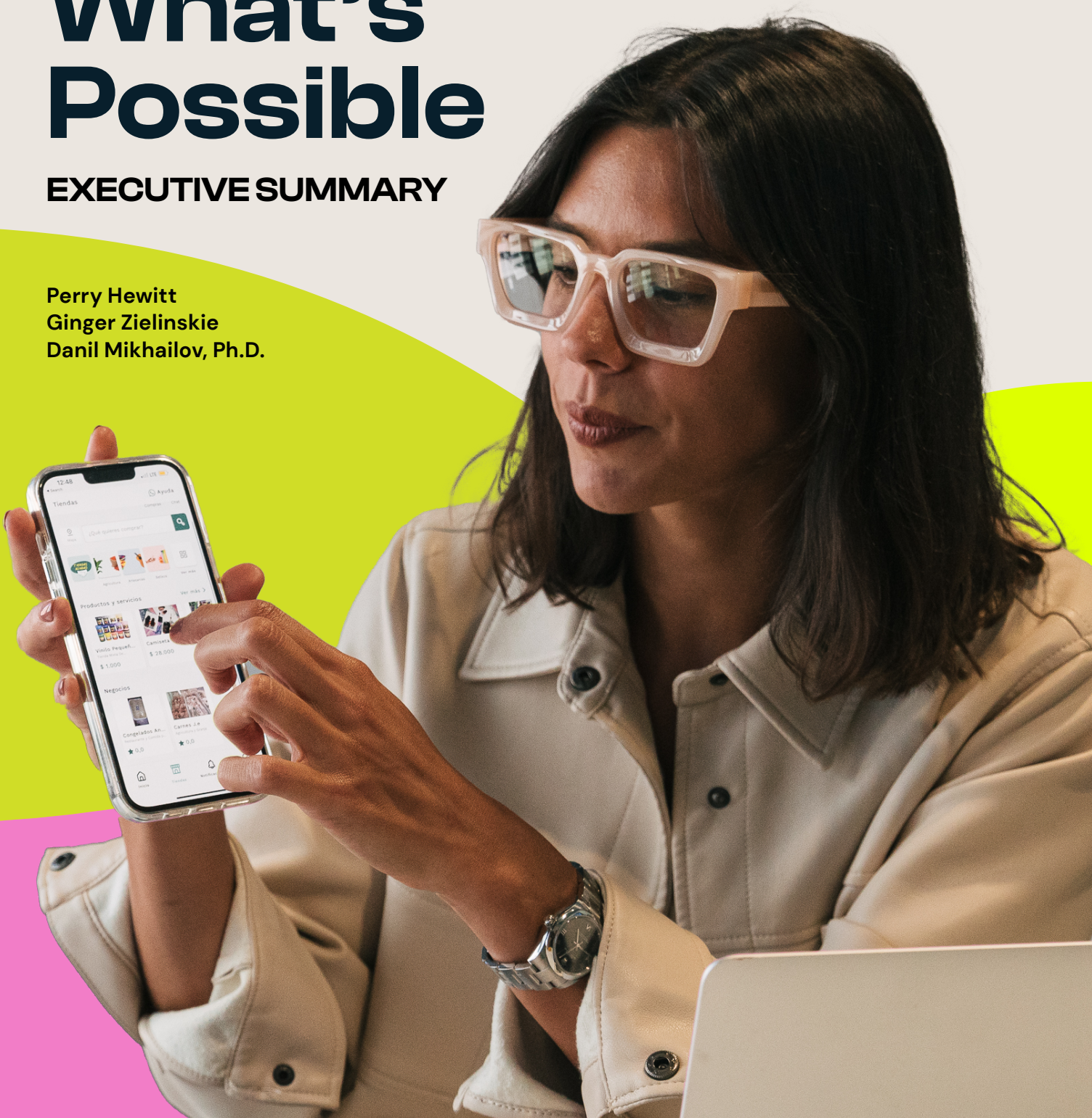data.org

2025 DATA AND AI FOR SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT

Accelerate What's Possible

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

In a world increasingly shaped by data and artificial intelligence, the potential for transformative change is undeniable. But so too are the risks.

Which side wins out—whether we drive progress or exacerbate challenges—is determined not by the technology, but by the people leveraging it.

That is the key theme throughout this report as we examine opportunities, risks, trends, and recommendations, informed by data.org's work as a connector, convener, and catalyst over the past five years. Across our global innovation challenges, our Capacity Accelerator Network that is strengthening the workforce and building demand for purpose-driven data and AI practitioners, and our growing library of resources and digital learning opportunities, it always comes back to people.

- People who believe that data and AI should be collected and designed not just for but by the communities they seek to serve—and in the languages they speak.

- People who understand that good intentions aren't enough, and that we need to do more, collectively, to establish standards, guardrails, ethics, and accountability that protect against the further marginalization or exclusion of vulnerable communities.

- People who consistently pursue innovation and develop promising new solutions, including in emerging roles tailored to the changing sector, like the data ecosystem designer we have helped envision.

- People who prioritize building trust with those closest to the work to improve the quality of life for people everywhere, across critical challenges like financial inclusion, climate change, and public health.

In every case study we encounter, the same is true: be smart about how you invest in people, and the potential for sustainable progress will grow exponentially. At data.org, our focus has always been on identifying, amplifying, connecting, and empowering people. Guided by our commitment to be globally informed but locally led, we empower the social sector with a community of practice to collaborate with, with a library of tools and resources to learn from and build upon, and with hands-on training and workforce development. Because technology will never stop changing. To stay resilient and relevant, we are—and must remain—tool agnostic. We focus instead on the skills, knowledge, experiences, and connections that people need to not only be successful individual contributors to the workforce, but to also be part of the movement that is harnessing data and AI for impact in every corner of the globe.

So how do all stakeholders in the data and AI for social impact ecosystem set the stage for taking a more people-first approach to this work?

1. Build digital and data fluency with more representative data and a more representative workforce. You don't need a degree in data science to do this work well.

2. Create more localized resources across languages, disciplines, and borders, including in software development.

3. Ground workforce development and capacity-building strategies in real-world problems and practical applications.

Generative AI can help accelerate progress across this trifecta. It creates opportunities for translation, fuels the rise of low-code, no-code solutions, and allows even organizations at the start of their data maturity journey to access tools that can be adapted to their local context. The need for custom builds—and the upfront investment that requires—is reduced as more open-access tools become available. Generative AI can also save time for resource-constrained leaders and organizations so that they can focus on more mission-aligned tasks. As long as we are intentional about simultaneously addressing risks like the digital divide and embedded bias, these opportunities can translate into meaningful change for people who need it.

As we explore in this report, the applications of data and AI are as diverse as the organizations using them. The case studies come from different sectors and different continents, but what ties them together is a fierce and fearless commitment to solving some of the world's most intractable problems. They embody the best of the sector and bring to life our three key recommendations for how all organizations, and especially nonprofits, can keep up with the pace of innovation and leverage data and AI for social impact:

- **Stay focused on practical applications.**

- **Harness the power of partnerships.**

- **Remember, always, who it is you seek to serve.**

Over the past five years, data.org has learned what great looks like in data and AI for social impact. And as we look ahead to the next five, we cannot predict how the technology will change, but we do know, from experience and without question, that 'great' will always look like purpose-driven people who have the will and the skill to do good.

data.org

is a connector, convener, and catalyst,
for data and AI for social impact.