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Philanthropy & Nonprofits

Helen Mountford is tackling one of the most urgent issues of our time

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Helen Mountford is president and CEO of ClimateWorks Foundation.

LIPO CHING | SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS TIMES

By Diana K. Murphy – Special Projects Editor, San Francisco Business Times
Apr 8, 2022

University activism was how Helen Mountford got into environmental rights.

The 51-year-old national of both the United Kingdom and United States was attending university in Melbourne to study neuro linguistic programming, but found herself involved in campus activist groups in her spare time. After realizing that there was opportunity to pursue a career doing what she was most passionate about, Mountford hasn't looked back.

This January, Mountford became president and CEO of the nonprofit ClimateWorks, which is tasked with working to solve one of the greatest challenges of our time. I spoke with Mountford about her career leading nonprofits — and she graciously shared useful steps we can all take to address the climate emergency.

How did ClimateWorks begin? It started in 2008 to accelerate and amplify the impact of climate philanthropy internationally. We bring together the major funders and inform them with data science on strategic areas and sectors.

We now have a much broader and bigger philanthropic field investing in climate,

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which is wonderful. It's still under 2% of total philanthropy, but we're hoping that number is increasing.

What sort of work does the foundation do to drive action around the climate emergency? We host and support conveenings of the foundations on key issues. So that can include established programs which a number of different foundations are engaged in. We also have programmatic areas – something we call global intelligence services – to map what's happening on climate philanthropy which can inform the field on where we need to target where we've got gaps and where we can strengthen action.

You have a background in environmental studies. Did it always interest you? I've been interested in it for a long time. My first university degree was in philosophy and history. I was looking at going into neuro linguistic programming, but I was involved in lots of environmental movements and groups on campus and spent most of my time doing that. As I was about to go into doing a master's, somebody said, you could do this as a career. That was 30 years ago.

Does ClimateWorks partner with businesses and government orgs to further its mission? It does – we work internationally. And in most countries, there's regional climate foundations that we work closely with. Our projects bring in local as well as international players.

So within countries, for example, the Drive Electric campaign that we've been supporting in the U.S., Europe, China and India covers the largest number of those who are producing vehicles, captures about 70% of global production of new vehicles demand. We use that as a model that can engage and be followed in other countries as well.

What are companies doing in the climate space to attract new talent during this "Great Resignation?" On the ESG side, there's a recruiting crisis right now. If you want to attract younger millennials and Gen Z, they're looking at what corporations are doing and asking if they are being sustainable. Are they putting their money where their mouth is as far as diversity, equity and inclusion?

I don't think the big companies have fully grasped this. One of the leading oil and gas companies who I've had conversations with tell me they cannot recruit anybody under 40 these days.

Helen Mountford

About ClimateWorks Foundation

Founded: 2008

Employees: 100+

Headquarters: San Francisco

Grants: $81M awarded in global grants in 2020

Revenue: $93,577,498 in 2019

Key partnerships: Ikea Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Mission:
"ClimateWorks Foundation is on a mission to end the climate crisis by amplifying the power of philanthropy. We envision a planet that is a thriving home for all living beings for generations to come."

About Mountford

Age: 51

Education: B.A. from University of Melbourne; M.S. from Univers College London

Residence: San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

Recently read: "The Ministry for the Future" by Kim Stanley Robinson

Hobbies: Hiking with my husband, kids and our rescue dog, Car jigsaw puzzles

How she unwinds: Walking or swimming, dinner parties with far and friends

Pet peeves: "Restaurants with only one vegetarian option (or no at all!). With both my sons vegetarian, this limits our options."

Causes she's passionate about — besides climate change: Racia and social justice, safe streets for pedestrians and bikers

First job with a paycheck: "Waitress (long ago, but I will always l immense respect for wait staff)"

Favorite park: "I'm excited to discover the Bay Area ones, but in D.C. I love Rock Creek Park"

Guilty pleasure: Luxury chocolate

First car: A white VW Rabbit

How did your work at the World Resources Institute inform the kind of impact you hope to make at ClimateWorks? At WRI a lot of my work was focused on identifying where we have the big opportunities for climate action, and how to drive climate action in a way that is durable and what will actually make businesses, government, cities, people make different choices.

A lot of that intersected. To lead to durable and ambitious change on climate action at the level that the science says is needed, we need to be able to show people how this will lead to better lives and more employment income generation.

What can the local business community do to reduce their emissions and innovate in a way that isn't harmful to the planet? This is an opportunity to experiment. We know a lot of the solutions we need but not exactly how to put them in place. San Francisco is at the forefront of having businesses that are engaged and interested and aware of the importance of this issue.

I've been able to profile where things have worked, what's worked, also where things have faced challenges and had to be adjusted along the way that can actually accelerate what we're trying to do around the world.

50%

Governments look at what's happening at the local level to see if things are working before they're willing to take action and put in place policy. San Francisco's got an edge here.

Has the pandemic accelerated the urgency of your work? A lot of us feared that the climate would slip off the agenda. Surprisingly, it didn't. Because of the nature of the pandemic, people started to understand the nature of some of these global challenges. And that was accelerated because we had a number of climate disasters here.

We've seen companies, the finance sector and cities coming forward with a wave of net zero commitments. There's a lot to be done, but it's definitely not a backburner issue.

What are some things that one can do on an individual level that are most impactful? Vote. We need people to elect government politicians who will actually make the right choices and take this seriously.

We're seeing very high energy prices and supply chain shortages around gas and oil. And some say we need more gas, we need more oil. Whereas what we really need is to switch to energy supply systems which are independent of the demand for international gas and oil. We need to switch to local renewables and we need to elect politicians that have that vision.

The others are personal choices that are healthier for us like walking, more biking, more taking public transport.

60%

What does it take to lead a nonprofit with such a critical mission? It's easy because we have a fantastic team. The philanthropic community working on climate is very much in the space of how do we urgently work together and collaborate to get things to happen. And so there's already a mindset and I would say a community feeling that is really dedicated to moving things forward through radical collaboration, helping to fill gaps, complement what we're seeing in the public sector and help to drive change experiments.

What's been the most surprising lesson you've learned as a leader? Culture eats strategy for breakfast. You cannot get a business or a city or a government to change what they're doing unless they see that it's good for them and their people.

You're moving out to San Francisco from the East Coast soon? Yes, I've been living on the East Coast. And one of the things I'm really excited about is going back and forth a bit. My son is finishing school, but I'm just loving San Francisco.

So I’m really excited to get to know the city and spend more time here. I love food and it’s a great city for that.

THE LIST

Highest-Paid Nonprofit Employees

Total compensation

Rank	Prior Rank	Person
1	1	Scott, Larry
2	2	Jeffrey, William
3	3	Tessier-Lavigne, Marc

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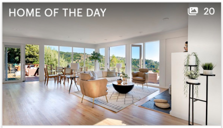

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