ACRJ

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Cultural Transformation at AIS: Navigating Generational Diversity and Inclusive Change in Thailand

SYNOPSIS

This case study takes the reader through the journey of cultural transformation and strategic HR-led change at Advanced Info Service (AIS), a major telecommunications company in Thailand. Kantima Lerlertyuttitham, the Group Chief Human Resources Officer (G-CHRO), looks into potential Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) practices to reduce inequality in the company while navigating the 13,000 employees through transitions towards becoming a Cognitive Technology Company, or Cognitive Tech-Co., through a Fit Fun Fair organizational culture. One of the challenges faced during the transformation is the gap in technological skills, particularly among the older generation of employees, who are facing more difficulties adopting the new technology. With the adoption of more advanced technology in the workplace, Lerlertyuttitham is considering initiatives to close this technological gap among the long-tenure and older employees. The case positions DEIB as a complementary enabler to the broader HRM transformation, aligned with AISs national values and ESG commitments.

It was a sunny afternoon in the year 2024. Kantima Lerlertyuttitham, AIS Group Chief Human Resources Officer (G-CHRO), was sitting in her office in Bangkok, staring at

the poster on the wall. It was a list of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that had been guiding AISs sustainability efforts. Lerlertyuttitham had made tick marks beside the four sustainability goals of the human resource management department:

Goal 3 Good health and well-being
Goal 5 Gender equality
Goal 8 Decent work and economic growth
Goal 10 Reduced inequalities

Progress had been made on all four goals over the past few years. However, Lerlertyuttitham felt that more could be done to reduce inequalities (Goal 10) within the organization. She had been paying particular attention to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) policies. In addition, the board of directors had just concluded on a new vision for the company, which would require cultural transformation within the organization.

Lerlertyuttitham knew that the company's greatest challenge wasn't solely in implementing policies; reshaping the organization's culture to align with its new ambitions was the major challenge. It would be the role of strategic human resource management in aligning people with this vision, especially in navigating change across generations, work styles, and capabilities. Utilizing the benefits of a diverse workforce would allow the company to fulfill both its sustainability and transformational goals.

Lerlertyuttitham was especially concerned with the company's older employees who were lagging in fully adopting the newly introduced technology into their daily operations. They were at least 50 years of age (see Exhibit 1) and had been with the company for a long time. Termination was not an option for Lerlertyuttitham as this would go against the Thai culture where seniority was valued. Letting go of a senior employee due to their inability to keep up with new technology would negatively impact employee morale. She pondered, "What can be done to support the senior, long-tenured employees through this period of cultural transformation?"

Lerlertyuttitham had been tracking other companies in Thailand to keep updated on what other organizations had been doing to manage this group of employees. The topic of generational diversity, or the diversity in age groups, was addressed differently across organizations, ranging from stating the importance of a workforce with diverse age groups to employment policies that used the gig model to hire retired employees on a contract basis.[1-2]

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

The telecommunications industry in Thailand was highly developed, being the first in the Southeast Asian region to launch the 5G network[3] in 2020. The industry comprised three markets, namely (1) fixed-line and fixed-broadband, (2) mobile, and (3) internet-based communication. As of 2023, there were approximately 118 million subscribers in the mobile communication market.[4]

The three major operators in the market were Advanced Info Service (AIS), True Corporation (TRUE), and Total Access Communication (Dtac). By the end of 2022, AIS had garnered 46 percent of the subscriber market share, with a revenue of 47 percent of the market share. This made AIS the leader in the telecommunications industry in Thailand.[5] On March 1, 2023, the much-speculated merger of Dtac and TRUE was finalized. Under the new entity 'True Corporation,' the merger accounted for 54 percent market share in Thailand.

The Dtac-TRUE merger had caused controversies and consumer protests surrounding fears of monopoly in the telecommunications industry.[6] This brought criticisms towards the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission (NBTC) for allowing the two big players to merge. The NBTC was a government agency that regulated broadcasting and telecommunications companies, including mergers. In addition, the role of the NBTC was to grant companies operating licenses, such as the spectrum license for 26 GHz, 2,600, 2,100, 1,800, 900, and 700 MHz that was granted to AIS in 2010.

A few months later, AIS acquired Triple T Broadband (3BB) for US$899 million,[7] including a partial acquisition of Jasmine Broadband Internet Infrastructure Fund (JASIF). Before the acquisition, AIS had 2.38 million subscribers while 3BB serviced 2.31 million households.[8]

COMPANY HISTORY

AIS was a subsidiary of Intouch Holdings Plc. (formerly known as Shin Corporation Plc.). AIS had four main businesses under its umbrella: (1) the mobile communication service, (2) fixed broadband (FBB) service, (3) digital service, and (4) enterprise business service. In 2022, the company's total assets amounted to 337,044 million baht (approximately US$9.5 million).

AIS first operated in 1986 as a computer services company (see Exhibit 2). The company was recognized as a mobile phone service provider when it was granted a 20-year concession in 1990. It was then listed as a public company two years later. In 1994, AIS started offering Digital GSM mobile service to the Thailand market, which reached one million subscribers within four years. In 2015, the company launched the AIS Super Wifi and AIS Fiber internet services to consumers under the FBB division. AIS also targeted corporate clients with its digital services, such as cloud, cybersecurity, and data centers. Two years later, AIS transitioned into a telecommunications company by offering video-on-demand packages.

Sustainability Efforts

AIS had always been praised for its sustainability efforts. It was recognized by several global and national institutions, such as the Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI), S&P Global, and the ESG100 for its compliance with ESG performance criteria.

AISs sustainability efforts began when it formed the Sustainable Development Committee, which was responsible

for reviewing internal sustainability-related policies, strategies, goals, and issues.

As shown in Exhibit 3, the Sustainable Development Committee oversaw the Business Sustainability Strategy Unit and the separate business units that implemented sustainability initiatives across the company. Both these units further managed efforts aligned with the company's vision in terms of digital economy, digital inclusion and climate issues.

The acquisition of 3BB in 2023 reinforced AISs commitment to its environmental and social equal strategies, which emphasized the use of technology to minimize the impact of operations on the environment. These included expanding high-speed internet access to underserved regions, supporting green energy awareness through its Green Energy Network, and prioritizing partnerships with businesses that demonstrated environmental responsibility. Integrating 3BB's existing fiber network with AISs infrastructure enabled the company to reduce the duplication of physical assets, enhance energy efficiency, and extend broadband access to remote and low-income communities. Not only did these efforts fulfill the company's environmental goals, but they also helped reduce inequalities in society, particularly in less-developed areas of the country.

In addition to providing internet access to distant communities, several other projects were established to support society. These projects were founded under the AIS Academy. The objective of the AIS Academy was to increase social equality by making knowledge and skills accessible to employees and the external community. This way, even people who lived in distant areas had access to knowledge they would otherwise not have the opportunity to learn. Topics included digital skills, such as Power BI, design thinking, and data analytics.

In addition to providing online courses, sustainability projects were developed to increase social equality. One of the projects that aimed at external societal development was the "Aunjai Volunteers for Occupational Development." This project was founded in response to the economic challenges posed by COVID-19 and emphasized up-skilling and

job retention opportunities in Thailand. A total of over 10,000 people participated in the program.

AIS also gave importance to its governance policies by adopting a company-wide corporate governance policy that emphasized transparency, stakeholder accountability, and Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) disclosures in accordance with the standards of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB). One of the ways this was done was by collecting input from internal and external stakeholders to learn the current trends, effects, and developments in the area. These sustainability goals would then be communicated to the employees through Townhall meetings.

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

From Telco to Digital Life Service Provider

The year 2015 was a milestone for AIS, with the announcement by AIS Chief Executive Officer Somchai Lertsutiwong on the company's transformation into a digital life service provider in Thailand. It marked the beginning of the company's digital transformation. Being a digital service provider meant that the company would offer services leveraging digital technologies to deliver content, solutions, or experiences via the internet. These encompassed streaming, cloud computing, digital communication, e-commerce, digital marketing and IoT services in catering to evolving consumer needs for more integrated, efficient, and flexible digital interactions and transactions. The first services AIS offered as a digital service provider was an entertainment platform for digital and online TV channels called AIS PLAY and AIS PLAYBOX.

Lerlertyuttitham recalled when she first joined AIS that same year, when she was tasked with steering the company's workforce through the transformation. At that time, the organizational culture of AIS was based on the Triple I approach, which stood for *Individual talents*, *Idea generation*,

and *Infinite changer*. These *FASTMOVING* values[9] focused on developing competent, creative, and adaptive individuals.

To align the new organizational culture with the transformation, the *find-U* culture was introduced. *Find-U* signified the company's direction towards a faster-paced, innovation-driven environment with the *Fighting Spirit*, *Innovative*, *New Ability*, *Live Digital Life*, and *Sense of Urgency* values. With her experience working with esteemed companies such as Microsoft, Watsons, Prudential, and MC Group, Lerlertyuttitham anticipated the challenges of leading 13,000 people through the changes. It was normal for transformations to elicit a mixed range of reactions from people who were affected by changes. Therefore, it was no surprise when there were employees who had positive reactions towards the changes while there were also those who were more complacent: "Why do we have to change if we are already the leader in the industry?" Lerlertyuttitham recalled.

From Digital to Cognitive Tech-Co.

> "*AIS Cognitive Tech-Co.'s vision is aimed at delivering the best products and services to customers and the people of Thailand, transcending all limitations and focusing on creating an ECOSYSTEM ECONOMY.*"[10]

> —Somchai Lertsutiwong, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Advanced Info Service Plc. (AIS)

In 2021 — six years since the company's last transformation — the board of directors had agreed that it was time for AIS to take its next steps and transform into a cognitive technology company, or cognitive tech-co. AIS aimed to move towards the more diverse and fast-changing technology industry, similar to renowned technology companies like Alphabet Inc. and Meta.

The additional aspect of AIS as a technology company was the use of cognitive technologies in its products and operations. On the product side, cognitive technologies provided information about consumer preferences, which enabled the

company to understand, predict, and satisfy customer needs with precision. On the side of internal operations, cognitive technologies were used to perform tasks that were once carried out by employees. The Robotic Process Automation (RPA) was employed to integrate manual labor with technology in daily operations. This increased efficiency and reduced employee workload, while simultaneously fulfilling the company's environmental goals of decreasing paper-based processes, reducing energy-intensive back-office routines, and enhancing digital workflows. The employees whose roles were automated were then reassigned to tasks that required advanced technological skills and were therefore expected to develop skills that aligned with the requirements of cognitive technologies.

On July 1, 2021, the company held the mid-year town hall meeting to communicate updates about the company's performance and future. Due to the ongoing precautions against COVID-19 during that period, it was mandatory that meetings be held virtually. Fortunately, the company was already equipped with the technology needed to run the meeting seamlessly, especially one with over 13,000 attendees. Lerlertyuttitham used this opportunity to announce the company's cognitive tech-co. aspirations and conveyed the expected changes that would occur at AIS. Included in the transition was the goal of equipping at least 90% of employees with digital knowledge and skills by 2025.

After the town hall meeting, Lerlertyuttitham continuously communicated the company's vision and future directions through the HR division. Similar to the 2015 transformation, there was a mix of reactions towards the planned changes. The majority of employees welcomed the upskilling opportunities and saw the transformation as a means of staying ahead of the competition, despite the challenges they faced. As one employee shared, "It's overwhelming at times, but the support from my team and the extra training really helped." A smaller group of employees were more resistant towards the changes, mostly long-tenured employees who were less adaptive to digital tools and platforms. One senior technician complained, "I've been with AIS for more than 20 years, and suddenly we're expected to use AI dashboards and apps every day - it feels like I'm starting all over again."

To support employees through the transition, AIS provided more intensive training sessions and hands-on coaching. Founded by the human resource department, the Technology Incubation and Research Team aimed to assist the company with the transformation of people and culture. The motto "Innovate to lead, Connect to succeed" was used to encourage employees to maintain a positive and innovative mindset.

A *FIT FUN FAIR* Culture

The transition towards becoming a cognitive tech-co. meant empowering employees and creating an innovative and continuous learning workplace. Coinciding with this was the entry of the younger generation into the workforce, which was known as the generation that was motivated by meaningful, creative tasks and advanced technology. This added a new layer of complexity to the company's culture-building efforts, as the organization now needed to harmonize the expectations of multiple generations in the workplace, while maintaining fairness and inclusion.

This led to the introduction of the *Fit Fun Fair* culture. *Fit* referred to an individual's preparedness in working for AIS as a cognitive tech-co. It required being physically *Fit*, as well as *Fit* in skills and knowledge. *Fun* referred to having a growth mindset and seeing the fun in taking on challenges. *Fair* referred to equal opportunity for all members of the AIS community. The *Fair* component was a key mechanism used to promote transparent recognition, equitable access to career development, and a workplace that encouraged cross-generational respect.

As she looked back at the SDG poster, Lerlertyuttitham got up, picked up her marker, and wrote beside each goal:

- ✓ Goal 3 Good health and well-being – *Fit, Fun*
- ✓ Goal 5 Gender equality – *Fair*
- ✓ Goal 8 Decent work and economic growth – *Fit, Fair*
- ✓ Goal 10 Reduced inequalities – *Fair*

She wanted to make sure that the company's new culture continuously reinforced the SDGs.

The combination of the four generations in the workplace — Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z — led to the launch of tools and programs that aimed to accommodate the learning and developmental preferences of employees through the transition, while keeping the process Fit, Fun and Fair. These included the AIS DIGI LIFE mobile application, the INNOJUMP Project, and AIS Academy.

AIS DIGI LIFE Mobile Application

The DIGI LIFE mobile application (see Exhibit 4) was introduced as a platform to gamify the process of learning and development. Employees accumulated points when they participated in developmental activities, such as attending training, or wellness activities like fitness activities and team sports.

As shown in Exhibit 4, employees were rewarded token points for their "accomplishments." Once employees earned enough points, the tokens were redeemable for food and beverages, gift vouchers, or even a trip overseas.[11] The DIGI LIFE application was successful in assisting employees in developing their skills and knowledge while keeping the process fun and engaging for all generations.

INNOJUMP Project

The purpose of the INNOJUMP project was to develop innovative mindsets by creating a safe, inclusive space for employees to contribute ideas through workshops, festivals and competitions. In 2023, the competition yielded 315 innovative ideas from 231 employees.

One of the success stories of the INNOJUMP Project was the "School Van Clever" vehicle control system.[12] This innovation enabled parents to monitor their children on their commute to school. This gave parents peace of mind as they always knew where their children were. The product was initially launched in the southern part of Thailand and was considered a success.

The launch of the DIGI LIFE mobile application and the INNOJUMP Project were aimed at developing the skills and knowledge of employees, without making employees feel overwhelmed in the process.

AIS Academy

AIS was envisioned as a "Hub of People Excellence[13]" — a place of continuous learning and innovation for the sustainable growth of the organization. With the belief that "humans will be chosen to survive in the workplace by technology," Lerlertyuttitham saw the demand for programs that would develop employees with the required knowledge and technological skills. The company invested 100 million Thai baht (US$2.8 million) in the AIS Academy to establish it as the center for learning and development resources.

The AIS Academy served as a tool that provided benefits to both external and internal stakeholders. The online courses and the "Aunjai Volunteers for Occupational Development" were beneficial to external stakeholders. These programs helped reduce social inequality and increased the possibility of decent work and economic growth in the community through knowledge and skills development.

Similarly, the AIS Academy supported employees' growth mindset as they were equipped with resources to help them through the transition. Employees had access to a variety of learning platforms, such as the "ReadDi," which was an E-library with books on topics ranging from self-development to business management. Employees downloaded books onto their devices and had access to the books for a certain period. "LearnDi" was a platform that contained online training on both soft and hard skills, such as effective communication and data analytics.

Through the AIS Academy, the company was able to achieve its transformational and sustainability goals by being inclusive while cultivating the skills required for the transformation. As a result, more than 85% passed the assessment of digital skills by 2023.

With these initiatives, AIS won several awards for its dedication to personnel development and well-being. Some of the recognitions included HR Asia Magazine's Best Companies to Work for in Asia for the third consecutive year in 2021, and the 2022 Human Rights Awards by the Rights and Liberties Protection Department of the Ministry of Justice, to name a few.

Start with HR

"The Human Resources Department needs to understand the organization's business trajectory and business plan in order to design the strategies that can upskill employees and improve their capabilities so that they become a force driving the company forward in the future.[14]*"* – Kantima Lerlertyuttitham

On the human resources side, Lerlertyuttitham has made plans for the employees, as well as HR personnel. Her first goal was to change the role of the HR department. "Instead of being reactive and focused solely on day-to-day operations, HR personnel should be involved in strategic planning and organizational goals," she explained. Therefore, her first step was to shift the role of HR personnel to HR Business Partners (HRBPs). This way, the HR department would be responsible for addressing concerns, providing tailored support, and driving actionable strategies for different departments.

HR Policy Changes

"In traditional Thai culture, performance evaluations often emphasized compliments and face-saving. Providing feedback, even if constructive, could sometimes cause demotivation and create discomfort," Lerlertyuttitham explained about the rationale behind making changes to the company's employment structures, evaluation methods, and reward system. Revising the HR policies was a requisite for the transition towards a technology company.

One of the primary changes made was the criteria used to promote employees. While promotion was based on

tenure in the old policy, the revised policy emphasized performance. This marked a major shift toward meritocracy and was aligned to the culture of a rapidly changing company.

In the area of performance evaluation and communication, supervisors were provided with training in the art of delivering effective feedback. This meant that feedback needed to reflect the combination between constructive communication and face-saving value of the Thai culture. As a result, employees became more open to the feedback given by their supervisors and subsequently showed more willingness to continuously develop their skills.

People Champion

Lerlertyuttitham's third goal was to make the transition as smooth as possible for the employees. This led to the establishment of the *People Champion* support unit. The goal of this unit was to use human interaction and open communication to minimize the feeling of anxiety that usually came with changes. Representatives from each department were recruited to serve as a bridge between the HR department and the representatives' department members. Employees were asked to volunteer or propose someone for the role. Approximately 240 People Champions were recruited nationwide.

It was the role of the People Champions, as "change leaders," to communicate with department members regarding ongoing and upcoming changes in the organization. They helped influence the attitudes of employees towards the changes. In addition, the People Champions were also tasked with monitoring the morale and satisfaction of employees during the transition process.

DEIB for Cultural Transformation

AIS integrated Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) principles into its policies as part of its transformation endeavors. Based on the Thai law and the social aspect of

sustainability, AIS introduced inclusive hiring policies, digital accessibility tools, family caregiving benefits, and LGBTQ+ protections.

The Thai labor law had been consistent with its view towards equality and non-discrimination. For instance, the Constitutions of 1997, 2007 and 2017 contained provisions that guaranteed equality and non-discrimination. Despite frequent changes to the constitutions due to its dynamic political landscape, such as the dissolution of parliament that would result in the re-election of a new government,[15] emphasis on the prohibition of discrimination based on race, gender, age, disability and religion across several constitutions had always been a constant. This highlighted the value given to diversity in the society which was, in turn, observed in organizations.

Specific laws regarding employees in Thailand included the Labor Protection Act (1998), which was designed to protect workers from discrimination and to ensure fair treatment in areas such as wages, working conditions, and termination of employment; the Gender Equality Act (2015), which explicitly prohibited gender-based discrimination and harassment in the workplace, and ensured equal pay and access to opportunities; and the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act (2007), which mandated that employers provide equal employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

The Challenge

Lerlertyuttitham was still faced with the challenge concerning the gap in technological skills within the group of the senior, long-tenured employees. She noticed that this group lagged in digital skills despite having the same access to learning resources, tools and programs as the other employees. Compared to the younger employees, this group had not fully adopted the RPA technology. As one senior employee shared, "It's not that we don't want to change. We just need more time and someone to show us, not just through a video or a link."

Lerlertyuttitham looked down onto the busy streets of Bangkok — the heavy traffic, people walking, and street vendors. In a few hours, all this would subside, and a new day would begin. With time passing by so quickly, something had to be done soon for everyone to get through this transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(1) Using John Kotter's 8-Step Change Model, analyze the organizational change process at AIS by addressing the following sub-questions:
    (a) What stages of Kotter's change framework can be identified in AISs transformation process?
    (b) How did each stage contribute to the implementation of sustainable practices?
    (c) In what ways did AIS address resistance to new technologies throughout these stages?
(2) Recommend DEIB initiatives to address the technological skills gap among older employees while ensuring alignment with AISs sustainability goals.
(3) Discuss the key roles of leadership and HR in driving AISs transformation to a Cognitive Tech-Co., with a focus on promoting sustainability and DEIB.
(4) Formulate and recommend best practices for future technological changes in the telecommunications industry by emphasizing the importance of integrating sustainability and cultural transformation.

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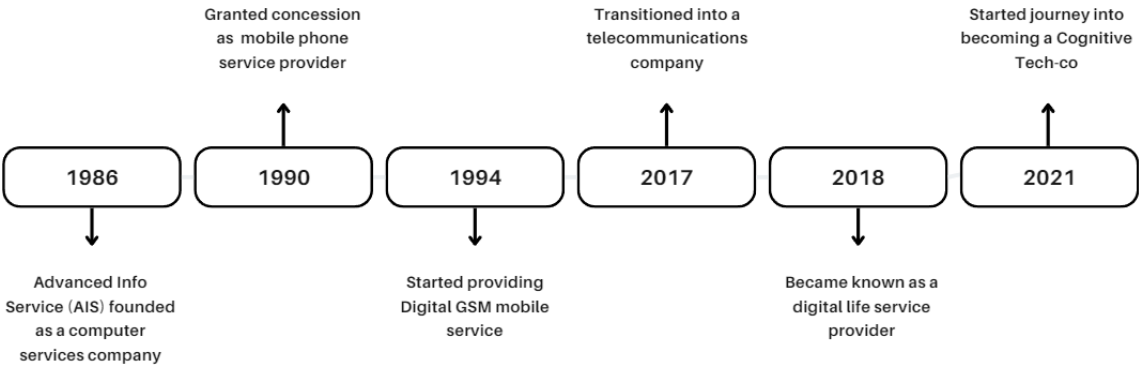
EXHIBITS

EXHIBIT 1

Employees of AIS During 2020–2023

Topic	Unit	2020	2021	2022	2023
Employees					
Total employees	Persons	13,975	12,909	13,141	11,448
Breakdown by gender					
Male	Persons	5,595	5,097	5,260	4,724
	%	40	39	40	41
Female	Persons	8,380	7,812	7,881	6,724
	%	60	61	60	59
Breakdown by age					
50 years old and above	Persons	671	965	1,084	924
30–49 years old	Persons	8,343	8,023	8,051	7,767
Below 30 years old	Persons	4,961	3,921	4,006	2,757
Breakdown by employee type					
Permanent					
Male	Persons	4,104	4,031	4,050	3,756
Female	Persons	5,258	5,043	4,898	4,579
Contract employee					
Male	Persons	1,491	1,066	1,210	968
Female	Persons	3,122	2,769	2,983	2,145
Other employer diversity					
Employees with disabilities	Persons	202	142	149	138
	%	14	11	11	12

Source: Sustainability Report 2023, pps. 24 via.

EXHIBIT 2

Timeline of AISs Journey Towards a Cognitive Technology Company

Source: Adapted from https://investor.ais.co.th/milestone.html.
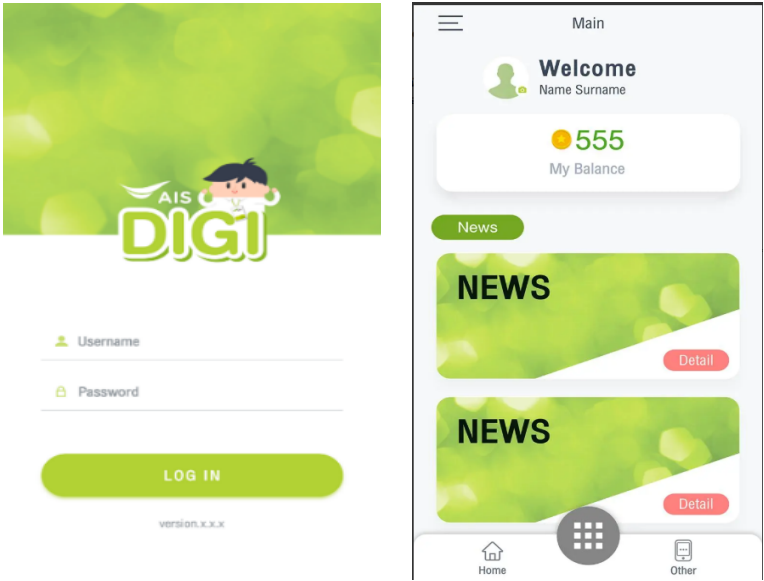
EXHIBIT 3

Sustainable Development Structure

Source: Sustainability Report 2023, pps.10 via https://sustainability.ais.co.th/storage/sustainability-report/2023/20240219-advanc-srd-2023-en.pdf.
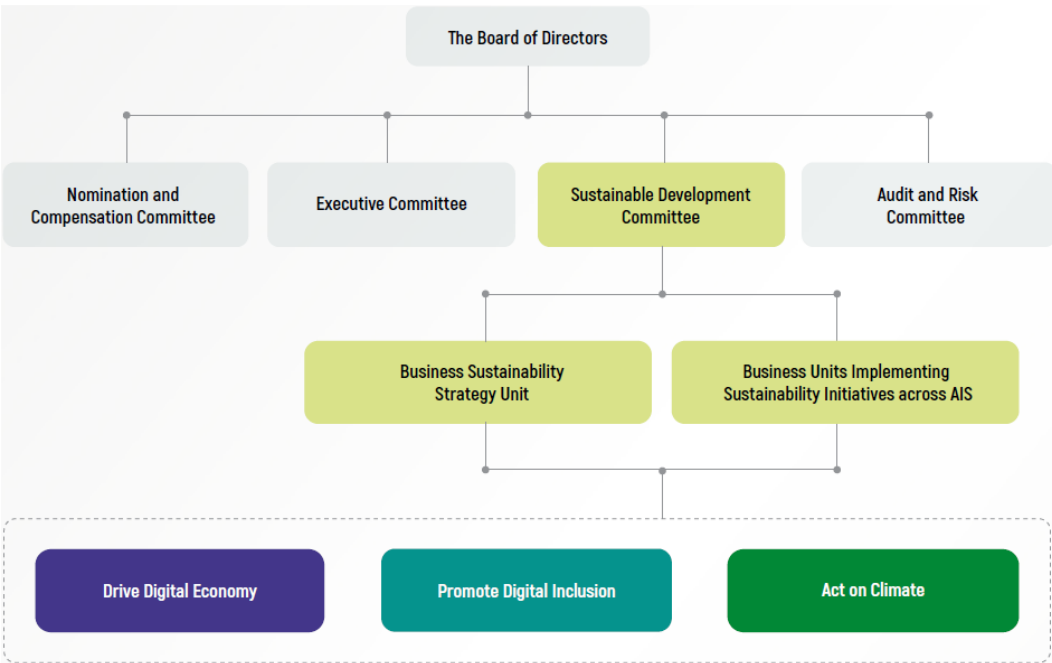
EXHIBIT 4

AIS DIGI LIFE Mobile Application

Source: AIS Digi via https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.ais.digi&pcampaignid=web_share.