





Know future

Is the future predictable, a rational extrapolation from the now to the then? **Fran Molloy** gazes into the future of futurists.

Futurists have their own magazine (unimaginatively titled *The Futurist*), they have a definition in the Oxford Dictionary, they have a number of international societies (at least one boasting over 25,000 members) – and they may even have a secret handshake.

On the surface, becoming a futurist sounds like a career move with great prospects; but is there really any difference between today's futurist and yesterday's crystal-ball gazer?

The term 'futurist' emerged in the mid-1960s as people like Yale sociologist Wendell Bell and US military strategist Herman Kahn received wide recognition writing about likely world scenarios in the near future. But

it was writer Alvin Toffler's best-selling 1970 tome *Future Shock* that really made futurism accessible to the general public.

In *Future Shock*, Toffler predicted huge and very rapid social change would start to accelerate as our society moved from its industrial revolution roots to what he calls the super-industrial society. Toffler warned that most people would be overloaded by fast-moving technological and cultural change and the overwhelming availability of information.

Within a couple of decades, most people in the West were living Toffler's sped-up, ever-changing super-industrial dystopia – and futurists had become a formidable force on the fast-growing speaking and consulting circuit.

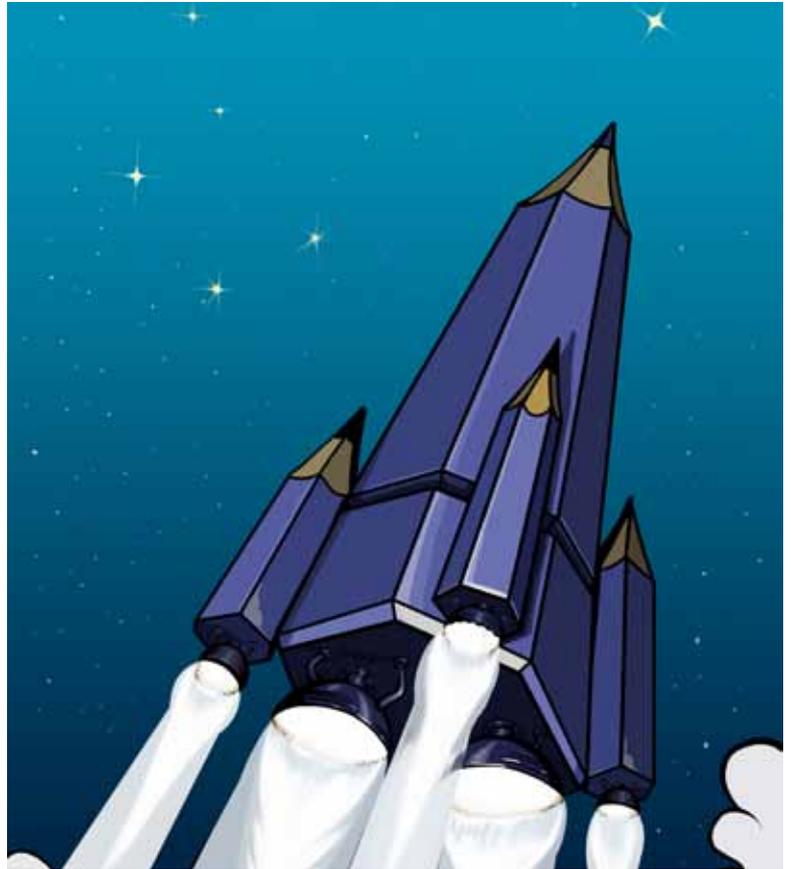
Australian academic and senior UN adviser Dr Peter Ellyard is a prominent world-renowned futurist and at the age of 73, is still flying around the world on the futurist speaking-track, delivering presentations and prophecies to many a captive and grateful audience.

“There are two kinds of futurists,” says Ellyard. “One is the prophet who asks the question, what will the future be like? And the other is the visionary, who asks, what could the future be like?”

Ellyard places himself firmly in the visionary camp. “I create narratives and scenarios so that people can understand the future, because they walk around it in their imagination.”

Like most futurists who’ve been around a while, Ellyard wandered into futurism after a long career doing other things. Returning to his native Australia after completing a PhD in biochemistry at Cornell, he worked in senior policy areas, eventually becoming the chief of staff of the Environment ministry of the Whitlam government. Ellyard later set up the Commission for the Future with former politician Barry Jones and after completing a term as the Commission’s second director, put out his ‘futurist’ shingle.

“I set up on my own more than twenty years ago after working in environment planning for a decade and a half, where I had always been thinking about the future,” he says.



While Ellyard was director in 1988, the Commission for the Future received a UN global award for its project on shaping a climate-safe society, at a time when few people were considering climate change seriously.

“When I started out, I did the traditional ‘alternative scenario’ stuff, but over the years, I’ve created an entire new edifice of my own.”

His prophecy record stands up well, with Ellyard estimating he’s got about 80 per cent of his predictions right so far.

In one current project, he’s working with a large coal company to help it work out what the industry’s future might be. “We are asking, is there a future in coal at all? I create metaphors to illustrate that.” Ellyard says that burning coal and releasing climate change gases in 2030 can be compared to smoking in a café in 2010. “If you can understand the dominant values of 2030, you’ll understand what people will value and what they will need then.” Finding a way to reduce coal emissions to zero then becomes a significant goal, he explains.

He cites Richard Buckminster Fuller, who invented the geodesic dome and whose many books include *An Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, and American writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell, as two foundation thinkers who have had a huge influence on futurism.

Phil Ruthven, who heads market research company IBISWorld, says that futurists now have a very valuable social role. “We get people to be more open-minded about the future, think outside the square, and encourage entrepreneurship and open thinking.”

Ruthven founded IBISWorld in 1971, and these days, divides his time between “a bit of strategy work” for paying corporations, and a busy schedule of keynote speaking and presentation-delivering.

In the various IBISWorld branches, which include outlets in China, the USA, the UK and Indonesia, Ruthven’s staff do detailed



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surveys and data analyses of particular industries and markets and sectors of the economy and sells five-year forecasting reports, mainly through its online portal.

“Five year forecasts are serious stuff, they feed into business strategic plans, which are normally five years.”

Ruthven says that while most individuals rarely think longer term than a year or so, businesses usually do three sorts of plans: the one-year budget, the three-year business plan and the five-year strategic plan. A five-year forecast based on detailed current trends can be very accurate, Ruthven says; even in longer-term planning, the firm usually gets it about 80 to 90 per cent right.

“In my public speaking, though, I will forecast many more different elements and often will go much further out in time, twenty or more years. We put our reputation on the line, but we are celebrating our 40th year next year and our track record shows we have been pretty darned accurate for a very long time.”

It’s not mysterious, Ruthven adds; using good forecasting techniques and solid data to extrapolate from existing trends is quite straightforward. But picking an outcome within a twelve month timeframe is like betting on the Melbourne Cup – there’s too much volatility.

“Most industries move in cycles of around 40 to 50 years. We see cycles in marriages, we see cycles in birth rates, there are cycles in everything. With enough data, you don’t have to look at chickens’ entrails at all!”

He says the key to getting it right is to combine an understanding of economic cycles with human behaviour. “Sociology and economics are fellow bed-travellers, we blend both in our forecasting.”

Australian academic Dr Jennifer Gidley is the current president of the World Futures Studies Federation, a non-government network of practicing futurists from around sixty countries formed in Paris in 1973, on the back of an earlier project, Mankind 2000.

“The idea of futurism is often trivialised,” says Gidley. “People tend to think that futurists are either crystal ball gazers/astrologers, or they are high tech, focused on high-tech gadgetry or predicting the future.”

But futures research has a more substantial side, she argues. The European brand of futures studies focuses on non-commercial futures as opposed to the dominant and mainly American futures approach, focusing on empirical prediction and corporate futures.



Ancient futures and stars in their eyes

Julie McBeth is an old-time futurist. “I’ve got a good understanding of business, but I’m using this ancient knowledge that stems back to Hellenistic times. The Greeks, the Romans and the Magi astrologers were the source of all knowledge in ancient times.”

A former finance journalist, McBeth has a degree in commerce and was a senior reporter at *BRW* magazine when she watched Kerry Packer make some very lucrative business decisions in the late eighties influenced partly by his astrologer.

“Astrology was a hobby of mine for a long time, but when computer-based astrology charts came out, I took up reading charts.”

Astrologers, like futurists, look at history, McBeth says. “They look at the actions of the past in human history and marry it with relationships in celestial history.”

Futurists were also big in the past, with most ancient societies indulging in a spot of forecasting, whether through divination using anything from tea-leaves to animal’s gizzards, or via an oracle speaking of visions and visitations.

Some past oracles continue to wield influence; the Book of Revelation remains a favourite in many churches, while the

prophecies of Nostradamus (whose plans supposedly ran up to 3797) will clearly be around much longer than the Mayans, whose calendar and accompanying prophecies infamously come to a halt in 2012.

The global financial crisis was on the radar of business astrologers for decades, says Macbeth. “The big planets were coming together in a T-square, Saturn Uranus Jupiter and Pluto, which is a very heavy line-up in astrological terms.”

“In some ways, futurists have been around for a long time. It’s just the tools that they are using have changed,” McBeth explains.

“I’m using planetary cycles. The more I read and understand charts, the more I see history repeating. There’s a certain amount of destiny involved in the future and most people in Western culture are not comfortable with that.”

How do the astrologers stack up against the data-collectors in the accuracy of their predictions?

McBeth laughs. “Like me, the data-collectors are basing their predictions on the past and they aren’t on completely solid ground with the future, either. It all boils down to the person with the best guess.”

“We’re interested in social, cultural and environmental interests and in developing a wide variety of methodologies focusing on research into alternative futures. Regardless of what a trend might be, is this the only way to go? Is the trend, destiny? Or are there other alternatives?”

With a focus on non-corporate, non-commercial futures, Gidley says that the World Futures Studies Federation places emphasis on things that many other futurist groups don’t cover.

“The evolution of futures studies needs to parallel the evolution of other ideas in the world. Empirical science is based on the old model of classical Newtonian physics, with its mechanistic view of human nature.” Science has moved on from the idea that the universe – including human beings – is mechanical, Gidley says. Concepts like quantum physics, or in biology, self-adaptive organisms, all show that existing trends don’t necessarily predict outcomes.

“The discipline of futures studies hasn’t necessarily kept up with the changes in teaching and thinking in other disciplines,” Gidley says.

Various methodologies in futures studies offer alternative models for assessing futures, Gidley says. Drawing on the European critical theory approach to sociology, Critical futures studies make value judgements about impending futures through critique and look at the changes that need to happen to forestall an apparent outcome.

Another model is cultural futures, which questions the dominance of the Western model of development and argues that the American dream of high consumption that has dominated global culture since the advent of television in the 1950s is unsustainable.

“People working through the World Futures Studies Federation include sociologists and political theorists and social psychologists and environmental scientists and they are looking at alternative futures.”

Science journalist Bianca Nogrady is co-author of *The Sixth Wave* with CSIRO director of development Dr James Moody, a newly released book predicting that impending limited resources will spur a new wave of global innovation.

The Sixth Wave combines an alternative futures approach with an analysis of trends and early indicators. It was launched in mid-2010 and sold out its first print run within months. Initially, Nogrady was surprised that her publisher, Random House, described her as a futurist, but happy to accept the title.

In *The Sixth Wave*, Moody and Nogrady explore previous cycles of innovation since the Industrial Revolution, and anticipate the next wave, one of resource-efficiency, and the changes likely over the next thirty years as this wave occurs.

“The book sprang from a vision of the future, but it wasn’t our vision,” she explains. “We are simply documenting a number of things that we see are happening, things that others are already doing.”

Nogrady admits that when her first child was born she had many fears about the future of the planet, thanks to her growing awareness of the challenges facing scientists and environmentalists through her own journalism.



“In writing a book like *The Sixth Wave*, at some level we are helping to make the future, or at least provide people with a structure so they can be optimistic about it and see the opportunities to invest in a positive future.”

Ross Dawson says becoming a futurist is pretty straightforward. “You can claim you are a futurist and people either believe you or they don’t.”

Most futurists are less inclined to look at ‘the future of everything’ and instead have a specific industry focus, he says, with futurists now often employed within large global organisations to guide planning and strategy. Dawson’s financial markets background and strong interest in technology start-ups are behind his own focus on likely futures.

It seems books are an important component in the construction of the modern futurist; Dawson woke up wearing a ‘futurist’ label after the publication of his book, *Living Networks* in 2002, where he outlined the upcoming explosion of social networks and micro-messages.

“A futurist is somebody who helps people

to think about the future, so they can make better decisions today,” Dawson says. “We can’t predict the future, but we can think about it. Prediction can do us a disservice because it’s likely to be wrong and can be misleading in helping us think about uncertainty.”

Like Ellyard, Dawson is big on constructing scenarios. “Strategy projections for organisations involves building a number of possibilities about what can happen, and trying to get an idea whether your plans will be relevant across business, society and technology.”

Dawson says that a significant shift in the near future will be the global talent economy, where work will become individual-centric rather than organisation-centric. “Organisations are going to have to compete to attract the best talent – and money won’t be their prime motivator, people will be attracted by challenges, by the pleasures of working collaboratively with others.”

Dawson was greatly influenced by Alvin Toffler who he says was the father of today’s futurism. “Books like *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave* sold millions of copies and had a big impact on popular consciousness. They really helped futurism become a broad movement.”

Alvin Toffler and his research partner and wife, Heidi, both in their eighties, still make the occasional appearance on the speaking circuit and still take an interest in the research consultancy they set up several decades ago, Toffler Associates.

The Toffler’s first book, *Future Shock*, had its fortieth birthday in 2010, celebrating many predictions that were spot-on, like the instant global dissemination of news and short-lived celebrity, the ever-growing range of TV channels, the rise of psychopharmacological treatments like Prozac, the growth of interactive gaming in homes, and the rise of meltdowns (like road rage and violence) as people become overwhelmed by the fast pace of life and lose a sense of control over their own lives and identities.

The firm is now headed by Deb Westphal, a Harvard graduate and engineer who worked in US military Space and Missile Systems research. Westphal says that her firm approaches futurism by understanding what drives upcoming changes in the world around them.

“You get that understanding by being very



broad, by seeing the inner connections across many different areas. We look at society, technology and policy and regulatory areas and ask, for example, how does a change in technology impact us in society?”

Westphal says the firm uses the framework and processes established by Alvin and Heidi Toffler, and trends are not its main focus.

“We try to understand what’s driving a change and it’s not necessarily a trend. A trend is an extrapolation and looking at it in isolation, you miss seeing another trend that might bump up against the first and cause an anti-trend.”

Westphal gives the example of the trend of explosion of free sharing of information on the internet, complicated by anti-trends like concerns about individual privacy, the rise of hackers and viruses and political censorship by some governments.

“Drivers of change are multi-dimensional and incorporate a whole bunch of trends and anti-trends.”

She says an important driver for innovation is the amount of human connectivity. “In countries where people most connect with each other and share ideas without patenting and intellectual property restrictions, innovation can be explosive.”

To measure this, Westphal says, the firm examines the co-operation between universities and between scientists, the availability of broadband and the regulations around information including patenting in a particular country.

Futurists who work for Toffler Associates have to be curious, to question a lot, and to look at situations from a different perspective, Westphal says – just like a good detective.

“It’s human nature to think about the future, I think all of us are futurists in some form or fashion,” says Westphal. ★

Future skills for organisations in the mid-21st century:

Open the aperture to see what is going on in the world and to understand the change that is taking place

- Bring cognitive diversity to your teams, organisations, and problem solving
- Connect dots that don’t always seem as though they should be connected
- Look beyond trends and look for areas converging or diverging
- Embrace the idea that we are in the midst of an amazing time and that the future holds amazing possibilities and opportunities.

Source: Toffler Associates