

A FUTURIST IS NOT A FORTUNE TELLER. Ross Dawson, a futurist, helps businesses face the demands that an endless chain of tomorrows always brings. His job, he says, is not soothsayer, but trusted adviser.

“People ask me, ‘how do you become a futurist?’” Mr. Dawson says. “My usual response is, ‘You claim you are, and people either believe you or they don’t.’”

The trick behind that, he adds, is that you have to have already established credibility. The second of his four books, *Living Networks*, anticipated Facebook and the rise of social media. “That helped,” he says.

Based in his native Australia, he earned his university degree in physics and went to work first in computer sales and later in equity and capital markets with Merrill Lynch and Thomson Financial. Even as a student, he was interested in what was then termed “futurology.” At those jobs, he learned how society works in technology, business and finance. To that, he added important training in scenario planning.

Mr. Dawson is the founder of professional services and publishing firm Advanced Human Technologies, and two professional platforms, the Future Exploration Network and the Future of Media Summit. He is in demand as a media commentator, guest speaker and corporate adviser.

The future, he says, is being written today in the relationships businesses are building. He talks to us about his profession, the challenges of rapid social and technological change, and the lessons learned from his own worst prediction.

How do you define the role of futurist?

Someone who helps people and organizations think about the future, so they can act better today. One project I’m working on is a taxonomy of futures studies and how futurists think, to explain the many different approaches. But that’s how I define it.

I don’t believe that predictions are useful. In fact, they can sometimes have negative value. If you hang your hat on a prediction, you’re likely not looking out for changes that are coming that will prove it wrong. So all the thinking that goes behind that prediction is lost. The reason to think about the future is to work out how we can shape it to create the world we want. The future is made by people.

What’s the purpose of your published list of the world’s top female futurists – 167 so far, from all over the world?

We need diverse perspectives. If all the perspectives on the future happen to be white, male and not so

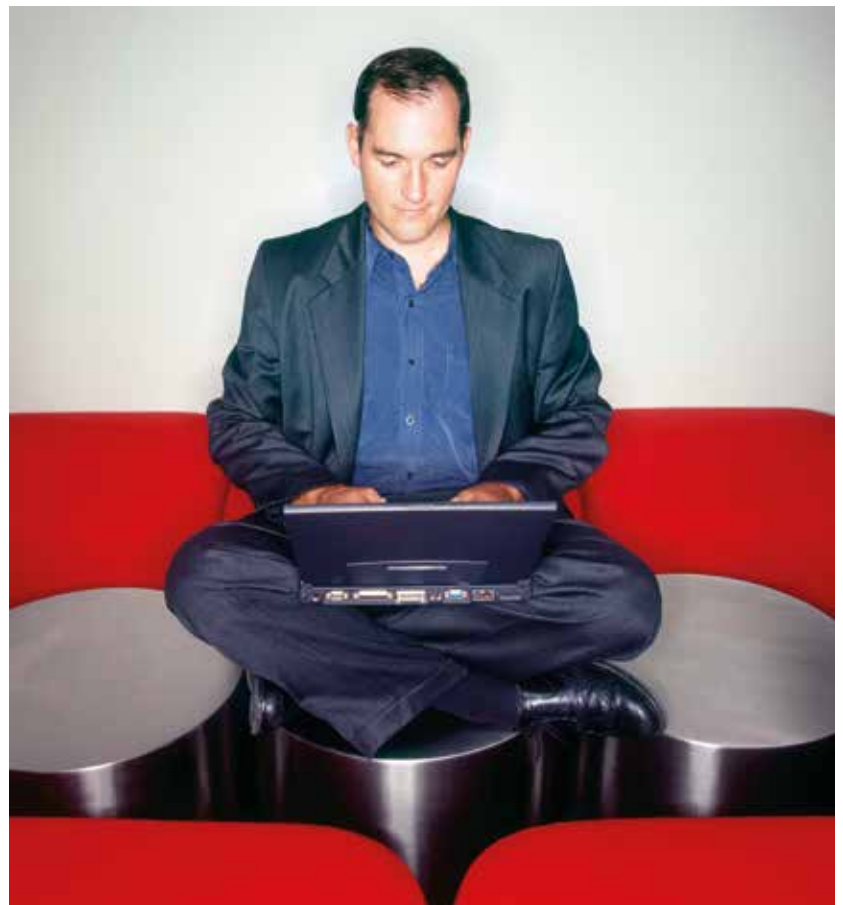
VISIONS OF TOMORROW

young, that’s a problem. If you are in Bangladesh, you’re going to have a different perspective on the world than if you’re from New York. And there are extraordinary people out there.

The emerging economies are interesting here, in that they’re not participating in the world of the past, but in the world that’s coming.

Absolutely. There’s a lot of discussion in Africa about leapfrogging. You’re not tied to the old technology, the way to do things. You can leap ahead because you don’t have anything to hold you back. Some places are going straight to mobile without having fixed lines. Kenya and other countries are arriving at more advanced payment structures than Australia, with

Knowledge and relationships – not predictions – are the windows to the future, author and entrepreneur **ROSS DAWSON** tells Brunswick’s **CARLTON WILKINSON**.



the US being way, way behind in terms of payments. They are creating the future.

In your speaking engagements with corporations, what is your message?

The only valid intent of speaking is that you change people, particularly how they think about or frame the future.

An organization has inertia. It has history. It has specific ways of working. Governance, for example, the highest level of responsibility for the organization, has to be able to manage risks to ultimately have a sustainable organization, to grow and create value over the long term. Yet governance is often more focused on risk of action than opportunity or the risk of inaction. So how do you frame the idea of change in a way that allows you to create the structures to allow the organization to transform itself?

You wrote that knowledge and relationships together are at the heart of the economy today. Why is that?

That was framed around professional service firms. Essentially you need to be able to make a client more knowledgeable. Greater knowledge means greater capabilities. You're able to make better decisions. In a knowledge-based relationship, the client is different as a result of your interaction. You're not just providing a black-box service.

Some of the largest organizations on the planet are those most open to innovation from beyond the organization itself – the US Department of Defense, Procter & Gamble, Boeing. They have literally hundreds of thousands of extraordinarily talented people inside their organizations, but they realize they must look outside the organization to get the talent they need.

We are seeing more of this shift to an economy based on this network of relationships. Technology has commoditized many interactions, but that is shifting the work of value creation toward these high-value collaborative relationships. Those relationships require trust.

Your book *Getting Results from Crowds* tackles that growing aspect of collaboration.

Globally, there are 3.7 billion users of internet-enabled mobile devices. That includes extraordinarily talented people, a global talent economy. *Getting Results from Crowds* looks at the many ways in which we can tap an entire world of talent. It is a very pragmatic book, trying to provide specific instructions for how to do this well.

How will that affect the future of the workplace?

We have dehumanized work for many decades. We have put work into boxes. This is your job description – and that's it. You've got a title in a box. And that's where you sit until you get promoted, or shifted.

That is not going to give us highly responsible, fluid organizations, responsive to the world around them. We need a more humanistic thing that looks at the capabilities of the individual – to tap the full breadth of experience, perspective, insights. With that, you can, in real time, match expertise or experience or relationships within the organization to the challenge or the opportunity as it emerges, creating a more fluid environment and a better response.

Automation is the other piece of this – the real impact of artificial intelligence on white-collar roles. Rather than saying, "Well, let's replace a human with a machine," we can focus on, "What are the unique capabilities of humans that we can use and that can be supported by machines?"

A culture of experimentation is also needed and is difficult in large organizations because sometimes experiments fail. This comes back to governance – how you encourage responsible risk taking, so that you're not just covering your ass all the time.

You've said you're not in the business of predictions, but do you have a prediction you're particularly proud of?

Well, let me tell you a prediction I got wrong. It's arguably my best-known attempt. It's been seen probably 10 million times and reported on in newspapers in 30 countries around the world.

In 2010, I created the Newspaper Extinction Timeline. I gave a year when news on paper would become insignificant in different countries around the world. I was pretty bold in my first one: the US in 2017. I'm pretty clearly wrong at this point.

I was wrong too, I think, on the back end, in predicting how long news on paper would remain significant in countries such as Russia or Brazil or Nigeria. Those are going to be gone a lot earlier than I said in the timeline.

This is where I say, "All right. Well, I don't believe in predictions." But the idea was to be able to provoke people to think about that. You can say, "I agree" or "I disagree." But if you disagree, then you have to articulate why you disagree – what's your reasoning? At the time, the CEO of the International News Media Association, Earl Wilkinson, wrote a blog post saying essentially, if Ross has helped us to think a bit more about what might be coming, then he's done us a service. ♦

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CARLTON WILKINSON is Managing Editor of the Brunswick Review.