

View from “Out There”

Q&A with Futurist Jack Uldrich



FORESIGHT: THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE

Jack Uldrich, our keynote speaker for the CIBC Atlantic Trust Speaker Series events this year, wants you to really think about what “innovation” means for your company, your organization or even your family. The business forecaster, futurist and change management professional says that most companies only pay lip service to the notions of creativity and innovation. Among the provocative questions he suggests leaders ask are: “If failure is recognized as a necessary component of risk, how does your company deal with failure? Who in the company is responsible for focusing on ‘what the organization doesn’t know’? Are new ideas allowed to compete openly for support?” We recently talked with Uldrich about those questions for the innovative company, what a futurist really does, and to what and to whom you should be paying attention.

Question

So what exactly is a futurist?

This is what we’re *not*—we don’t claim to “predict” the future. In my latest book, I make clear that believing you can predict the future is the ultimate in hubris. The scenarios I offer are designed to describe the major trends shaping the world of tomorrow and provide insight into how the future might unfold. What I do, and what I believe any good futurist should do, is remind people of the acronym **AHA—awareness, humility and action**. We make people aware of the trends that are transforming the world, we help people understand that humility is understanding that what worked well in their industry or job yesterday might not tomorrow and then we help them act. Really, the only way to predict the future is to create it yourself—it’s all about *positioning* yourself for the future.

Q Let’s talk more about humility—you say it’s in shorter supply than it should be.

I often use the letter “B” to explain humility. Ten years ago, Blockbuster, Borders and BlackBerry were all leading their industries. But there were technological and consumer behavior changes underway, and they should have understood how those would transform their businesses. For a variety of reasons, they simply couldn’t adapt. Netflix beat out Blockbuster, Amazon crushed Borders and Apple steamrolled BlackBerry. These companies didn’t practice humility. The “B” examples are to remind other business leaders not to get too confident. This is not to say failure will happen to your company; it’s to say that the more humble you are, the more aware you are of changes underway, the more you’re willing to challenge your assumptions and certainly the more willing you are to ask the difficult questions—all of those things won’t necessarily guarantee your survival, but they will help you confront the future.

Q What’s the one overriding theme about the scenarios you discuss and the transformational change underway?

One word: exponential. Adidas recently announced that they would be using 3-D printing to manufacture shoes—5,000 this year. Now, that may not sound like much of a threat to Adidas’ competitors, but they said they could do 100,000 next year and then a million the next year. Suddenly, once the company is printing 1 million, they can go quickly to 50 million. This is how exponential growth happens, although people will tend to dismiss the development when it’s “just” 5,000 shoes. Another example is the number of miles that are being driven by self-driving cars. It took three years to get to a million miles. The next million was achieved in six months and the next million? One month. Business leaders *must* start thinking exponentially.

Q What's at the top of your list as far as advancements and innovations?

Artificial intelligence, or AI, intrigues me the most. The idea that our computers are getting really, really smart is embodied in the Amazon Echo device. It's only 18 months old and already 10% of all households in the U.S. have this AI device in their homes. Here's the most important point: When it came out 18 months ago, you could ask Alexa to do 100 things. Now, it can do 10,000 things. Recently, I came across a quote that said that by 2020, less than three years away, 40% of everything your smartphone will do for you will be in anticipation of your needs. Your phone will know when you wake up, to whom you're married, how many children you have, what their schedules are. It will respond to this knowledge before you even think to ask it questions. This could be a remarkable development, and it will change the world—your world—in so many ways. Hospitals are using these devices, letting patients ask Alexa basic questions—for example, about the medication they're being given—and they're finding that it's freeing up 10%

of nurses' time. Nurses are then able to spend more time on the human element of their relationship with patients.

The expected expansion of wireless speed from 4G to 5G is another huge development—that's not a "slightly better" speed; it's one hundredfold better and faster. It will boost telemedicine—your healthcare provider will be able to see massive-sized digital files of your body and it will be possible to transmit your entire genome sequence over the phone. I'm also keenly interested in watching developments in virtual reality. People think of virtual reality goggles today in terms of giving gamers a better experience, but their thinking shouldn't stop there. Virtual reality has the potential to change education and training dramatically, showing students virtually how to operate a machine, fly a plane, put a needle in a patient's arm to draw blood. Instead of going to a physical therapist, it's plausible that you could put on virtual reality goggles and "see" the physical therapist, who could walk you through the exercises you need to do, all without you leaving your home. Think of the convenience and the cost factor in that situation.

Q How can business leaders train themselves to do more "what if/what then" thinking?

First, just *think*. It's often a missing component in today's fast-paced world. Leaders are typically consumed with what they need to do today. But it's a leader's responsibility to get away from technology—close the door, read about advances and innovations, and think deeply about how they might change their business. I advocate that all companies do a "pre-mortem," thinking about their demise. Far from being a depressing activity, it's actually quite optimistic, even liberating, to start thinking about what you need to start doing differently. This ongoing exercise begins driving leaders toward actions that will create a better future for them and their company. Imagine if the taxi industry had done this five years ago when Uber was brand new. We all need to think about the unthinkable. ■

Read more about Jack Uldrich at jackuldrich.com. His latest book is *"Foresight 2020: A Futurist Explores the Trends Transforming Tomorrow."*

That "Little" Aha! Moment

Jack Uldrich didn't dream of being a futurist when he was a young boy, like some kids dream of becoming an astronaut or doctor. It was only after he served as an intelligence officer in the military, a strategic planner in the Pentagon and head of the strategic planning agency for the state of Minnesota that he got interested in what the future might hold. About 15 years ago, during his time in Minnesota, he began reading about and researching nanotechnology. "I remember thinking, 'This is really cool technology; it should be extremely transformative,'" says Uldrich. "Scientists and researchers certainly understand it, although the average business leader didn't then and doesn't now. But it touches just about every industry, from agriculture to healthcare to manufacturing."

Nanotechnology is the manipulation of matter on an atomic, molecular and supramolecular scale. It's difficult to get your head around—after all, a nanometer is equal to one-billionth of a meter. Nanotechnology is being used to create new materials and devices in medicine, electronics, biomaterials and consumer products—tennis balls and plastic beer bottles include clay nanoparticles, bandages infused with chemical nanoparticles are being used to stop bleeding, antibody-coated nanoparticles result in the "positive" reading in pregnancy test strips. Samsung even offers a phone with a casing that can self-heal if scratched. "So I guess you could say my big inspiration that got me focused on the future in a significant way was a very tiny 'thing.' That was when I started calling myself a futurist."