



**Knowledge Review**  
by Stuart Crainer

**B**usiness seers tend to dislike the term “futurist” in the same way management gurus dislike the word “guru.” “Futurist” is suggestive of wacky guesswork rather than considered extrapolations from current trends. John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends*, among other books, likes to think of himself as a social forecaster, not a futurist. “There’s a lot of nonsense under the ‘futurist’ banner,” he says. Mr. Naisbitt is right. While many claim to see the future, only a chosen few do so with perception or precision.

The clarity achieved by the best is startling. The trouble is that it is also increasingly historical, belonging to the more confident group of thinkers active in the 1960s. Indeed, perhaps the most underrated masterpiece of futuristic literature is Warren Bennis’s and Philip Slater’s 1968 book, *The Temporary Society*. The duo argued that organizational forms needed to harness innovation and creativity. With the Cold War then at its peak, they foresaw the collapse of Communism and sounded the death knell for bureaucracy. Mr. Bennis, later transformed into a leadership guru, and Mr. Slater, who migrated from the

## The Days of Futurists Past

Projecting the future used to be a bold, adventurous enterprise. Today’s business seers — John Naisbitt, Watts Wacker, et al. — are doing all they can to keep up with the present.

Photograph by Bruce Weller

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Harvard faculty to become the artistic director of a theater, envisioned “temporary” organizations, teams drawing on specialists to focus on specific projects. They were talking about the world of free agency long before *Fast Company* magazine was even a business plan. The book’s prescience is startling; by way of comparison, Michael Mazaar’s *Global Trends 2005*, published in 1999, identifies education, moral values, and the renewal of capitalism as the key issues with which the world needs to come to terms — much the same agenda mapped out by Messrs. Bennis and Slater 30 years earlier.

Of similarly high standing is *The Age of Discontinuity* by Peter Drucker, the éminence grise of management thinking. More than 20 years after its 1968 publication, Richard Pascale noted in *Managing on the Edge* that Mr. Drucker’s work “describes the commercial era in which we live.”

In *The Age of Discontinuity*, Mr. Drucker introduced the concept of “knowledge management.” Instead of obedient adherents to the corporate code, organizations, he posited, would be populated by executives with a keen sense of their own worth — financial, intellectual, and professional. Knowledge management re-

quired the acknowledgment of the needs and aspirations of a new breed of knowledge workers. “The knowledge worker sees himself just as another *professional*, no different from the lawyer, the teacher, the preacher, the doctor, or the government servant of yesterday,” Mr. Drucker wrote. Only today, at the doorstep of a new century, is his projection being borne out.

The final tour de force of this period was Alvin Toffler’s 1970 book, *Future Shock*. Its messages were not easily contemplated by managers raised on a diet of certainty. *Future Shock* suggested that businesses were going to restructure themselves repeatedly. That would require a reduction in hierarchy and the adoption of what he called “ad-hocracy.” To managers reared on command-and-control, it sounded highly implausible. After decades of assembling ornate bureaucracies and carefully constructed hierarchies, companies saw no reason to dismantle them.

*The Temporary Society*, *The Age of Discontinuity*, and *Future Shock* had some of the same themes. They were sizeable needles pointed at the bubble of complacency that surrounded the Western corporate world in the late 1960s and early 1970s. When every-

thing looked rosy, they spoke of seismic shocks ripping through the neatly aligned flower beds. Messrs. Bennis, Slater, Drucker, and Toffler, and a select few others, accurately predicted the uncertainties of the contemporary businessworld. It took time, but aside from not anticipating some events, such as the competitive emergence of Japan, they were largely right. These futurists looked into the far distance with all the grandiose bravado of explorers. The future was out there, a great big adventure. Think of the perennially quotable glimpses offered by Marshall McLuhan, who anticipated globalism and the all-encompassing grip of the media decades ago.

**N**ow, however, time has shrunk — and so, too, has certainty. Economic transformation, social change, industrial organization — all have accelerated, so much so that confidently looking into the future is increasingly a thing of the past. The “future” is not an imaginary world of space travel and technological control; it is happening now, in our offices, in our homes, in our minds. Instead of purposefully striding into a brave new world, we tread carefully. Brave assertions and bold prophecies have given way to timor-

## Confidently looking forward is increasingly a thing of the past. Brave assertions and prophecies have given way to timorous extrapolations.

ous extrapolations. Tumultuous technological progress means that today's students of the future have been reined in. Few are following the advice of author Herman Kahn, to "think the unthinkable."

Increasingly, futurists find themselves reporting on and trying to make sense of the present rather than gazing into the distance. Take the work of the contemporary futurist Watts Wacker, of the consulting firm First Matter LLC. His first book, *The 500 Year Delta: What Happens After What Comes Next* (cowritten with Jim Taylor and Howard Means in 1997), is rich in insights and detail. As a spotter of current and emergent trends, Mr. Wacker has few competitors. The futuristic part of the book, however, comes by way of a postscript and contains a series of predictions made for what may happen in the next 500 days, 500 weeks, 500 months, and 500 years. It is an entertaining ending, but not the heart of the book. The essence of *The 500 Year Delta* is the moment. Typically the authors take some survey data, place it in the overall context of a specific trend in society, and then discuss its likely impact on your life and what you can do in response.

In the maelstrom of hyper-

competition and frenetic change, this approach is understandable. Companies and executives want to make sense of the here and now to secure tomorrow's advantage. They don't want blue-sky thinking when there are real rain clouds gathering overhead. "The problem is no longer how do you predict what will happen five, 10 years from now," says Gary Hamel, coauthor of *Competing for the Future*. "The challenge is: How do I find the revolutionary potential in what is already changing, as opposed to how do I predict what might change? How do I find the small things, things at the fringe that are changing, that other people have not recognized yet?" Futurism has become a form of arbitrage — an attempt to profit from small differences in the current outlook.

**T**he futurist has become a reporter, seeking out strange and unusual activity on the fringes of corporate normality. This, says Mr. Naisbitt, is no bad thing. He cites the adage: "Don't get so far ahead of the parade that they don't know you're in it."

Mr. Naisbitt should perhaps be acknowledged as the man who brought futurism back to earth. In his

quest for authenticity, he scours local newspapers, believing that local morsels translate into broader trends. His most recent book, *High Tech/High Touch: Technology and Our Search for Meaning*, is a prime example: a rigorous and wide-ranging critique of American society circa 1999. *High Tech/High Touch* suggests that our fascination with the future has, in the corporate world at least, been replaced by a fascination with the past. "There is an increasing degree of fuzziness between what is real and what is fake," Mr. Naisbitt observes. "The authenticity of a company's product or service is now all-important. They need to establish intimacy with consumers."

Because today's futurists tend to peer around the corner, there hasn't been as much consensus about what the future holds since the early 1970s, when forecasters were predicting an "age of leisure." Among other things, virtually all now agree that the future will see the emergence of lifestyle tribes, the growing importance of mobility over stability, and national competitiveness predicated on individual creativity rather than manufacturing capacity.

The rapid pace of change has also encouraged the growth of scenario

## Resources of the Future

Selected works mentioned in this review.

planning, which adds scientific credibility to the nature of futurism. Scenario planning involves testing strategies and business decisions against a series of alternative futures. It has been practiced in one form or another in the business world since the early 1960s, when a team of planners at the oil company Royal/Dutch Shell first employed it. Using this technique, they foresaw the energy crises of 1973 and 1979, the growth of energy conservation, the evolution of the global environmental movement, and even the breakup of the Soviet Union, years before they happened. Scenario planning is useful and has proved highly successful, but despite those admittedly significant predictions, at its heart it is an attempt to tidy up the future. It removes some of the fun. Gone are the wild extravagances. Instead, there is the straitjacket of rationality — when we know all too well that the future will take us up unanticipated and irrational byways.

All the plans and scenarios in the world will not protect us from the messiness of life. At its best, futurism should not be a protective measure but a bold act of exploration. Once futurism stops exploring and settles for reporting, complacency creeps in. Hence the unbridled optimism that comes from extrapolating from current technological and economic trends, evident in such New Economy manifestos as *The Long Boom: A Vision for the Coming Age of Prosperity* by Peter Schwartz, Peter Leyden, and Joel Hyatt. They confidently describe a scenario in which “a truly better

Warren G. Bennis and Philip E. Slater, *The Temporary Society: What is Happening to Business and Family Life in America Under the Impact of Accelerating Change* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), 176 pages, \$20.

Peter F. Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society* (Transaction, 1992), 420 pages, \$19.96.

Charles Handy, *The Age of Paradox* (Harvard Business School Press, 1995), 303 pages, \$12.95.

Herman Kahn, *The Coming Boom: Economic, Political, and Social* (Simon & Schuster, 1982), 237 pages, out of print.

John Naisbitt, Nana Naisbitt, and Douglas Philips, *High Tech/High Touch: Technology and Our Search for Meaning* (Broadway Books, 1999), 290 pages, \$25, [www.hightechhightouch.com](http://www.hightechhightouch.com).

Richard Scase, *Britain in 2010* (Capstone, 2000), 138 pages, £9.99.

Peter Schwartz (with Peter Leyden and Joel Hyatt), *The Long Boom: A Vision for the Coming Age of Prosperity* (Perseus Books, 1999), 352 pages, \$26.

Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (Bantam Books, 1991), 561 pages, \$7.99.

Watts Wacker and Jim Taylor (with Howard Means), *The 500 Year Delta: What Happens After What Comes Next* (Harper Business, 1998), 320 pages, \$14.

Watts Wacker and Jim Taylor (with Howard Means), *The Visionary's Handbook: Nine Paradoxes That Will Shape the Future of Your Business* (Harper Business, 2000), 272 pages, \$26.

world” is achieved by 2020; they even resuscitate the “futuristic” notion of the Space Age. Despite a boldness uncharacteristic among today’s futurists, they still proved too narrow in their thinking; the article on which their book was based appeared in 1997; by 1998, Asia was in meltdown and Russia on the verge of collapse.

Messrs. Schwartz, Leyden, and Hyatt notwithstanding, most con-

temporary futurists fear the future. Book titles sometimes trade on this. My favorite is *Cybercrime... Cyberterrorism... Cyberwarfare... Averting an Electronic Waterloo*. But scare stories, to be fair, have long been a part of the genre. Futurists are notorious purveyors of frightening statistics. The human population is expected to stabilize around 2035, but the pet population isn't. Conclusion? A shortage of pet food is all but inevitable.

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More seriously, this fear is manifest in a general unwillingness to go out on a limb. Futurists once put their reputations on the line. When Mr. Kahn published *The Emerging Japanese Superstate: Challenge and Response* in 1970, his views ran counter to received wisdom. He was right — and then right again with *The Coming Boom: Economic, Political, and Social*, which anticipated, during a seemingly endless recession, America's recovery.

Things are happening so rapidly in the business world that venturing an opinion on "what might be" appears an act of futility and folly. There are more questions than answers. This can be seen in the profusion of paradoxes that fill business books. For example, Mr. Wacker's latest work is *The Visionary's Handbook: Nine Paradoxes That Will Shape the Future of Your Business* (cowritten

with Jim Taylor and Howard Means). Many of the paradoxes explored by Mr. Wacker and others provide useful frameworks for thinking about the future. Some, however, are intellectual riddles — irritating, and not necessarily enlightening. Opposites do not necessarily attract.

Perhaps the most lucid poser of paradoxical questions is Charles Handy, whose various books include *The Age of Unreason*, *The Hungry Spirit: Beyond Capitalism*, and *The Age of Paradox*. In many ways, Mr. Handy is the exemplar of the contemporary futurist, although he writes with an easy fluidity that eludes most business writers. Mr. Handy's beguiling and friendly tone disguises the challenges of the ideas he explores. The end of the world of work may be nigh, but let's gather around for a glass of wine. Not every-

one is comfortable with this world of paradoxes and questions; the European edition of *The Age of Paradox* was titled *The Empty Raincoat*.

The reticence of futurists to be bold prevents them from taking a great opportunity. From *In Search of Excellence* to *Built to Last*, business literature over the last 20 years has been dominated by examinations of successful companies. The prevailing logic was that for most companies, emulation is the route to business success.

Now, many realize that the benchmarks of the past will not be the benchmarks of the future. Richard Scase, a Britain-based futurist and author of *Britain in 2010*, argues that periods of accelerated change require "a greater need to look to the future." The brave will be those who shape the future. +

Reprint No. 00310