

Fu·ture·cast·ing

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# Futurecasting

Unlocking fresh strategic insight

A white paper



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## WHAT IS FUTURECASTING?

Futurecasting is a process designed to help people model and plan for the future. Futurecasting does not predict the future per se. The process instead helps people to understand what will likely be *possible* in a future timeframe and then guides them to develop ideas for new products, services or experiences they want to build for that imagined future. Since the process is highly focused on better serving the future needs of people, participants usually use futurecasting to think through the entire experience for their customers rather than just a product or service. They consider how customers will first learn about their product or service, how they will feel when they first use it, how it will fit within the context of their existing lives, how it connects with other products, and so on.

The futurecasting process takes a variety of trends as its main input. These include social, technological, business and ecosystem trends. Practitioners of futurecasting then combine trends and ideate new experiences that are made possible by the intersection of two or more of those trends.

For example, a transportation company might have used futurecasting in the past to consider the intersection of the sharing economy (a social and business trend) with the Internet of Things (a technological trend). They would then have used this to develop ideas for the experience of a car-sharing program like those now available from companies like Car2go, ZipCar and other providers.

## WHY SHOULD I CONSIDER USING FUTURECASTING?

Many organizations turn to the futurecasting process because they are looking for a way to get out of their current rut. They are looking for a way to stimulate and advance their strategic thinking and to leap over their competition as a result.

Typical planning processes plan forwards from the present. Futurecasting offers an approach that enables organizations to imagine a desired future state and then work back from the future (with or without Marty McFly) as a way to build strategic plans that get them to somewhere new and exciting.

Signs that you might need to consider running a futurecasting session for your organization include:

- Feeling that your organization is out of ideas and a bit “stuck”
- Experiencing a corporate culture that has become too rigid and inflexible
- Feeling like you are always playing catchup with your competition
- Being regularly surprised by rapid technology and market changes
- Feeling out of touch with your customers’ needs
- Worrying that you will soon be disrupted by new market entrants

Futurecasting can provide a way to revitalize tired strategic planning processes and build a treasure chest of new ideas that will help you create new value and win back customers. Futurecasting workshops have provided many organizations with the jolt they needed to reset thinking, reenergize teams, and refocus their strategy on delighting customers in new ways.

## WHO CAN USE FUTURECASTING?

Anybody can use the futurecasting process. Futurecasting is often used by strategic planners to build out *actionable* future scenarios as an input to their business and product planning processes. Futurecasting can be used in any organization. It has been used by small and large companies, industry consortia, and even by individuals.

## WHAT IS THE FUTURECASTING PROCESS?

The futurecasting process is a multi-step effort designed to decode the possibilities of the future and then build innovative plans that create and capture new value in that future.

Participants first consult a range of experts to understand the expected future landscape in a pre-determined target timeframe. They then develop a suite of fresh new ideas, they test those ideas, and finally they construct concrete steps towards building that future, starting with immediate, actionable tasks.

The main steps of the futurecasting process are as follows:

1. Expert testimony
2. Synthesis
3. Personas
4. Rapid futurecasting
5. Science-fiction prototyping
6. Backcasting
7. Reporting

**Expert testimony** – The futurecasting process relies heavily on the quality of the input it receives. Bringing experts



to any futurecasting effort is essential to success. Experts can come from inside an organization but often the most influential expertise (in terms of forging change within an organization) will come from the outside. Experts should bring vital insights and span a wide range of disciplines. These disciplines will vary a little depending on the domain being targeted but must always include a review of social trends (the current and emerging habits, practices, needs and wants of

people), all major technological trends relevant to the domain, current business trends, and any relevant ecosystem trends. Ecosystem trends might include insights related to impending government regulations, industry dynamics (the relative strength of key market players, M&A activity etc.) and any planned development or changes to relevant infrastructure. For all those participating in a futurecasting process or workshop, this expert testimony serves a number of important purposes. Firstly, it brings everyone up to a common level of knowledge. Secondly, it should stimulate and shift the thinking of participants by introducing them to new information and new ideas. Finally, it should start to force them to challenge their own status quo by bringing them illustrations of how people working in different sectors are embracing emerging trends in ways that they can learn from.

**Synthesis** – The next step in the futurecasting process is to synthesize all the inputs from the expert testimony and



understand its impact on the domain being explored. Futurecasting participants listen carefully to the expert testimony, always with the filter in their minds of “what does this mean to my organization, my group’s future plans, or ways I could better serve my customers?” During the synthesis process, participants reduce the testimony down to a set of key ideas they heard from each expert, carefully noting how they think that trend will have impact on their organization

together with what their organization should do to respond or take best advantage.

**Personas** – Detailed personas are built and selected to act as a proxy for the organization’s target customer base. In



this context a customer could be a traditional paying customer, or anyone that is consuming a product or service within an organization, including a company employee for whom new workplace experiences need to be designed so that they can better serve actual customers. Personas are typically composites built from ethnographic studies of real people. They act as an abstraction of

the target customer group. Teams are encouraged to make the personas their own and imagine a broad set of details

about their particular persona as a way to make them seem as real as possible. Without the use of personas people using the futurecasting process can unconsciously tend to gravitate towards designing experiences for themselves rather than experiences that real-world customers might find useful.

**Rapid futurecasting** – “Futurecasting” as a term is used both to denote the overall futurecasting process itself, and



also the effort of imagining future potential experiences through what is known as “rapid futurecasting”. This can be a little confusing, but think of rapid futurecasting as being the core of the overall futurecasting process. In rapid futurecasting, small teams of participants (usually 4-5 people) work together to come up with ideas for future experiences that they hope will better serve the needs of their assigned persona. These imagined experiences are aimed for the

target timeframe agreed for the futurecasting session. The team first considers a challenge their persona might be having, or some task they are trying to accomplish and attempts to build an experience that solves the problem or aids the task. To stimulate ideation, and also to ensure the planned future experience is anchored against the trends provided by the experts, teams select two or more trends distilled from the synthesis phase and look for new experiences that sit at the intersection of those trends. Trends should span at least two broad categories, for example, “social” and “technology”, or “technology” and “ecosystem”. Trends can be chosen based on the team’s interest, or randomly (perhaps with the throw of a dice). This forces thinking in new directions by creating unusual trend combinations. Once the team has come up with an idea for an imagined future experience, they improve and flesh out the idea by asking and answering a set of questions designed to aid them in thinking through the next level of detail around the experience. They are also encouraged to think through what it will take to deliver the new experience: what infrastructure investments might be needed, what new partnerships might need to be formed, etc. Rapid futurecasting is usually done over and over to generate more and more ideas, each time trying a different combination of trends as seed factors. Once each team has created enough ideas from the rapid futurecasting phase, they pick the most promising idea as their focus for the rest of the process.

**Science-fiction prototyping** – This element of the futurecasting process is very polarizing. When they first encounter

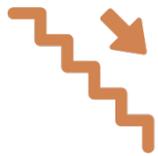


science-fiction prototyping, which we shall refer to as “SFP” for short, most people either immediately see its value, or they think it sounds like a crazy waste of time. Quite honestly, I was one of those latter individuals who just did not understand the true value of SFP until I had tried it. It turns out to be a very powerful component in the overall futurecasting process. SFP lets you battle-test your new experience idea, find holes in it that you weren’t previously aware of, and then improve your idea accordingly. Teams imagine a time when their experience has become

commonplace. This might be fifteen or even twenty years after they first imagine their planned experience becoming available. So if they are planning to launch their new product or service in 2022, they start to imagine people using it (or what it has developed into) in 2035 or 2040. Each team writes a story in three acts. It doesn’t need to be long, perhaps just several hundred words, though it can be longer if people have the time and inclination to write more. The key is to have fun with it. It just needs to be science-fiction that is based on science fact, and not total fantasy. The first act of the story should describe a person using their new product, service, or experience in the new extended future timeframe. In the second act, something goes catastrophically wrong with the use or delivery of the experience. Perhaps a massive security breach, privacy violation, or equipment failure. In the third and final act, the team writes about how the catastrophic issue is remediated and everybody lives happily ever after. By being forced to write out a story version of their experience in actual (imagined) use, imagining things going horribly wrong, and then having to come up with detailed plans for fixing these huge issues, teams gain a much deeper understanding and appreciation of what it will take to actually build and deliver their experience. It forces them to consider how people will learn about, provision, and use an experience. It makes them think about the labor, equipment and capital needed to support the delivery of such an experience. It helps them appreciate what partnerships might be

needed. And most importantly it forces them to pay attention to operational details related to security, privacy and resilience. The output of this phase, other than a fun story to share, should be a list of improvements and considerations the team can apply back to their planned experience. To learn more about SFP, I encourage you to buy and read “Science Fiction Prototyping: Designing the future with science fiction”, written by my good friend and former colleague, Brian David Johnson. As a fellow futurist, Brian literally wrote the book on SFP. His book is available on Amazon and published by Morgan and Claypool.

**Backcasting** – Perhaps the most important step in the entire futurecasting process is that of backcasting. This process



was first outlined by John B. Robinson of the University of Waterloo back in the early 1990s. It’s a planning method that works backwards from the future to identify the steps that must be taken to get from the present to the desired future. Teams work together to think through the steps needed to reach their desired goals. So, for example, if the team was imagining an experience they wanted to build in 2026, they would ask themselves what they would need to have in place by 2023, in 2019, and what they need to start working on tomorrow in order to

achieve their goals. Considerations include such things as technologies that need to be developed, infrastructure that needs to be deployed, talent that needs to be acquired, partnerships that need to be forged and so on. What teams are essentially building at this stage is a roadmap for the successful execution of their strategy. Without this vital step, once everybody goes back to doing their day job all the creativity and forward thinking generated by the futurecasting process is essentially wasted. The futurecasting workshop just becomes a fun distraction and nothing more. Organizations make significant investments when they pool their best talent and dedicate them to a futurecasting effort for multiple days. Backcasting is essential to capturing the value generated and makes first steps tangible, concrete, and actionable for when everyone gets back to the office.

**Reporting** – Attending a futurecasting process is a fun, eye-opening, and exhilarating experience. Participants come



away freshly educated, re-energized and ready to take bold new steps forward. Not everyone in an organization is able to attend a futurecasting session, either because key personnel have schedule conflicts, or because attendance at the event is necessarily capped. Futurecasting events are typically attended by invitation only. Capturing and then sharing the full value of the futurecasting session is where a high-quality report comes in. A futurecasting report is typically generated by the person facilitating the futurecasting workshop, usually a practicing futurist.

The futurist summarizes all the major findings of the futurecasting session in the report, ensuring that all the value of the workshop is documented. The report includes a summary of all the key trends presented by the experts, overviews of the most promising imagined experiences that were ideated by the teams, and a set of recommendations for next steps. A good futurist will also weave in a set of provocative questions and considerations for next steps. These are designed to stimulate further thinking and help to move the organization even further forward.

## WHAT IS THE MAIN DELIVERABLE OF A FUTURECASTING WORKSHOP?

The key deliverable of a futurecasting workshop is the futurecasting report. The quality and depth of this report will depend on three main factors: 1) the quality of the insights shared by invited experts, 2) the quality of the ideation that occurs during the workshop, and 3) the ability of the futurist writing the report. Typical futurecasting reports are 10-20 pages in length though some futurecasting workshops generate so many great new ideas that the resulting reports can stretch to 100 pages or more. This said, the quality of a report is not measured in how many pages it covers. A wonderful futurecasting report that elegantly documents all the main insights and ideas generated from the workshop may fit in just a few pages.

Aside from the report, the other main deliverable for a futurecasting workshop is that it should impact all the attendees and move their thinking forward meaningfully. The most successful futurecasting workshops have a profound impact on everyone attending. Once attendees return back to work from a session, most will find their thinking and approach forever altered. Attendees reset their assumptions based on insights shared by experts. And they naturally begin to apply all the ideas generated at the workshop to their projects and plans. This impact may be as important a deliverable as the report itself.

## WHAT TIMEFRAME SHOULD A FUTURECASTING WORKSHOP TARGET?

Futurecasting participants usually all agree on a single timeframe for which they are targeting their efforts. The timeframe they pick will depend very much on the goals of their organization and on the rate of change in the industry within which they operate. Futurecasting timeframes might be four, seven, ten, or even twenty years in the future.

The optimal timeframe will depend very much on the typical length of the organization's product development cycle and also on the speed at which their target market evolves. For example, futurecasting efforts within the retail sector tend to be most fruitful in the 4 to 10-year range, while a futurecasting effort focused around the future of airports and air travel might target 20 to 30 years out.

## HOW LONG IS A FUTURECASTING SESSION?

A typical futurecasting session lasts two or three days, with most lasting two days. Longer sessions give more time for expert testimony, enable more rounds of rapid futurecasting, and give time for a more thorough and comprehensive backcasting effort. If you can find a way to do it, do consider investing in a three-day workshop. The results you will achieve will be more complete and the impact you will have on your organization will be significantly increased.

## HOW CAN MY ORGANIZATION START FUTURECASTING?

Futurecasting is a powerful business tool and well worth the investment. Hiring the services of an experienced futurist to run a futurecasting workshop for your organization is highly recommended, especially if you are new to futurecasting. Bringing together your best and brightest for 2-3 days of intense ideation is a serious investment of time and resources. Having an experienced guide will help you to maximize the value you capture from this significant investment and assure a high-quality result.

If you are on a tight budget you could try to run a futurecasting session yourself using the information outlined in this white paper. You will need to develop an appropriate set of workshop materials for each of the stages of the futurecasting session. These materials are needed to guide participants through each step of the process. They should be tuned to each individual futurecasting session. No futurecasting workshop is the same, and materials should be tailored to the domain area being explored. This is work that a trained futurist will know how to do for you. You will also need to design an appropriate agenda, secure a relevant set of external experts, and find a strong, experienced moderator that is able to keep the process on track and guide your attendees to deliver the desired result.

If you don't have prior experience with futurecasting and don't already know how to get the best results from the process, engaging a futurist may save you a lot of wasted time and effort.

## HOW DO I MAKE FUTURECASTING PART OF MY STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS?

If you want to build futurecasting as a strategic capability within your organization, you will need to build it as a core competency within your strategic planning team and then build a broader organizational culture that embraces the futurecasting approach.

There is nothing like learning by doing. The best way to add futurecasting to your set of strategic organizational capabilities is to do one or two workshops and learn how they work by running through them yourself. Hiring the services of a futurist to guide you will assure the best learning curve and aid knowledge transfer into your organization. A futurist may also offer training classes designed to help your strategic planners build this new capability within their team. This training should include details not just on how to run a futurecasting workshop, but also how to prepare and customize workshop materials, and how to find and engage external experts.

## HOW DO I FIND A GOOD FUTURIST?

There are quite a few futurists out there. Many are very talented individuals with strong creativity and a passion for the future. Be sure to select a futurist that is not too specialized in one area: for example, many futurists think deeply about the future of technology, but do not have much business experience or any ethnographic or social science experience thinking about people. To understand the future, you need to look at the intersection of trends related to technology, business, and people. Many organizations have placed big bets to develop new technology and failed because they didn't fully consider how it would fit within people's lives, or how it could be monetized. For example, 3D television was much touted just a few years ago, but any good futurist with a social science background would have instantly told you it was doomed to be yet another failure because of the way people actually watch TV in their homes. Ensure your futurist has a background in technology, business, and social science. Also check that they have experience running futurecasting workshops and that they are an experienced moderator and emcee. Make sure you're going to look good for hiring them.

Besides myself, I personally recommend futurist, Brian David Johnson. Brian and I worked together at Intel under the wonderful Dr. Genevieve Bell. Dr. Bell holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Stanford University and led a team of roughly 85 social scientists, ethnographers, anthropologists and technologists (including two futurists) inside Intel Labs. It was under Dr. Bell's tutelage that both Brian and I honed our craft. Brian has extensive experience as a futurist and pioneered the science-fiction prototyping approach.

Whoever you choose to help you, futurecasting can be a wonderful way to unlock creativity in your organization, encourage fresh thinking, and build innovative strategies that help you to leapfrog competitors and capture new value in the market.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steve Brown** is an experienced futurist and is CEO of Possibility and Purpose, LLC. Steve is an accomplished speaker, writer, strategist, and executive coach. Using his prior experience as the Futurist and Chief Evangelist at Intel Corporation, Steve helps thought leaders at Fortune 500 companies and other organizations to understand and navigate the future. Steve combines his deep knowledge of technology, business, ecosystem, and human trends to help organizations plan for the possibilities of the future. He offers a rich menu of services spanning



**Futurecasting:** A white paper by Steve Brown, CEO of Possibility and Purpose, LLC

futurecasting workshops, speaking, consulting, and training. Steve works with a wide spectrum of organizations spanning the transportation, retail, hospitality, finance, healthcare, manufacturing, media and entertainment sectors.

Steve hosts customized two-day futurecasting workshops for organizations that want to project how future trends will affect their business and then build strategies to shape and thrive in that future. He also delivers public and private keynotes on the future. He uses straightforward language, compelling visuals, and memorable stories to decode the future for his audiences. He then helps them understand how advances in business and technology will enable them to innovate, differentiate, and create new value.

Steve is also an executive communications coach. He delivers a range of communications coaching to leaders, both as individuals and as intact teams, spanning executive storytelling, leadership presentation skills, and on-camera speaking skills.

Steve has over 30 years of experience in the high-tech sector spanning research, engineering, marketing, manufacturing, management, and communications. He holds both bachelors and masters degrees in Micro-electronic Systems Engineering from Manchester University in the U.K. Steve has been featured on BBC, CNN, Bloomberg TV, ABC News, Wired, WSJ:Digits, CBS, and many more media outlets where he provides insight and analysis on what's next and what it means to us all. Steve's new book, *Hacking Reality*, will be published next year.

Steve was born in the U.K. and became a U.S. citizen in 2008. He lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife, Kristin.

To learn more about Steve and the services he offers, please visit [baldfuturist.com](http://baldfuturist.com) where you can also read his blog and review samples of Steve's work, including his popular talks at TED, the CTO Forum, and C2:MTL. You can also follow him on Twitter ([@baldfuturist](https://twitter.com/baldfuturist)) and Facebook ([www.fb.com/baldfuturist](https://www.fb.com/baldfuturist)).