

By Futures Alchemist
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Futures Literacy

The professional development
skill we are missing

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Dedication

To the crazy ones who have the audacity to think that they can create the future.

“Here’s to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently — they’re not fond of rules... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can’t do is ignore them because they change things... they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

— Steve Jobs, 1997

Foreword

This book is only a primer, an introduction to new ways to think about, prepare for, and affect change on the future. Please continue to scan, explore, read, and engage with the topic to begin to do it justice. Futures thinking, or Strategic Foresight, is an expedition towards the future, never a destination, and always evolving.

You can join the ***Futures Alchemy Collaborative*** on either Facebook or LinkedIn, to connect with other people learning to read and discuss the future with new tools and insights.

Part 1

You are a futurist

While there are professional and academically trained futurists and strategic foresight practitioners, my belief is that every one of us is a natural futurist. If you have children, you are a futurist. If you own your own business and you've planned to grow it; if you've looked at your career, and learned some skills to make progress; if you have any long term investments, if you have property, if you are married, if you save for retirement, if you wish that you could leave a legacy for the world, then you are a futurist. But more than just natural futurists, I believe we can become better futurists, more conscious and intentional futurists.

How we start to become better is by learning the language of futures thinking. We will look at what it means to learn futures literacy, introduce some new concepts and terminology and demonstrate ways to apply futures thinking to your life and career.

Futures Literacy

Think about learning a new language and how you have to try and get your mind and tongue around foreign sounds and sentence construction.

I am learning Spanish on Duolingo and the insights I am getting are incredible. Initially you have fun with some new sounds, and you learn how to order a coffee with milk, no sugar, please. (Una cafe, con leche, sin azucar, por favor). But after some time struggling with the higher levels on the app and trying to put thoughts into the past tense, work out gendered nouns or have a meaningful conversation in another language, you begin to develop a feeling, a sense of the 'rightness' of the sounds you are saying. And more than learning this other language, you begin to really understand your own. You begin to pick up the nuances of choosing one word over another. For example, some languages have passive and active voices and others don't. A passive English sentence such as 'The ball went through the

window' has a very different implication to the active sentence, 'I kicked the ball through the window.'

These experiences in learning a new language give us some insight into what happens when we learn the language of a new field. Every industry has their own jargon, acronyms, and a base of assumed knowledge before you can even begin to have a sensible conversation with an insider. We need to learn the ABCs, some terminology and some basic assumptions if we want to have a sensible conversation about the future. The more intentional we are about learning this language, the sooner we can become fluent in it, and this frees us up to return to our own areas of concern with new insights and a deeper understanding.

Philosophy and Professional Development

While most corporate budgets have an allocation for professional development, asking companies to invest in the 'philosophical reflection' of their senior people, would be a tad more challenging to calculate in terms of ROI. But at the root of our development there will always be some philosophy.

Definition: *Philosophy* is the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality and existence as well as the theoretical basis of a particular branch of knowledge. It includes thought, reflection, and wisdom in that field.

Definition: *Professional Development* is the development of knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness that leads to an increase in your competence at work. It includes both formal and non-formal ways of adding to your continuous learning through your professional lifetime.

Definition: *Futures Literacy* is the skill and competence to read signs about what is coming, imagine alternative scenarios, and to craft a strategy to both develop and respond to a range of potential futures.

While there are the normal topics of interest in the future such as AI, self-driving cars, 3D printing etc, our attention in recent times has been on the incredible disruption of a global pandemic. Suddenly every leader is tasked with imagining potential futures for their organisations, having to make huge decisions about the future of people, clients, assets, stakeholders and more, in a space filled with conjecture, changing timelines, screaming headlines, fear, uncertainty and rampant anxiety. It takes little futures literacy to read the extent of the crisis. It does take a huge amount of professional development or natural competencies, to respond in the best possible way.

It may be easier to think that we can read the future during normal times of development, when the future is assumed to be a natural extrapolation of the present, albeit accelerating. However when there is a fundamental change to our world, those assumptions of the future are undermined.

Of course, at the time of writing, COVID is our biggest disruption and grabbing most of the headlines, but there are always issues that have the potential to derail or detour our plans. Before COVID, we were talking about artificial intelligence, robotics, self-driving cars, automation and algorithms, 3D printing, and more. These were the issues we were concerned would affect how we do business or earn a living. They haven't gone away. Their potential to alter our plans still exists, but if we read only the headlines in front of us, instead of developing insight into the future through futures literacy, then we run the risk of being blindsided by yet another crisis.

The best we could do now

When I was finishing off high school, many years ago, my father gave me some career advice. With what he knew, his experience and seeing other people struggle through life, he recommended that I go to university (the first in my family to do so) and get a Bachelor of Commerce degree, get a job in a financial institution (he worked in a bank and had worked for a major, international life assurance company) and then start contributing to a retirement annuity with my first pay cheque.

From the perspective of a young, relatively sheltered scholar, in the early 1990's, that all seemed very impressive. But as I started my studies and my career, I soon discovered that my father's advice fell short of not only what was possible, but what I was ambitious enough to want to achieve.

From the perspective of a much older and intentionally connected career person, in the 2020's, that advice seemed naive and short sighted.

My father's advice was the best that he could give, given what he knew at the time. He was ambitious enough for me to want more for me than he had had the opportunity to experience, but it fell short of what was realisable and certainly what was possible.

And this is probably the most uncomfortable insight we have about futures literacy: We can make the best plans we are able to make, given what we know. And those plans will very neatly and successfully lead us to ruin, if they do not take into account what is really happening in the world now, and into the future. The only way we can make plans that are actually useful, is to consider elements beyond what we know right now.

The best we can do now will be insufficient if we do not consider potential variables of the future. We must develop a mindset that allows us to consider the unthinkable, plan for the impossible and invest in the intangibles.

What happens when we don't look at the future?

There is a legal concept called 'wilful blindness' where a person who suspects that something illegal is happening, takes measures to intentionally *not* find out about it so that they cannot be held responsible. They want to establish that they have 'plausible deniability'. We will let lawyers work out the success of that approach, but for us futurists, being wilfully blind to the development of the future is a very risky move. A court of law might not find you guilty, but you will be found wanting in your career or your business.

People have a blind spot about the future, or intentionally ignore developments, when they feel threatened. To be fair, this is a natural human response to the unknown. But this book is not about being fair. It is about being prepared. We have to do the difficult work of learning a new language to read the warning signs. We have to do the work of uncovering words and verbs and adjectives, so that we can discover new opportunities. The future is not hidden from those people willing to explore it, or to create it.

When we look at companies that have failed to read the future correctly, we often come up with the familiar business school clichés of Blockbusters and Kodak. Blockbusters started a streaming video service (video-on-demand) before Netflix, and Kodak invented digital photography before anyone else. But their blindspots about what people really wanted, their inability to be agile and responsive, and their belief that they could just keep doing what they were already doing well, but perhaps a little better and a little faster, were what lead them to failure. They did the best they could, knowing what they did, but they did not go far enough beyond their own paradigms to find out how to really succeed in the future.

We don't want to become the go-to example of failed enterprises because we fail to read the future. We want to be innovative, courageous, and creative. At least if that is what you want, then read on.

How do we learn

We learn from mistakes in the past, only if we pay attention to them

Ford Motors hyped up a campaign for a new car called the Edsel, in the late 1950s, and is used as a classic business school example of failure. It was rumoured that the CEO of a minor competitor at the time, Saturn Corporation, used a book on the disaster of the Edsel as a learning tool. He distributed it to his senior team and had them underline every mistake that Ford made in the design, production, naming, and marketing of the vehicle.

When we underline the mistakes we see, it makes us more conscious of how we could be repeating those types of errors. Let us try and recognise them before we make the mistake, instead of as we make them, for best results.

We learn from policies in the past, if we do not choose to remove them

The 1929 Stock Market Crash drove the world into the Great Depression. It is argued that the crash was created by overinflated bubbles of non-real value caused by greedy trading. Consequently a number of laws and regulations came into place to restrict certain speculative trading to protect the American economy from this type of disaster in the future.

As the modern world became more technologically savvy and financial products became more intangible and creative, people in the financial world argued to lift those 'old fashioned' restrictions. Over a period of years various laws were repealed and protections of the economy were erased. And so we come to the 2008 global financial crisis, caused in no small part, by the abolition of the legislated protections designed to prevent overinflated, predatory, risky investment practices.

When we put protections in place, forget about the reasons for them, and then rail against the restrictions because 'things are different this time', then we run this risk of people getting to say 'I told you so', when the same thing happens again.

We learn from failed predictions, and don't get caught up in the hype

From nuclear fuelled vacuum cleaners, flying houses, helicopters / flying cars for everyone, the obsolesces of manual labour, the inviolability of the horse-drawn carriage as well as cities drowning in horse manure, flying uterus¹ and 3D printers reducing consumption, we have an entertaining array of predictions that have been proved wrong (at least for the moment). These predictions fall into three categories: an assumption that something couldn't possibly happen the way it is advertised (humans, and women humans, surviving the terrifying speed of trains), a belief that something works so well that it could never be replaced (horse-drawn carriages could not be replaced by motor cars), or the assumption that a new invention will solve all our problems (almost any new platform, 3D printers, etc).

While the stories, in hindsight, are amusing, if we pay attention to them with our futures focussed lenses, we begin to see things in a different light. We have missing information that leads to superstitions (flying uterus), we have a sacred assumption that something that works could never be replaced by a new-fangled invention (carriages and cars), or we have a mythological fantasy that a new invention will solve all our problems and undo the messes we have created (technology will solve our pollution, over-population, food scarcity, global warming, poverty, etc).

¹ People warned that women shouldn't travel on early trains because at the speed they travelled at, the women's uterus would surely 'fly out' of their bodies!

We can enjoy a chuckle when we come across those amusing stories, but then pause and look at our own feelings about current headlines and ensure that we aren't making those same mistakes.

Careers that didn't exist before

My father tried to encourage me to go to university and get a BComm degree (commerce). As a rebellious young 20 year-old, I signed up for a BA instead. My degree majoring in Education and Psychology has never directly helped me in my future career choices, but then there was nothing at university at the time, which could have prepared me for the following careers that I have enjoyed:

- **Financial services:** I worked in various roles in the financial services industry before being asked to start a training department in the rapidly growing financial management company I ended up working in. Training was the real professional goal.
- **Social Media:** By keeping a few weeks ahead of my clients, I spoke about, trained on, and helped manage and create social media platforms for audiences for over a decade when social media was really new as a business platform, especially in South Africa. When I started offering training on social media I only had about 2 hours of content. By the time I finished working in this space I had over 7 days of content, without repeating anything. It was and still is, a rapidly developing field that constantly introduces new areas to explore and gain expertise in.
- **Association Executive:** If you speak up, you get the job. In a number of volunteer organisations and associations, I have had the opportunity to volunteer my skills and experience in everything from marketing to membership to ethics. I now hold serious leadership positions in local and international associations.
- **Professional Speaker:** The main way I provide value to clients is speaking at their conferences, workshops, training sessions, and other meetings. My topic has changed and become more focussed, but the methodologies of keynote speaking, training or facilitating, coaching or consulting, continue to be developed.
- **Futurist:** I came to futures thinking relatively late in my career, and yet I feel like I have come home. Everything I have ever read, watched, or pursued as a topic or interest comes together in futures thinking as a way to feel more purposeful about exploring the future.

My last 4 career choices: futurist, professional speaker, association executive, and social media practitioner, are all topics that were not available to me at school or university. When my father was imagining my future, he could not have dreamt that these would be places I would find meaning and remuneration.

That is why the skill of considering the future is such an essential one to develop. While we could not imagine these specific areas of work, there were opportunities for me to learn and develop skills, attitudes and networks that would help me to fulfil unexpected roles in unexpected careers. We cannot necessarily prepare completely for a specific career in our youth, and we need to incorporate continuous learning to be able to respond to new opportunities, and to create new career choices in the future.

Part 2

New Nouns and Verbs

To construct our new language of futures thinking, we need a few new terms. While we would have used many of these before, let us see how they serve us as futurists.

Futures (plural)

This is an interesting language issue. In this field we talk about a plural of futures. Futures thinking. Futures literacy. Not a singular 'future'. (It drives my editors crazy.)

The future is plural, not singular. We aren't referring to science fiction and multiple or parallel universes. Very practically, since the future has not yet arrived, it still has the potential to be expressed in so many different ways. As we look forward we know that there are different ways that issues can play out, different ways votes may be cast, different decisions that can be made. And that is only in our own lives. You, as a singular person, could craft a multitude of different futures. Imagine how exponentially more options there are when you factor in everyone else's decisions.

Just as we all experienced 2020 differently, we all anticipate the future differently. While some people lost businesses, other businesses expanded. Some people were estranged from their families while others families came together. We all look through the lens of the current moment in time differently, so our expectation and expression of the future is going to offer different views too. It is certainly a plural concept.

Imagination (noun)

In other disciplines there is a strong reliance on past knowledge. When studying the future, we have no explicit knowledge of what is to come, only models to indicate the range of possibilities.

That means we have to rely on our imaginations more than we might expect. We actually create our futures from our imaginations, from our thoughts, experiences, hopes and fears. What we imagine and then focus on, will be the direction we will point our futures towards.

Imagination allows us to create temporary, imaginative worlds of the future in our minds, and then to play out what they might mean for our own interests.

For example, imagine that medical advances meant that humans could now live happily and well to an average age of 150. What would that world look like? What would careers look

like? Would we have to re-school ourselves to have different careers over our life times? How would we save for retirement? Would retirement be a period we look forward to towards the 'end' of our lives, or would we have cycles of mini retirements and reinventions. How would we fund this longer life? What would marriage look like? Might it be a series of say 5-year contractual couplings, with an option to renew, rather than the 'till-death-do-us-part' approach we have at the moment? What would the population look like with people living for so long? Would birth rates fall? Would this longevity be seen across the world or might it be far more prevalent in wealthier nations?

There are no wrong answers. Imagination underscored by well developed futures literacy gives us a view of what the world could look like. We then prepare to bring those elements we prefer into reality, or we prepare to minimise the influence of those elements we would prefer not to see.

Anticipate (verb) and Anticipation (noun)

We anticipate the future. We regard certain outcomes as more or less probable. Much of our future reality is actually based on what we anticipate it to be.

A famous quote from Einstein helps us with an example.

“The most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe.”

If we believe we live in a friendly universe, then we will expect our future to have welcoming elements. We anticipate having as much enjoyment from life in the future as we do now. Which means that we prepare our personal lives and our professional influences, in the direction of a good, friendly future. That anticipation means we are friendly, helpful, hospitable.

The alternative view of a hostile universe means that we anticipate a difficult future, one where we are threatened, in danger, trying to survive. Our behaviours will include protection, rejecting, ring-fencing, selfishness. And the world, and the future, will respond with evidence that proves us correct. If we fear that someone will take what we value from us, we will protect ourselves from those people, and they will respond with aggression, which will reinforce for us that the future is much like the past, full of selfish people, out for their own gain, with no respect for others. Our anticipation of that future created our behaviour which created the future we expect.

Of course deep anticipation of the future is more complex and there is a significant body of work just on this one noun.

Sense-Making (noun)

When we experience something that is challenging we need to make sense of it. We often do this retrospectively, trying to give occurrences in our lives some form of meaning. Some people seek to learn from an experience and take ownership of how their action, or inaction, caused the occurrence. Other people ascribe almost mystical meaning to an event, making sense of the occurrence as something outside of their control.

When we make sense of the future, we are trying to wrap our heads around the extreme pace, rapid development, masses of data and interconnectedness of all things.

Sense making is probably the most human skill we have that cannot be performed by the machines. Algorithms and AI can generate forms of creativity beyond their calculation and procedural superiority, but it takes consciousness to make sense.

Trends (Noun)

When people think of futurists and the future in general, minds often go straight to the idea of trends, but futures thinking is so much more than only this one element.

Simply, a trend is the general direction that something is taking, like an upward trend in sales, or an increasing prevalence of working from home. But without insight, trends can look very exciting and people can get swept up in the predictions and the headlines and miss out on the real insights, or get caught up in something that is no more than a short term fad.

There are many trend reports and sources online and while they make great reading and do reveal some interesting insights, ultimately knowing a trend exists is an irrelevant unit of knowledge, if nothing is done about it. Futures literacy helps us identify and respond to significant trends.

Imagine you go to the doctor and are told that your cholesterol is too high, as is your blood pressure and weight. With a family history of heart trouble and these factual statements, the historic trend very strongly indicates that you are in danger of having a heart attack. This is what a trend tells us: that there is a strong indication that the expected result will be X. Unfortunately, knowing the trend and faced with the unequivocal evidence does not lead all patients to radically revise their lifestyle. According to the American Heart Association, only slightly more than 50% of adults with cholesterol problems are even taking medication.

To reiterate to make this really, super clear: We have evidence. We have a trend. We know we are affected. There is a simple medication to address the issue. There are simple lifestyle choices to literally save our lives. And only slightly half of adults with this problem are even taking the simplest step to address it.

Futures literacy helps us to learn how to respond to those trends, not just be entertained by them.

Scenarios (Noun)

A scenario in its simplest form, is the setting where something happens. When we use scenarios in futures thinking, we create an imagined setting for the world, and then explore what that might mean for our business or area of concern. To do the task well, we do not only create one scenario but a range of them, a range of possible ways the world might look. And then we develop plans to respond to those possibilities.

For example, we may imagine a world where fuel prices rocket because of a lack of fossil fuels. That could result in a decrease of traffic, with people relying even more on working from home, remote work, the more rapid development of how we connect digitally and perhaps the introduction of the first forms of holographic imaging for home use. People may move to more pleasant rural surroundings, as long as there were facilities available within walking distance. Or some people may move into the cities where a decrease in motor vehicle activity means a more pleasant living experience, again, within walking distance.

In a scenario like this, who would do the driving? Would we need expensive permits to drive and would it be reserved for the wealthy or connected? Would there be a return to horses for travel or an increase in the production of bicycles? Would we explore other forms of fuel and retrofit vehicles for new energies? Would self-driving, electric vehicles finally have their day? What would happen to car ownership? Would there still be people who owned cars like some people own yachts or would there be collective ownership of self-driving cars? Or perhaps could a car be owned by itself, and credits earned for its services be ploughed back into its own maintenance?

Once we have this scenario we can explore so many issues and see how they might impact our business. Rising fuel costs could lead to an increase in online dating or it could see families move across the world to locate themselves in the proximity of the best schools for their children. The impact would be felt on retail, real estate, education, luxury goods, marketing, communications, etc.

Once we have explored that scenario, imagined the impact on our business, suppliers and customers, we would then move on to a different scenario and repeat the exercise. What might the world look like, how would our business respond, if we suddenly discovered an extremely inexpensive, hugely bountiful fuel source that could easily be used in the place of fossil fuels?

The value of the scenarios and the resultant considerations on our industry sector and business, is that it primes our mind, our attention, to look for the indicators that we are moving in one direction or another, it helps us remove the emotion from huge decisions in the face of 'good' or 'bad' scenarios, and it helps us to imagine, prepare and perhaps rehearse valid commercial responses instead of simply viewing the change and feeling the impact but not being able to respond.

Part 3

Now let us turn to a few characteristics of time, history and the future, so that we can begin to develop a language for Futures Literacy.

Honour, but more importantly, learn from the Past

There is huge value in studying our past and understanding our history and origins. Yet people often view the past through nostalgia-coloured lenses. We need to honour what we have learned from the past and those people who challenged what was wrong and initiated change. Let us not pretend that everything was better back 'then'. The reason our values change over time is because as we mature, as individuals and as society, we need to reassess what we accept as appropriate or inappropriate and reject outdated beliefs and values.

A test of this is that if someone is overwhelmed by nostalgia, longs for the 'good old days' or moans about 'the youth of today' then it may be that the values of today are not necessarily in their favour any more. If formerly privileged people feel threatened then maybe they are experiencing just a little of the uncertainty, indignity, and difficulties that other groups of people have experienced in the past.

Celebrate our Present

Much of what we discuss in public about 'the future' are actually developments having an effect right now, today. When we are creating scenarios and assessing trends it is in response to what is actually being experienced in the present moment.

The pace of change is so rapid that headlines often feel like they are futuristic when in fact they are demonstrating our current reality.

An already classic statement that explains this is by futurist and science fiction author, William Gibson.

"The future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed."

There are self-driving cars on the roads already. People are already losing their jobs to automation and AI and robotics. Holograms are already in use. Real-time AI generated translation is already available. Cloning is already old news. Life spans are already lengthening.

To become futures literate is to become aware of the changes that we are already experiencing as we move ever more rapidly towards the future, and then to still be able to imagine something beyond what is being reported on.

Educate and Inspire our Future

The South African Education Department is rewriting the History syllabus being taught at schools. Of course for some people there is an automatic reaction of concern that history should not be rewritten at all, that it reflects a reality that should not be tampered with. But consider these two developments.

As I was approaching the end of my high school studies, my history class was taught about South Africa's apartheid past. We were one of the first generations to be taught what had been hidden by the apartheid government. Even while in a government-run, race-segregated school, our teachers were presenting a curriculum that taught us the flaws in our current reality. And even those lessons fell far short of what really happened in our country.

As only one example, the current education department is now looking at the history curriculum to address the absence of the stories of prominent women in South Africa's history. The failure to share those stories reinforces the patriarchal nature of South African society and the failure to honour those women diminishes the opportunities for our young women of today to identify their potential.

As we develop literacy about the future, we will look at our past and present with new lenses. There is much that we should recall from the past but never repeat. And as we identify that, there are so many more opportunities in our future to inspire us to take action to challenge what is wrong, and to begin to design what we believe is our shared, preferred future.

Disruptions come from PESTLE issues

I live in Cape Town, South Africa. It is a beautiful part of the world, but it has its challenges. In a period of a few months in the last few years, we had, not only COVID lockdown levels in place, but water restrictions because of a devastating drought, rolling blackouts because our national electricity generator cannot produce enough power for the country consistently, as well as runaway fires that destroyed priceless buildings and artefacts. We have gang violence, homelessness, unemployment, racism, and gender based violence. This could feel overwhelming and dystopian, but we also have some of the best schools, incredibly innovative tech hubs, we export excellent business people, sportspeople and artists and we have arguably some of the most beautiful countryside in the world.

All of these issues, both good and bad, can be illustrated by a look at the helpful acronym, PESTLE.

Acronym: PESTLE = Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legislative, Environmental

Changes in any of these areas can result in disruptions to people, businesses, industries, or countries. Often changes are neutral. Something happens. It is our emotional response to it that gives it a label of either 'good' or 'bad'. For example, the development of a new app or piece of technology is not intrinsically good or bad, but the nature of its existence and its adoption, could have widespread implications for industries around the world.

Political

Political decisions have a direct impact on the lives of individuals. Think about the effect of people stranded at airports because of visa rule changes overnight in response to political positioning. During Covid we paid a great deal more attention to the announcements of political leaders in order to plan our next week's movements. Longer term, where politicians focus their attention means that certain industries are supported, or not, international relationships with other countries are encouraged, or not. Companies rise and fall in response to political decision making and individuals feel the effect directly.

Economic

Economic implications are vast. The economic system of a country is an ideological (read 'philosophical approach') position that has implications for what citizens can or cannot do in their own professional lives, and how they earn, spend, what they are taxed on and how they can invest their money. Economic decisions such as common currencies like the Euro, the acceptance or prohibition of cryptocurrencies, and daily currency exchange rates have a direct bearing on the lives of citizens.

Social

Social issues disrupt us at every turn. While some broken systems are familiar to us, we can become derailed by more rapid changes in values or extreme events that shine a light on rampant racism, gender based violence and the stripping of rights of entire groups of people. The difference between the generations has always been an issue, but rapid advances in the thinking, the philosophy, of younger generations has challenged the assumptions of the societal acceptance of a set of values that should be passed on. Over the decades we have seen the challenge of the original unquestioning acceptance of the patriarchy, racial superiority, the subjugation of women and certain national or racial groups, the punishment of people with different sexual orientations or identities, and the disregard for people with mental health issues. As societies broadly evolve and change legislation and political positioning on these issues, the disruption is felt from the legislature all the way to Sunday lunch with family.

Technological

Technological development has the opportunity to make entire industries null and void. The printing press threatened the hand copiers of texts but opened new industries and business opportunities. The development of textile manufacturing machinery put manual weavers out of business but stimulated new opportunities in the fashion industry.

Someone could be developing a widget or an app right now, in their mom's garage, that could put an entire industry out of business next year, and that industry doesn't know about it yet because they haven't considered what kind of disruptions could derail them, and how to respond.

Legislation

Legislation appeared overnight to enforce pandemic home stay or movement control orders. And rules changed and were differently applied around the world about the wearing of masks. This was a rapid response but legislation isn't normally a fast responder to changes.

One of the most apparent futures issues related to legislation is how far behind it is in comparison to the emergence of new technologies. An innovation could take off as a hot trend producing many related technologies, new companies, varieties and brands. Individuals and companies can respond to these new innovations and adopt them and adjust their business practices to get the most out of this new opportunity. And then eventually the government and the courts have the opportunity to finish research and inquiries and asking for public comment, and then develop the rules and laws to govern the previously autonomous technology that had been enjoying free reign. An example is the hype around drones, all the possibilities that small, unmanned, remotely controlled flying devices could offer. It took a long time for courts to start hearing and setting precedent and laws about what was legal or illegal in terms of flying drones in public places.

Environmental

And while we are focussing on all of the man-made issues, the Environment is sending alerts that we need to pay attention to. Fires, droughts, and earthquakes all get our attention and media headlines and people rush to respond to the immediate and evident crisis.

In the meantime, nutrient poor soil, nutrient poor food, pollution on land, sea, air and in the space around our planet, global warming, the loss of biodiversity, all get relatively less attention and are relegated to scientists and voices crying in the increasingly distressed wilderness. The less immediate the impact, the less visible it is to us, and those with poorer futures skills fail to see that these issues may be more devastating on far more people, than the rise of self-driving vehicles or AI.

Where else do we find Futures Literacy as an essential mindset?

Futures Literacy or Futures Thinking is not a subject on its own. It is intrinsic to so many other subjects and fields.

- History - While we are looking at the past and unpacking how developments back then played out to our current reality, we can extrapolate that same process to imagine how today's developments may play out into the future.
- Mathematics - There are formulae for calculating the future value of money, or compounding interest, or the future value of debt, both which give us a numeric indication of the value of futures thinking.
- Literature - Apart from the obvious speculative fiction and science fiction, many novels project story lines into the future, imagining how relationships and life may change over time.
- Education - By its very nature, education is an investment in the future. Taking the time to establish a good foundation of learning principles into the minds of young children, is a futures thinking exercise played out by governments and families across the world.
- Science Fiction - This genre actively explores possible alternative futures and gives us a platform to consider the implications of future developments from any driver of change.
- Sciences - All forms of science track a progression through time. Botany, metallurgy, psychology all have a time element where the future of the subject in question, is considered.
- Art - Even physical art that is created as a passive, discrete item, will have an impact and value in the future. That value may be very different because of the changing perceptions of the audience over time.
- Politics, Economics, and all the PESTLE drivers, all demonstrate past forms and future forms for us to consider.
- Physical bodies - A terribly scary sci-fi short story once explored what would happen if people stopped growing. Imagine a beautiful newborn who stays in nappies, crying, unable to talk, and never ever develops into the potential human being they could have become. Our physical bodies are designed to change over time and how healthy our bodies are in the future, may be a good indicator of how well we managed futures thinking when it comes to the most tangible element of our reality.
- Business and Economics - It is in our nature to create businesses and economies that we want to see grow and develop. What the future version of this looks like,

depends in large part, on how we imagine them to look and what we create in that direction.

Anything that is relevant or important to us has a beginning, middle, and end. Anything created has its start date and its future. Where we want to create something of value we need to infuse our thinking and imagination with the concept of futures thinking.

Futures literacy or futures thinking, needs to be like salt in a meal. One wouldn't make pizza dough, bake the base, add the sauce and the toppings, cook the pizza and only then sprinkle salt on top. Salt is a part of each ingredient and mixed in right at the beginning. No matter how much salt we add to a pizza at the end of the process, nothing will save it from tasting bland. Salt is needed in the initial process to bring the right flavours of the meal out. So should our futures thinking be a part of every process we design so that we can create something tasty and worthwhile.

A cultural view of time

Very broadly speaking, Western cultures seem to value time in terms of efficiency and views 'time as money'. Businesses in the United States for example, are often accused of 'quarter-itis', the focus on the goals and profit earned every quarter, the next three months, the next 90 days. Eastern cultures in contrast, see time as not linear and with a beginning and end, but more cyclical and aeons long instead of weeks long. They value an investment in longevity as opposed to short term profits.

When you imagine the future, where do you 'see' it in your imagination? In front of you perhaps? In Madagascar they view time as cyclical with the future coming from behind, flowing through their heads as the past, that which is known and visible, stretches out in front of them.

While many broadly Western cultures might see staff leave work at the end of the working day, some European cultures have no problem with people leaving after having done enough work and wanting to go home and be with their families. Shops and businesses in Spain close for a few hours in the afternoon to cater for a siesta, and then reopen and operate into the evening. The work culture in Japan means that staff invariably stay at work until their superior has finished for the day and left.

Understanding that we have a different cultural response to how we view time and how we value work, is an indication that how we view 'the future' is going to be affected by culture, as well as personal experiences and values. Having an understanding of how people in your team view time and the future, is one of the first steps to creating a valid futures plan that everyone can relate to and support.

Linear, Cyclical or Pendulum

Closely related to the theory of change, these views of time affect how we perceive our past, present and obviously, our future.

The Evolutionary Theory of change proposes that, just like biological evolutionary theory, progress is a progression along a **linear** path. Organisms and organisations start simple and small and evolve into more complex versions. Time is in a line with the past, present and future on the same continuum. We see this in school history textbooks as timelines of important events. At work we would do a project plan and produce a Gantt chart of activities, stressing milestones and dependencies of tasks in a linear progression towards the project end.

The **Cyclical** approach to time and change is demonstrated by the rise or birth, maturity, decline and fall of nations, companies and living beings. These organisations can fall or die, but birth a new version of themselves for the cycle to begin again. Our seasons are cyclical and for many industries such as farming, their work is dependent on which stage of the seasonal cycle they are in.

The **Pendulum** view of society sees the values swing from one extreme to the other, oscillating between alternate versions of the same issue. For example a society may value individualism but then swing over the years to a more integrated society where the 'we' is more important than 'I'. In Africa we call this 'ubuntu'. After a few years or decades of subjecting individual desires to the group's needs, the society may begin again to idealise the radical individual who seeks their own good above that of the crowd.

Pay attention to which type of time is apparent in your work and life and then think about how your view of time could be different from others on your team. Short or long term? A new time line or a repeat of an earlier experience? How can you anticipate and prepare for a future with someone else, when your views are different?

Deep time

Our personal experience of time is different, depending on how far back or how far forward we go.

Think of these 5 stages of time on a linear continuum.

Deep Past / Past Personal Years / Current Time / Future Personal Years / Deep Future

Current Time

Starting from the middle, this current time can range from this moment that people share together, a broader concept of this day, or our experience of what we are sharing on an international stage. This Current Time could also refer to our current shared experience of Covid for example.

Personal Past Year

Our personal past is those years that we have been alive or perhaps may be extended a generation or two to include parents and grandparents whose influence has a bearing on the narrative we have of our lives. For example, when I think about my education, my story includes elements from my parents and grandparents lives because that is what influenced choices I made and experiences I had.

Our personal past years are vital to the story we tell about ourselves and very influential on the future that we believe we can experience.

This same 'personal past' narrative can be applied to an organisation. Its founders, the experiences that the founders had before the start of the organisation, all add to the story that organisation tells about why it exists, how well it is doing today and what it can expect from the future.

Deep Past

These are the long history years, the founding of nations, the movement of early hominids, the movement of tectonic plates. The further back we go, the less personally concerned we are about what we learn. How a random individual experienced their life 500 years ago, has little impact on what any of us do today, even if that individual might have been an ancestor of ours. Their story has no impact on our story.

Future Personal Years

Moving forward now, our future personal years are very important to us. Our career plans, family plans, retirement plans are of concern. We save money, eat well and exercise for the value that it will bring us in our future. And if we are particularly concerned about the future, then we will be trying to leave a legacy for our children, perhaps our grandchildren, and if we are really ambitious, for our great-grandchildren too. After that however, we don't really worry ourselves. Our great-great-grandchildren are probably not going to remember our names, and the future that we are preparing for becomes very blurry at this stage.

Deep Future

In about 5 billion years time the Sun will run out of hydrogen and burn out and life on this planet will end. However knowing that does not prevent us from saving for retirement today.

Characteristics of the future

There are various basic characteristics of time and future that we should bear in mind as we start to develop our thinking.

Linear vs Messy

Leaving aside the cyclical or pendulum views of time, we generally think about the future as being along a path, relatively neatly defined like in a textbook. However our real experience of time is very messy. Time seems to slow down and speed up, depending on what we are doing, or who we are with.

We experienced this in 2020 when we had national lockdowns or movement control orders. Without the normal milestones on our calendars, like an annual dinner with parents, or a regular meeting with colleagues, we had no external mental cues reminding us of what day it was. Working remotely and from home, meant that our day was not divided by commutes, our weeks were not marked by recurring meetings and our months were not defined by recognisable highlights. It all began to blur.

Things occur slowly then rapidly

This characteristic is best explained by the Ernest Hemingway quote:

“How did you go bankrupt?”
“Two ways. Gradually and then suddenly.”

While time is relatively regular (I know that it is absolutely relative but that is a different conversation) we experience work on a task to be different. While we are learning, struggling and exploring, it can feel like we are taking forever to work through something. Then either with experience or an increase of skill or the flow state, we enter into an experience of time that seems to move very differently, rapidly or perhaps without definition.

Weak signals can grow stronger

The future sends us signals by things that we can observe. An invention, a story or any other innovation, can indicate a weak signal that this is how it might be in the future. It is a weak signal, having happened once, or twice. But if you start scanning and seeing it occur in different parts of the world and different industries, then perhaps that weak signal is getting stronger and may indicate a prominent theme or trend for the future.

If we are doing our job and can identify those weak signals we can prepare for them before the media get hold of the idea. Once the idea is in the headlines, it's too late, you needed to have responded beforehand.

Surprising

As much as we prepare and scan and imagine, we are often going to be surprised by something in the future. One of the terms used for extreme surprises, is a 'Black Swan'; 'an unpredictable or unforeseen event, typically one with extreme consequences'. The existence of a black swan was thought to be impossible for centuries until European explorers first encountered them in Australia. Just because one group of people had no historical record of the existence of anything other than a white swan, they assumed that it was impossible. The term was used as a metaphor for futures thinking, by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. While Black Swan events really refer to events with extreme consequences but low probability of occurring (think of the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, the speed of the adoption of the internet) they particularly focus our attention on how biased and fragile our thinking is about potential extreme events. They also refer to large scale events, not to unexpected personal problems, although those sometimes are very surprising.

(Note: Just in case you are wondering why Covid isn't mentioned as a Black Swan, that is because the occurrence of a global pandemic with a novel virus has in fact been predicted, discussed and debated by experts globally for many years. This was not an unforeseen event.)

Change that is both Inbound and Outbound

Moving into the future obviously means that we will be experiencing change. Most of the change in our lives is inbound. Something happens 'out there' and then there is an impact on you and your business to which you have to respond. However, we are discussing a professional development skill, which means that you are the kind of person who wants to be growing and learning and developing. That means that a lot of the changes that you experience are outbound. It came *from* you and will go outward to affect others. Someone else will experience the change that you initiated as inbound to them, although it was outbound from you.

Events versus Trends

Depending how honest we are with ourselves, it is easy to see how we are inclined to misread isolated events as the start of a trend, or to disregard trends as only a once off occurrence.

In business, for example, one or two good months, with one or two big clients, can obscure the fact that the business has been in decline for many months. Decisions can be based on the good news of temporary positive cash flow because the trend of decline has not been acknowledged.

A handful of cases of a new illness can be explained as anomalies, but as the numbers start climbing exponentially, we have to see the start of the pattern of a global pandemic.

Why is this important? Because if you make decisions based on a fad or an event instead of a longer lasting trend, you will be relying on something that is unlikely to exist in the future. And if you disregard a trend as a short term blip, then you may find your business or skills to be irrelevant in a new world.

Part 4

How to develop a futures literate mindset

To stay with our language learning metaphor, let's look at what we need to consider under our A, B, Cs.

Anticipate the future

With your new insight, view the world through a futures focussed lens. Really pay attention to what is happening and then use your imagination to extrapolate these developments into the future. Then craft a scenario in your mind and see how you can respond to that scenario.

Beliefs can be challenged

Be courageous enough to challenge your beliefs. If you hold a belief that is too precious, too vulnerable to even consider it logically, then you may have a belief that is going to blind you to the future. Simply shining a light on a belief does not damage it, but if you reject the light, then perhaps that belief is shielding you from something that you should be exploring deeper.

Choose better

All the thinking, philosophy, trends, scenarios and debates in the world will have no impact on our own lives or the future of our world, if we do not choose to take better actions. We really do have an impact on the future, whether it is from apathy or from conscious, intentional action.

What happens if ...

Obviously one of the questions that arises when people start to look at the future, is that there are so many variables. It is really difficult at the start, to know what to focus on, and what to pay little attention to. This is not a neat scientific method that will always yield the same result. Learning to read the future is also a bit of an art.

But what happens if we don't pay attention to the future? Surely it will just happen anyway, regardless of what we do?

Of course it will. Events unfold. Things happen. That is so vague and unhelpful. But if we are not paying attention to the events, then we are missing the best story of our lives. We are failing to read the signs and learn the language to allow us to respond to the future.

You may have heard the expression that someone is a 'Luddite' before. It refers to a person unwilling to adjust to new technologies and embrace change. The Luddites were an organisation that protested against the introduction of mechanised machinery into the textile industry in the UK in the 19th Century. It's a well worn story but serves us well to remember that people who resisted change, without exploring all the opportunities, ended up with a derogatory name that is still used centuries later.

When we resist change out of principle, when we are wilfully blind to the developments around us, when we hide ourselves away from what the future may hold for us, we firstly allow other people to set the agenda, and secondly, we sabotage our own potential opportunities to find new and meaningful work. Along with descriptions like 'Luddite', we could add 'irrelevant' and 'redundant'. When our skills and experience are irrelevant to changing needs, we become redundant in numerous ways.

What's Next

Ask questions

The initial value of learning Futures Literacy is not that you will automatically have solutions to the modern problems of the age, but that you will ask better questions. Voltaire is claimed to have said "Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers."

Here are some questions to start with to which you can add your own.

- Is this trend good / bad in itself, or is this feeling I have just my own knee-jerk reaction?
- Do I really not like this particular change, or am I feeling that my sense of security is threatened in some way?
- Am I willing to examine my values and beliefs and defend them, or do I prefer to avoid such uncomfortable contemplations?
- What information would be necessary for me to change my mind about a strongly held belief I have?
- Am I able to articulate a scenario well or am I vague in what I believe to be a 'good' outcome for the future?
- Does this scenario that I have created of the future benefit everyone or only those few in my circle of concern?

The purpose of the questions is to help your mind learn to pay attention to new information and to create new frameworks for thinking about the future. Remember this is just the

beginning of your expedition as a futurist and your mind needs to be shaken loose of some old, restrictive thinking that may not work for you in the future you are trying to create.

Begin to scan

Scanning is one of the best tools for futures thinking and a good one to start using as soon as you can.

You want to scan far and wide around the issues that are important to you. The more you scan, again, the more your mind is primed to look for suitable information. We know from psychology that we very often fall victim to 'confirmation bias'. It is the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories. The more you intentionally scan beyond your own beliefs or theories, the more information you will find that may bring new insights to you.

Here are some ideas:

- Do comparative reading by looking for books or YouTube videos with opinions opposite to your own. Explore the opposite of your religion, your politics and other world views that you have. This is not designed to force you to change those ideas, but to help you see other people's perspectives and to deeply appreciate that the world is more complex than you may have thought before. This helps you later as you explore scenarios and need to see how certain developments may hurt some while benefiting others.
- Sign up for newsletters that will give you a broader picture of the world. Find your industry in other parts of the world. If you are in a corporate, then sign up for an entrepreneur's newsletter. If you are in a high value industry then sign up for articles coming from non-profits. You don't need to read all of these newsletters in depth, but you do need the ideas to come to you, as you scan lightly over the headlines and subject lines.

Create new opportunities

Why would we study futures literacy and develop futures thinking, if not to change the world? We need to reclaim our agency over the future and stop feeling as if we are victims of other peoples' plans and ambitions.

We have probably developed business plans and professional development plans in the past. Why not reframe that along these lines:

- Create a scenario for yourself. "This is the future I want for myself in 12 months time."

- Gather some intelligence. “This is what I need, to be able to have that future.”
- Manage change. “I know that change is difficult so this is how I will encourage myself.”
- Describe the future. “This is what I will feel like, this is what it will look like, when I achieve this element of my future.”
- Test your strategy. “This plan is viable. The goal is good for all stakeholders. I have a roadmap planned to achieve this in time.”

Congratulations. You are a futurist and have just completed your first future plan.

From Literacy to Fluency

If we return to the analogy of Futures Literacy being a language, then once we have learned our ABC's, there is still a great deal of work to do.

Duolingo tells me that I have learned 1,680 words in Spanish. I have spent 1,942 minutes learning and practising those words. I could ask for a table at a restaurant, order coffee or ask for directions to a hospital, library or airport. But I am still too shy to try and speak Spanish to a Spanish speaking person. I am literate, just, but I am certainly not fluent.

Far from being discouraged about the almost 2,000 minutes spent on a language that I cannot yet speak in public, I am delighted when I can read a (children's story) book and follow the plot. I love listening to Spanish movies and understanding some of the conversation and catching the rest in the subtitles. And I am even more curious and intentional about diving deeper into this language so that I can grasp humour, puns, or plays on words and so that I can read new insights about topics of interest from a culture that is so different from my own.

That is where we need to be when we are learning about Futures Literacy. We need to move beyond the introductory A,B,Cs and start learning the nouns, verbs and adjectives that make up this language. And then we develop Futures Fluency, so that we can appreciate the nuances of the trends and developments we see, we can identify those opportunities or potential hazards, and so that we can immerse ourselves in new spaces in the future that will allow us to do our best work or share our genius in a more meaningful way for those in our circles of concern.

How I can help

On my website you will find many more resources:

- Access to the Futures Alchemy Collaborative groups on Facebook and LinkedIn.
- A list of my books on various futures topics, as well as links to videos and blog posts.

- A Futures Literacy online training course that will unpack this content and more, in a self-paced program so that you can increase your futures language.
- A Futures Fluency hybrid program that combines both online, self-directed learning, as well as peer group sessions to explore deeper.
- A list of futures keynotes and workshops that are helpful for companies and conferences.
- A list of open, free-to-attend sessions where I present new material and we explore the content together.

Please feel free to share any stories or insights with me, or approach me for ways to help you and your teams. And enjoy this next stage on your expedition to the future.

You can find more about this topic and other work from Charlotte Kemp on these two sites.

<https://www.charlottekemp.co.za/futures-literacy/>

<https://www.futuresalchemist.com/>

The Author

Charlotte Kemp is the Futures Alchemist. She works as an international futures keynote speaker and workshop leader. She is at present, the Immediate Past President of the Professional Speakers Association of Southern Africa (PSASA), the Vice President of the Global Speakers Federation (GSF), and is a professional member of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF).