

## 15 Questions to Stretch Your Mind

A futures-studies professor offers a series of questions that can help you explore your assumptions about the future. The questions have no definitive answers, but thinking about them a moment before reading the author's comments can be a mind-stretching exercise.

**By Peter Bishop**

**W**e all have assumptions about the future. Assumptions are never completely right or wrong, although some may be more useful than others under certain circumstances. The assumptions that futurists use help them anticipate the complex and sometimes surprising futures that await us.

This test consists of several questions that challenge your ability to think like a futurist. The questions are designed with no clear right answers. Instead, they probe your assumptions about the future. The discussion following the questions indicates how futurists usually answer them.

### **1. Can we know the future?** a. Yes. b. No.

*Answer: a.* About 50% of people usually answer Yes; about 50% say No. Your answer, of course, depends on how you define "know." If by "know" you mean that you can predict what will happen, then the answer is obviously No. Efforts to

# Thinking Like a Futurist

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predict the exact future of human systems are so prone to error that they are futile. However, if by "know" you mean what might or could happen, then the answer is a qualified Yes. Futurists hold that we can know the majority of plausible futures, if we relax our assumptions and preconceptions of what is possible.

## 2. Are there one or many futures?

- a. One. b. Many.

*Answer: b.* Despite half of the respondents answering No to #1, most people say there are many futures. The future is plural, not singular—hence the term "futures." The multiplicity of the future is a blessing: It gives us the freedom to influence what the future will be. If there were only one future, it would be completely determined and our influence would be either negligible or preordained.

## 3. What is the farthest ahead that we can usefully forecast?

- a. 1–2 years. b. 3–5 years.  
c. 5–10 years. d. 10–25 years.  
e. More than 25 years.

*Answer: All answers are correct.* The answer depends on the subject of the forecast. Actuaries and futurists prefer the long term (more than 10 years); politicians and investors must be prepared for radical change in the short term (next week). Contrary to what most business people think, the future beyond five years (the standard business-planning horizon) can be useful, particularly when long-term investments or decisions are involved. Both individuals and companies have more influence in the long term than in the short because short-term outcomes are already determined, for the most part. Consistent effort toward a goal over long periods can produce amazing results, even when one's power or influence at any one time is small. Rock holds water in the short run, but water erodes rock in the long.

## 4. Which is better for understanding the long-term future?

- a. Single, clear predictions.  
b. Multiple possible futures.  
c. Neither. d. Both.

*Answer: b.* Would that we could have single, clear predictions that are useful! The problem is that predictions give a false sense of certainty and precision. Multiple possible futures are the best we can do and are therefore better for understanding the future. Unfortunately, some people prefer single, clear predictions. Futurists believe that basing a decision on a single prediction is like putting all your eggs in one basket. The purpose of forecasting is not to be right, but to avoid being surprised. If decision makers are prepared for the range of plausible futures, then they can be successful no matter what occurs, as long as it occurs in that range.

## 5. Which is the most important characteristic for a good forecast?

- a. Accuracy. b. Precision.  
c. Utility. d. Clarity.

*Answer: c.* Accuracy and precision are supposed to make the best forecasts, particularly quantitative ones. People even ask futurists how often they are correct—i.e., what their batting average is. The question indicates a misunderstanding of applied futurism. The best long-term forecasts are not necessarily accurate or precise, but useful to decision makers. They point out the most likely future as one possibility in a range of alternative plausible futures. Useful forecasts can even be inaccurate, as when the forecast of impending doom promotes action that averts the doom.

## 6. Is the future already determined?

- a. Yes. b. No.

*Answer: b.* People who answer Yes are likely those who only learned

about forecasting from well-behaved mechanical systems rather than from complex human systems. We learned to predict where a pendulum would be, how much ice would melt, when a lunar eclipse would occur. These kinds of phenomena are "determined" (and therefore predictable). Similar predictions are impossible, however, in the economic, social, or political systems in which individuals acting with incomplete knowledge and free will have yet to exert their influence. Fortunately, the indeterminacy of the future also gives us the time and opportunity to exert our own influence.

## 7. Which influences the long-term future the most?

- a. Trends. b. Events.  
c. Choices. d. All influence the future equally.

*Answer: d.* Each of the three specific factors—trends, events, and choices—represents a theory of how the future develops. Those who emphasize Trends believe that the future will be like the present, differing only in certain measurable quantities. Those who select Events see a turbulent future, full of uncertainty and unpredictability. Those who emphasize Choice believe they and others control the future. In fact, each influences the future somewhat, but differently in various domains—trends in demographics, events and choices in politics, for instance. The future is a combination of them all; leaving out any one truncates the range of plausible futures.

## 8. Which type of future is most useful?

- a. The most-probable future.  
b. Plausible futures other than the most probable.  
c. The future we prefer.  
d. All are equally useful.

*Answer: d.* All is a good answer, for probable, plausible, and preferable futures are all useful in specific ways. The Probable Future is what



most people believe a forecast should be; it is what will happen if nothing really surprising happens. Plausible Futures are useful for indicating the variations around the Probable Future. Possibilities that represent critical assumptions about the future prepare decision makers for a wider range of contingencies than the Probable Future alone. The Preferable Future is valuable both for forecasting (things preferred are more likely to occur because people work toward making them happen) and for action (mobilizing action toward a consensus goal).

**9. Which influences the long-term future the most?**

- a. Demographics. b. Physical environment. c. Technology. d. Economics. e. Government. f. Culture. g. All influence the future equally.

*Answer: g.* All influence the future equally. Some people think certain influences are more powerful than others: Americans generally see technology as more powerful than do people from other cultures; rulers

and politicians believe that government is in charge; environmentalists believe that the physical environment will have the last word; economists say the economy, and so on. Futurists are careful to weigh all the influences appropriately and realize that in the long run all of these forces will have their impacts. Rather than specializing in any one field, futurists specialize in the interaction of all fields.

**10. Which is the most serious cause of forecasting errors?**

- a. Lack of information. b. The forecaster's assumptions. c. External events.

*Answer: b.* Most people respond that Assumptions are the most serious error, but significant numbers choose Lack of Information and External Events as well. It is easier to blame Information and Events because we are not responsible for them. Our Assumptions, on the other hand, are our own making. A reading of history shows that the most serious errors are the result of mistaken assumptions: A patent official forecast a decline in invention

around the turn of the century; a physicist said heavier-than-air flight was impossible; an office equipment executive saw no need for more than six computers worldwide. Forecasters had all the information in front of them. Their interpretation of what the information meant caused the error.

**11. Which attitude toward the future is most often correct?**

- a. Optimism. b. Pessimism. c. Transformationalism. d. Fatalism. e. All are equally correct.

*Answer: e.* All are equally correct because the future is plural—there are optimistic, pessimistic, transformational, and fatalistic futures out there. Which one is most often correct depends on the domain and the time frame. For example, major change is easier to effect over a long period of time than a short one, so a transformational attitude is more appropriate for the long term, and a fatalistic attitude for the short. People tend to be more optimistic about their immediate individual future and more pessimistic about more distant societal or global issues. The point is that all views need to be considered to get a full, well-rounded view of the real future.

**12. Telling stories about possible but unlikely futures is useful.**

- a. True. b. False.

*Answer: a.* Science-fiction stories ranging from *The Time Machine* to *The Terminator* have told highly implausible but highly engaging visions of the future.

Stories capture the essence of the future without claiming to know the details. Futurists borrow the techniques of storytellers in developing scenarios to enliven a plausible future. The best response to a scenario is, "Yes, you're right; that could happen."

### 13. Who sets the vision for the organization?

- a. The leader. b. The top management. c. The strategic-planning team.
- d. Managers in general.
- e. Everyone. f. None of the above.

*Answer: f.* Most people answer The Leader. A sizable group of people also say Everyone. Both are correct. Vision is a tool of the futurist or leader who wants to create transformational change. A vision is an attractive future that motivates people to work beyond themselves (and beyond what they're getting paid for) and synchronizes their effort with those of others working for the same vision. It appears as though the leader sets the vision, but a more accurate view holds that the leader articulates the vision in everyone's heart. The leader is the spokesperson for the vision, but he or she can only know what to speak after listening to the visions of everyone involved.

### 14. Which are the three most important characteristics of an effective strategic plan?

- a. Commitment to carry it out. b. Coverage of everything the organization does. c. General direction for fundamental change.
- d. Detailed implementation plans. e. Understanding by everyone. f. Valid planning methodology.

*Answer: a, c, and e.* Strategic planning is the most often used and the most poorly practiced technique in the futurist's toolkit. We have all had the experience—endless forms, pointless meetings, large three-ring binders stuffed with details. The "plan" is supposed to contain everything the organization is going to do for the next five years. What it really



contains is what everyone is currently doing, put there to protect their position. The best strategic plans are short. They set the Direction, not every detail of carrying it out. Details more than a year out are impossible anyway. Everyone must Understand the plan. Who can understand 350 pages of dense outlines? And everyone must be Committed to it. Aha, there's the rub! The plan is approved, but serious disagreements remain. What happens to the implementation? Strategic planning is often so painful that the last thing people want to do is ever see the plan again, much less implement it. Direction, Understanding, Commitment—those are the essentials. Leave the details to the annual plan.

### 15. Which is the most frequently overlooked characteristic of successful change?

- a. Communication. b. Trust.
- c. Vision. d. Commitment.

*Answer: b.* Every one of us has one or two golden projects in our background—a group of people who worked together for a worthy goal and maybe even made a difference.

A staff group, reflecting on the projects in their past, developed these four attributes of successful projects: Communication, Trust, Vision, Commitment. They are clearly all important, even necessary. The leadership of that same organization went through the same exercise and came up with exactly three of the characteristics. Which characteristic of a successful project did not occur to them? Trust. All are necessary, but trust is the most often overlooked.

Trust among project members reinforces the belief that everyone is working for the good of the project, not using the project to advance themselves or their interests. Even more importantly, trust between managers and workers prevents the cynicism that often accompanies the announcement of significant change. People have been burned too many times before. Leaders announce change, people get on board—only to see the leaders "change their minds." The goal is harder to achieve, more expensive, more time-consuming than once thought. Trust is everyone's belief that their colleagues and leaders will do what it takes to achieve the goal.



These questions have no "right" answers, to be sure; but a host of common-sense insights can help us understand, anticipate, and influence the future more effectively. Understanding our assumptions about the future can increase our ability to conceive alternative plausible futures, understand the implications of those futures for ourselves and others, and begin to work with others to increase the chances of the preferred future occurring. □



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