

# The future of the future

The 5 revolutions that are shaping the world

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

From Toronto to Tokyo, from Copenhagen to Chicago, from San Paulo to San Francisco — in virtually every major city in every industrialized country in the world — leaders of business, government, and not-for-profits are preoccupied with the same fundamental question: What do we need to do to compete successfully in the economy of the future?

Depending on the history of any given city or country, the question may vary slightly. For instance, in San Paulo, with its explosive population trending toward 20 million, and its national wealth severely divided between the very few "haves" and the very many "have nots," the question drives more deeply into what it would take for Brazil to grow and sustain a serious middle class.

For Germany, France, and the U.K., struggling to discover a new direction in the face of the recent rejection of the EU constitution, and dealing with perplexingly sluggish economic performance, the question is, with so many troubling reverses, which way is forward?

And for Canada and the United States, with their diverse populations and more open economic systems, the question may be more bald than for any of the other national economies: If the United States is too rapacious, and Canada too soft, does either country have a sustainable form of capitalism?

Ostensibly, it's not hard to locate the source of so much economic soul-searching. Most observers could cull their list of explanations till it consisted of two simple words: China, India.

For almost a decade, the rise of these two nations has provided the shared back story to every developed nation's unfolding narrative. At first, business leaders, consultants, economists, and pundits noted the outsourcing of low-end, low-cost, low-complexity manufacturing jobs to human-capital-rich China and India. Then came headlines about technology transfer, higher paying jobs, more complex manufacturing operations, and, finally, whole manufacturing operations.

In the next stage, observers noted the significant investment being made in education in China and India — China's drive to match the West in minting Ph.D.s, for example, or India's top-notch technology-based universities. It wasn't long before trend-watchers noticed the migration of service jobs to China and India, and not just call centres. Important companies were looking to the two countries to write software, to design websites, and to engineer sophisticated technology offerings in health care, in the auto industry, in home products. By 2005, it was clear where China and India expected their high-paying jobs to come from. For everybody else, the question was: What about us?

After spending a year travelling on four continents and conducting deep conversations with business, government, and not-for-profit leaders, I have this to offer: Whether we know it or not, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, we are all employed as mid-wives, assisting at the birth of the future — a future with new rules and practices, new realities and new opportunities.

While the observers who key into the rise of China and India are right to focus on the powerful revolution that is reinventing the dynamics of business, work, and wealth creation, there are four additional revolutions that all of us must attend to if we want to shape our future and not watch it shape us:

The convergence of politics, religion, and culture as a powerful force for national and international identity and change. In the last two years, I've listened as Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi talked about her efforts in Iran to argue for coexistence between Islam and human rights and, in particular, the rights of women; I've heard Buddhist nun Tenzin Palmo

describe the traumas suffered by Tibetans chased from their homes and their country by Chinese aggressors; and, along with so many others, I've watched the ill-founded war in Iraq morph into a global debate over a confrontation between political Christianity and political Islam.

The transformational power of technology and, in particular, bio-technology and the new sciences. At a remarkable gathering last month hosted by the Waldzell Institute in Vienna, Craig Venter, the man who cracked the human genome, described his next project: to learn how to create life from scratch.

The revolution in art and self-expression. Thomas Hampson, one of the world's most celebrated classical singers, has described the shift in music around the time of Beethoven as a change from making music for the glory of God to making music for the expression of the self. Today, that artistic revolution is exploding and becoming a global celebration: bloggers writing their own news, musicians and filmmakers using laptops to make and release their own songs and movies, writers self-publishing their works and finding a market via the Internet.

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**Why all the economic soul-searching?  
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The global search for personal meaning. What was once presumed to be a privilege reserved for the wealthy is now a global consideration. People around the world not only want to put food on the table, find good work, and have safety in their homes, they also want to have meaning in their lives.

These five revolutions — work, political culture, science and technology, art, and meaning — are the threads with which we will weave our future. To understand the context for this far-reaching process of creation, we need only look back 100 years, to the birth of the Modern. Like today, what looked like the turbulence of a troubled and troubling period was, in fact, labour pains for what became modernity. In science, Einstein was reinventing physics; in painting, Matisse and Picasso were re-imagining how we see reality; in business, big business, large-scale capitalism and mass manufacturing were struggling to define new rules of the game; in literature, James Joyce was introducing us to the voice inside our own heads; in psychology, Freud was offering new tools to understand what that voice might actually mean. Today, the five revolutions are every bit as powerful as the ones of 100 years ago. And while it is too soon to see the future that is being born, it is possible to glean some of the operating rules we can apply as we participate in the creation of our future.

First, innovation and creativity are the coin of the realm; talent, diversity, design, and leadership are the metals that make up that coin. Around the world, leaders in all walks of life are arriving simultaneously at the same conclusion: If you want to lead in the future, you have to unleash your organization's capacity to innovate and create.

This is true whether the organization is a business or a non-profit, a company or a country. As Matisse once said, "The artist is so made that he can't go back without giving himself up for dead. He must go forward in whatever direction his efforts may carry him — for every generation the ground behind you is quicksand."

So, if we want to avoid the traps of low-wage jobs, second-tier technology, and second-rate education, we will have to invest in a future based on out-thinking, out-creating, and out-innovating the competition.

Second, if we want to see the future, we have to ask the right questions about it. Austria's leading quantum physicist, Anton Zeilinger, points out that, in quantum physics, the question you ask determines the outcome of your experiment.

For instance, if we ask, "How can we have high-paying jobs for the future?" we are liable to get a different answer, and build a different future, than if we ask, "How can we create a more sustainable economy that includes more people for the future?" The Swede Leif Edvinsson, the world's first professor of Intellectual Capital, is pioneering a new field: "quizzics" — the art of asking the right question, the right way, because in every field, the question we ask will determine the answer we get.

Third, the future will be created in the interplay of these five revolutions, and at the boundaries of discrete disciplines.

Most of us are trained in one profession, one discipline, one career; and most of us are rewarded for our expertise in that one area. Yet, increasingly, the future will require cross-disciplinary thinking, the ability to work across categories and at the boundaries of expertise. The future will be born where art meets business — futurist Stan Davis has said that, when it comes to business leaders, the MFA is the new MBA — and where science meets religion; for example, in the global dialogues prompted by the Dali Lama in his meetings with the world's leaders in science and technology.

Finally, the future will emerge as we master the art of resolving what appear to be dialectical oppositions. Increasingly, what the five revolutions make clear is that we don't live in an "either-or" world. We live in, and must seek to create, a "both-and" world, where we thrive both on individual and collective creativity and action; where inspiration comes from both within and without our own lives and cultures; where we can both conserve our traditions and move into the future thanks to the creation of new art, new science, new technology.

There is risk inherent in the risk of creating the future.

Of course, the even greater risk is not to try.