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FUTURE NEWS

TO CONNECT, TO INFORM AND TO INSPIRE

IN THIS EDITION

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THE BIG DISCONNECT: WHY FORESIGHT MATTERS (BUT RARELY WORKS THE WAY LEADERS EXPECT)

by Jan Oliver Schwarz

Most organizations will tell you they want to "think long-term," "prepare for the future," or "anticipate disruption." Many invest real money into trend reports, horizon scans, and scenario projects. Some even build internal foresight teams or commission external work regularly.

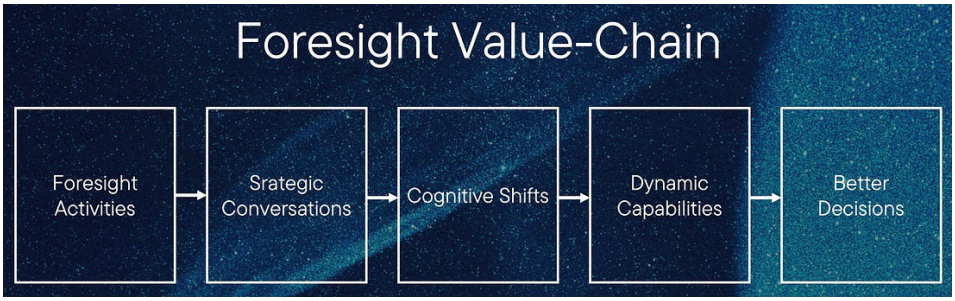
Two empirical studies —spanning 400 senior executives and 147 upper-tier managers in global firms help answer a crucial question: ***how to make foresight more relevant in organizations***. Taken together, they reveal a pattern that overturns many assumptions about how foresight creates value.

The headline is simple but profound:

Foresight does not work because it predicts the future. It works because it changes how people talk, think, and ultimately act.

WHAT FORESIGHT ACTUALLY DOES INSIDE ORGANIZATIONS

Across the three studies, a consistent pathway emerges. Even though each focused on different outcomes—decision-making, innovation climate, and dynamic capabilities—the underlying mechanism is the same.



1. FORESIGHT ACTIVATES STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS

The 2025 study demonstrates this clearly: when companies engage in internal foresight activities, leaders start talking more about the long term. Conversations become broader and more exploratory. People raise questions they normally wouldn't bring to the table.

This is the first value-creating step. But it's not enough.

2. CONVERSATIONS CREATE COGNITIVE SHIFTS

The 2019 study shows that foresight only becomes meaningful when it reshapes how leaders *think*. Foresight training and experience strengthen peripheral vision, improve decision-making under uncertainty, and help managers question assumptions. These changes happen slowly and subtly, but they matter far more than any individual report.

3. COGNITIVE SHIFTS STRENGTHEN CAPABILITIES

Once leaders think differently, organizations act differently. They become more adaptable, more willing to reallocate resources, more sensitive to early signals, and more capable of renewing strategy. Dynamic capabilities—the ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure—depend heavily on these individual cognitive foundations.

4. STRONGER CAPABILITIES CREATE AN INNOVATION-SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE

The 2024 study adds another layer: foresight, especially through scenario-driven prospecting, improves the innovation climate. People become more open to new ideas. Risk-taking becomes more acceptable. Teams challenge old assumptions more regularly and feel safer doing so. Innovation performance depends on this climate.

5. BETTER CLIMATE BETTER DECISIONS

And finally, decisions improve—not because foresight provided "the right answer," but because the organization has become better at seeing, questioning, interpreting, and acting.

This is the actual foresight value chain.

It's not linear in practice. It loops, feeds back, and evolves continuously. But it reframes foresight from a prediction function into a **capability platform**.

Organizations that expect foresight to predict the future become disappointed.
Those that treat foresight as a capability-building system are the ones that benefit.

WHY THIS VALUE CHAIN IS SO OFTEN INVISIBLE

Executives typically evaluate foresight in terms of immediate impact: *Did this scenario change our strategy? Did this trend report shift our priorities? Did this workshop lead to a concrete action?*

This framing sets foresight up to fail. The empirical studies tell us that foresight's value is **indirect**. It's cumulative. It acts through people, not through documents. It shows up in how leaders think six months later—not how they reacted in the room.

Most corporate functions can point to KPIs. Foresight cannot—and should not. The metrics are different:

- better questions,
- better conversations,
- better sensemaking,
- better adaptability.

These outcomes are real, but they're not easily captured on dashboards.

A MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

Executives often expect foresight to deliver answers. Predictive clarity. A strategic recommendation tied to ROI. A definitive signal of where the world is heading.

But foresight's real contribution is not deterministic. It is developmental.

It builds the *muscle* for dealing with uncertainty, not the blueprint for eliminating it. It enlarges the organization's imagination before it improves its execution. It widens the field of view before it sharpens the choice. Foresight is less like a GPS and more like a compass.

And once this is understood, everything becomes easier:

- commissioning makes more sense,
- facilitation becomes more targeted,
- expectations become realistic,
- and patience increases.

WHY THIS MATTERS IN TODAY'S STRATEGY ENVIRONMENT

Three things are happening that make this shift in understanding essential.

1. STRATEGY CYCLES ARE COLLAPSING

More and more decisions are being made on short time horizons. This makes organizations reactive, not generative. Without foresight, they default to optimizing the present.

2. COMPLEXITY IS INCREASING FASTER THAN ANALYTICAL CAPABILITY

Executives are dealing with intertwined supply chains, AI-driven shifts, climate risk, geopolitical fragmentation, and social transitions—all at once. No amount of forecasting will tame this complexity. Cognitive adaptability becomes the differentiator.

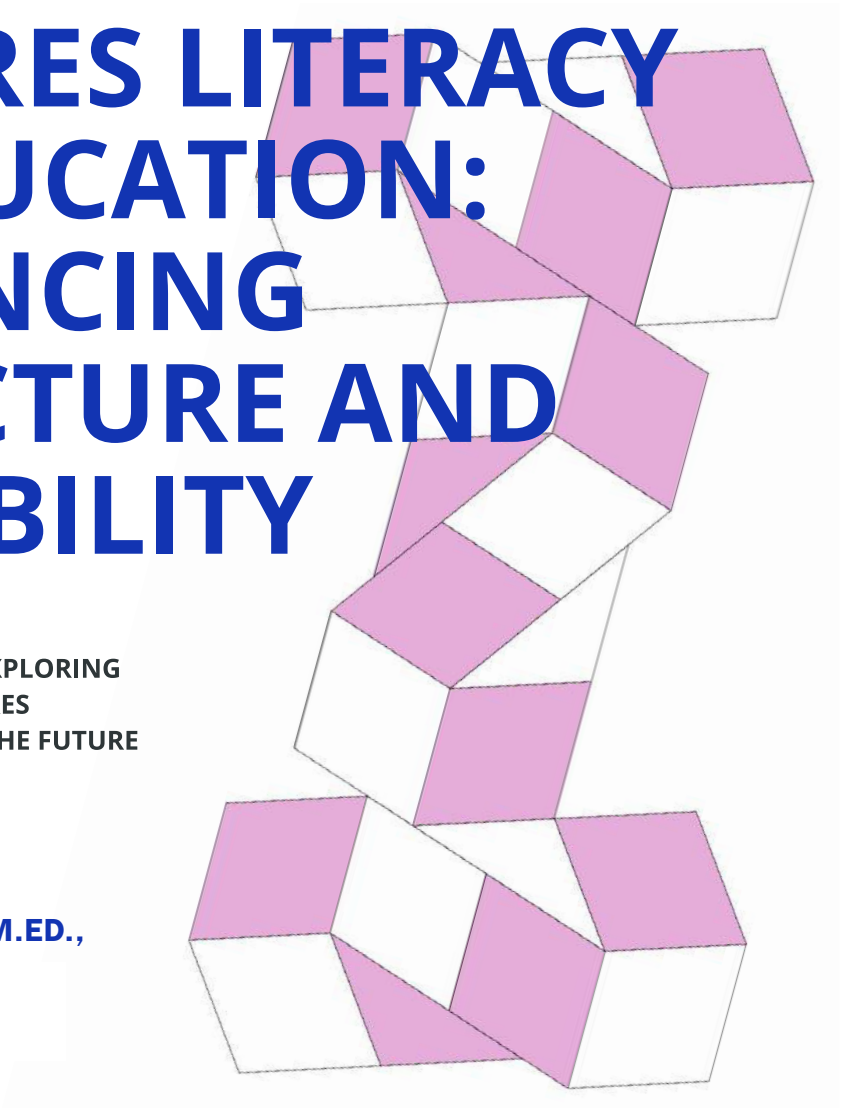
3. INNOVATION IS BECOMING CULTURAL, NOT PROCEDURAL

You cannot mandate innovation with a process. You need a climate where people feel safe imagining alternatives. Foresight plays a key role in cultivating that climate.

Taken together, these shifts mean foresight is no longer a "nice-to-have." It's a foundational leadership discipline.

FUTURISTS IN ACTION

FUTURES LITERACY IN EDUCATION: BALANCING STRUCTURE AND POSSIBILITY



A CONTINUING SERIES EXPLORING
TEACHING YOUTH FUTURES
THINKING WITH TEACH THE FUTURE

TEACH THE FUTURE

by Randi A. Millard, M.ED.,

The answer lies not in abandoning structure, but in reimagining it for competency development rather than content delivery. We must first recognize that this paradox exposes a larger systemic issue: *education is still built for content mastery at a time when the world demands competencies.*

THE SYSTEMIC MISMATCH BETWEEN CONTENT AND COMPETENCIES

Educational systems remain organized around content mastery even as global frameworks increasingly emphasize competency development. The skills and competencies required for life beyond school are becoming clearer across research and policy: McKinsey emphasizes critical thinking and adaptive leadership (McKinsey & Company, 2021). The OECD prioritizes collaboration and agency (OECD, 2019). The World Economic Forum identifies analytical thinking, resilience, and creativity as rising fastest in demand (World Economic Forum, 2025).

After years of training to recall information for standardized assessments, students are arriving in workplaces that demand something entirely different: the ability to think systemically and thrive amid uncertainty.

When educators encounter futures literacy, their questions reflect an understanding that innovation only matters if it is accessible and sustainable:

- **"What evidence makes the case that futures literacy is essential for today's learners and tomorrow's world?"**
- **"How can this work be embedded into curriculum structures without becoming an add-on available only to a few?"**
- **"What forms of professional learning enable teachers to confidently facilitate complex futures practices across diverse classrooms?"**
- **"How do we align this with standards and outcomes in ways that protect both creativity and universal access?"**

These questions are not obstacles to futures literacy – they are the profession's way of ensuring that innovation moves from theory to practice and reaches every student. Just as futurists use scenarios to expand possibilities and challenge dominant assumptions, educators challenge a new curriculum to ensure new approaches create access, preserve rigor, and serve all students.

This structural mismatch becomes visible in futures literacy because it is inherently competency-based rather than content-based. Students cannot memorize facts about futures and apply them mechanically. Rather, students must demonstrate their ability to question inherited assumptions, hold multiple possibilities simultaneously, and communicate visions compelling enough that others want to contribute. These capabilities resist traditional standardization and are precisely why they prepare students for a world that demands anticipatory thinking, critical thinking, temporal thinking, and systems thinking – all guided by metacognitive awareness – rather than content recall.

Through our work with students ages 12–18 in the Young Voices Network and Council and the Summer Institute spanning more than 25 countries, we have seen that competency-based approaches provide the bridge teachers are looking for: a way to preserve necessary structure while opening space for the kind of creativity, equity, and rigor that futures literacy requires.

EVIDENCE OF COMPETENCY-BASED FUTURES LITERACY IN CLASSROOMS

Classroom practice shows what this balance looks like when put into action. One student questioned assumptions about food insecurity being inevitable, mapped connections between climate, policy, and community systems, then developed a sustainable food distribution model that creates jobs while addressing hunger.

Another examined workplace inequality, traced how social stereotypes create systemic pay gaps, and designed an educational campaign for youth to shift hiring practices. Yet another student analyzed school bullying as a community-wide system rather than an individual problem, identifying intervention points where peer support could transform school culture.

Each of these examples demonstrates that competencies can move from theory to practice without losing authenticity. Clear progressions, teacher training protocols, and assessment frameworks can support this work, but they do so by scaffolding the process rather than prescribing the outcome. The design principle is straightforward: structure the *how*, leave open the *what*.

Educational systems can adopt shared scaffolds for assumption-questioning, systems mapping, scenario development, and strategic planning. Teachers can rely on flexible facilitation protocols. Schools can align the work with accountability frameworks. Yet what remains open – which assumptions students challenge, *which systems they map, which futures they imagine, which strategies they design and act on* – keeps the learning authentic while reassuring administrators that rigor and access are preserved.

IMPLEMENTING FUTURES LITERACY THROUGH TEACHER TRAINING AND ASSESSMENT

Teacher training is the critical leverage point. Educators do not need to master professional foresight tools, but they do need confidence in facilitating core competencies. This confidence develops through learning how to scaffold complex thinking without prescribing outcomes. Teachers practice posing questions that surface assumptions rather than steering students toward predetermined answers. They facilitate systems conversations that reveal interconnections rather than delivering lectures about complexity. They learn to hold space for uncertainty while still guiding students toward clear learning objectives.

Assessment becomes manageable through student artifacts that demonstrate thinking: strategic plans and actions, deep research into current states, scenario sketches, and vision statements. These products provide evidence of learning while preserving the open-ended nature of the work. Unlike traditional assessments that measure recall, these artifacts

reveal how students navigate problems, how they engage with complexity, and how effectively they communicate reasoning to others.

This approach is already being implemented through Teach the Future School Partners, where teachers are engaging in futures literacy competencies and skills. Educators are immersed in the same kinds of thinking they will later facilitate with students – systems thinking, recognizing patterns of change, experimenting with new approaches to classroom practice, and envisioning how education can better prepare students for uncertain futures.

Students who develop these competencies demonstrate capabilities that transfer directly beyond school: they analyze complex problems without oversimplifying, hold multiple perspectives simultaneously, communicate across differences, and act strategically in uncertain conditions.

For futurists, this represents both an expanded pipeline of people capable of productively engaging with futures thinking and a tangible contribution to educational transformation. As Peter Bishop, Founder of Teach the Future, reminds us,

> **It is the duty of futurists – and of the field itself – to teach and educate young people in the competencies and skills of futures literacy. "**

THE GLOBAL MOMENT FOR FUTURES LITERACY

The opportunity to bring futures literacy to schools is not just about a single curriculum innovation – it highlights why there has never been a more urgent or opportune moment for this work. The structural barriers that once made futures literacy difficult to adopt are dissolving precisely as the need becomes most acute.

The stakes are equally significant. Global education systems are shifting toward competency-based models, though the market remains modest – valued at roughly **USD 5.5 billion in 2024** and projected to reach **USD 12.7 billion by 2033** (Verified Market Reports, 2024; DataHorizon Research, 2024). At the same time, UNESCO warns that an additional **44 million primary and secondary teachers** are needed worldwide by 2030, requiring around **1.5 million new teachers annually** (UNESCO, 2024). This shortage is not just a matter of staffing; it underscores a deeper systemic challenge. Teachers are the mediators of educational change.

Teach the Future Institute – Student Products. Snapshots of meaning—students turning imagination into impact. Used with permission.

Without equipping this incoming generation of educators with the tools of anticipatory thinking and futures literacy, even the most promising reforms risk stalling at the point of delivery.

Meanwhile, the global skills landscape is transforming at an unprecedented pace. Employers expect **39% of core skills to change by 2030, with technological skills growing in importance faster than any other category** (World Economic Forum, 2025). Research from the OECD and McKinsey reinforces this trend, highlighting that adaptability, agency, and social-emotional learning are rising as essential complements to technical competence (OECD, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2021). Together, these shifts point to an urgent imperative: education systems must simultaneously prepare learners for accelerating technological disruption and cultivate the adaptive capacities needed to navigate uncertainty.

This convergence creates an unprecedented opening for futures literacy. Educational systems are actively seeking competency-based approaches that prepare students not just for today's demands, but also for futures we cannot yet fully imagine. The frameworks we have developed – structured enough for institutional adoption, open enough for authentic engagement – demonstrate that futures literacy can meet system-level requirements while preserving its transformative qualities.

The question is no longer whether educational systems will embrace competency-based learning – that transition is already underway. The opportunity lies in ensuring that futures literacy becomes central to this transformation rather than peripheral. In a world defined by accelerating change, the balance that futures literacy offers between structure and possibility may be exactly what education needs most.

For the futures field, this moment represents both validation and responsibility. The competencies that futurists have long cultivated – anticipatory thinking, systems analysis, scenario development, and

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strategic visioning, to name a few – are at the forefront as critical skills for every young person's education. Yet widespread adoption depends on showing that these capabilities can be cultivated systematically without diluting their transformative power.

This is not about futurists becoming teachers or teachers becoming futurists. It is about ensuring that the cognitive flexibility required to navigate uncertain futures is not left to chance encounters or elite institutions. When a 16-year-old can transform her understanding of an intractable problem into an actionable vision for change, she demonstrates the same intellectual courage that drives professional futures work.

The frameworks emerging from systematic implementation of futures literacy prove that this balance between structure and possibility is not only possible – it is achievable at scale.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With a background in education and change management, **Randi A. Millard, M.Ed., MOD** brings more than two decades of leadership experience across schools and global initiatives. She has served as a classroom teacher, held leadership positions in primary and secondary schools, and advances educational through curriculum innovation. As Co-Executive Director of Teach the Future, Randi has, under the guidance of Dr. Peter Bishop, focused her recent work on embedding futures literacy into education through initiatives including the Young Voices Council, flagship curricula, and educator training programs. Based in Switzerland and the United States, Randi works internationally to strengthen partnerships and expand the reach of futures literacy in schools and communities worldwide.

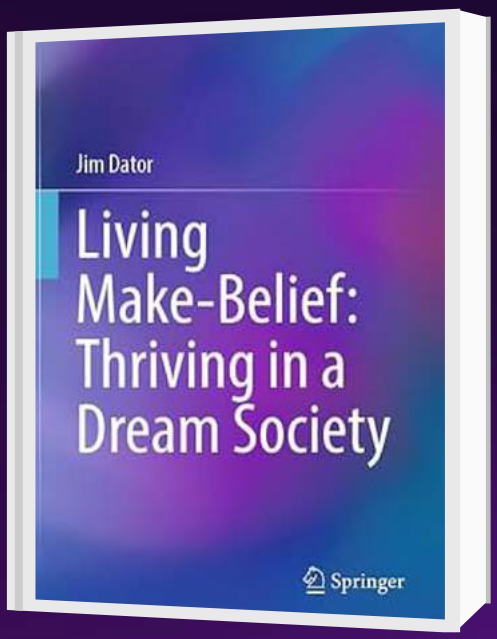
Book Review

PREPARING FOR WEIRD FUTURES BY CONTEMPLATING THE PAST

Legendary futurist Jim Dator challenges today's futurists with his new book, Living Make-Belief: Thriving in a Dream Society

BY LAVONNE LEONG

"*[T]hroughout this book, I spend some time characterizing the past, in part to help us seriously contemplate a very weird future by understanding how weird and unexpected the pasts were to those who experienced them.*" – Jim Dator



Now well into his nineties and writing from Honolulu, legendary futurist Jim Dator is still seemingly way out in front of things — and with his newest book, *Living Make-Belief: Thriving in a Dream Society*, he proves it.

I'm writing this on Feb. 4, 2025, two weeks after the second presidential inauguration of Donald Trump. This seems important to note with specificity, because things are changing so fast that by the time you read this, in a few weeks, months, or years, the world may be radically different. This is an interesting moment in which to be reviewing, in a digital publication filled with words, a book that is partly about the end of the primacy of the written word, partly about the end of factual "truth" as an agreed-upon societal pursuit, and partly about the inadequacy of the U.S. Constitution and other forms of governance to govern humans in their current and future technological realities.

Living Make-Belief is also, written as it was before November 2024, a 30,000-foot treatise as to why the re-election of Donald Trump and all its subsequent sequelae, whatever they may be, is only the tip of an iceberg that begins with Newt Gingrich in the early 1980s — then a known futurist — talking to the author in Washington, D.C. about how he was planning to model the Republican Party around both Amway and the *Wehrmacht*, the German army during WWII. That account, and the implication that futures lenses and understandings have underpinned many of the changes that are unrolling today, is alone worth the price of admission.

There's lots more. *Living Make-Belief* explores the concept of a "Dream Society" as a new stage in human societal evolution, following hunting/gathering, agricultural, industrial, and information societies. Dator posits that we are currently transitioning into this era (not an "if," note, but a "when"), characterized by the dominance of make-believe, imagination, and visual imagery over literal truth and the written word.

He uses this framework to analyze various societal trends, including politics, economics, technology, and culture, both tracing the rise of the Dream Society and speculating on its future. Crucially, *Living Make-Belief* doesn't judge, but accepts and asks, where do we go from here?

Living Make-Belief traces the impact of changing communication technologies on societal structures, from oral to scribal, to print, and then electronic, describing how each has shaped the way humans think and organize themselves socially. Dator argues (citing work published jointly with John Sweeney and Aubrey Yee) that the printing press, spreading its linear mode of presenting information, fostered rationality and linear thinking, characteristics that are now challenged by the

James Allen (Jim) Dator is Professor Emeritus and former Director of the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, Department of Political Science, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Core Lecturer, Space Humanities, International Space University, Strasbourg, France; Adjunct Professor, Graduate School of Futures Strategy, Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology; Daejeon, Korea, and former President, World Futures Studies Federation. He also taught at Rikkyo University (Tokyo, for six years), the University of Maryland, Virginia Tech, the University of Toronto, and the InterUniversity Consortium for Postgraduate Studies in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia.

rise of decidedly nonlinear visual and digital media. The dominance of images and sounds over the printed word is seen as a key driver of the dream society. This societal shift has significant implications for the concept of "truth," as the book asserts that in the "dream society" that is coming, well-crafted narratives and emotional appeals can overshadow literal truth and objective reality.

Another central theme of the book is the inadequacy of current governance systems, which Dator, who is also a political scientist, describes as "dangerously obsolete" products of earlier, less complex, and less technologically advanced societies. Dator suggests that the U.S. Constitution was a product of its time, based on 18th-century ideologies and technologies, and that it doesn't suit the needs of a dream society. He also discusses the rise of Trumpian figures as more fit for the age we find ourselves in: "dreamweavers" who embody the performative, narrative, emotional characteristics of the dream society. (The book also discusses other dreamweavers in culture, such as Madonna and Taylor Swift.)

Dator also dives deep into the "what comes next" question about governments in a technological Dream Society, approaching them from a design point of view. The book explores the potentially positive and negative impacts of technological advancements, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) on society and governance. He proposes a move towards "quantum governance" – a model that embraces complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness, using the vast number of technological capabilities that have come to us since 1776, rather than relying on outdated linear and rational approaches. New forms of technological governance, the book argues, are essential to thrive in the dream society. And so are all the ways we do, and will, enhance ourselves with technology: not human beings, but "human becomings." Before the end, Dator projects, we will have a lot more than a spoon's worth of plastic in our brains.

Dator's Second Law of the Future is often quoted as, "any useful statement about the futures should seem to be ridiculous," which is only part of the sentence. The whole of it is, "*In an environment of rapid social and environmental change, any useful statement about the futures should seem to be ridiculous*" – and we now find ourselves in just such an environment.

I find it refreshing that Dator is able to explore these very disconcerting (to me, anyway) prospects and still be such good, trustworthy company – a voice of sanity even as he mentally travels the ridiculous-seeming outer reaches of this crazy journey we're on; someone who, with sound reasoning, great seriousness, and seeming equanimity, delineates the coming of the end of the Age of Reason. And urges us all to surf the wave.

As Dator writes, "It is my understanding, after a lifetime as an academic and consulting futurist, of where we are and where we are trending, and how we can make the best of it with understanding and resolve, and without whimpering and complaining... The future is approaching us as sets of very large waves. Almost everyone is ignoring them, focusing instead on relatively trivial matters of the present with their backs to the ocean. If we don't turn around and act, we will all be swept away. If we do turn around, carefully study the waves, prepare our minds and bodies, ask other surfers about the conditions of the wave, wax our boards, jump in and paddle out, carefully choosing a wave to ride, we might experience an exhilarating adventure while knowing we will wipe out at the end."

LAVONNE LEONG

Lavonne Leong is an award-winning futurist and former journalist. She is an Associate with Vision Foresight Strategy, sits on the editorial board of the Journal for Futures Studies and is a co-founder of the journal's Community of Practice, a network that promotes global cross-pollination of futures teaching and futures accessibility. Lavonne has worked with a range of clients, including the CDC, UNDP, and Engineers Canada. She holds an MSc. in Strategic Foresight from the University of Houston and a doctorate in English Language and Literature from the University of Oxford. She lives in Honolulu, Hawaii.

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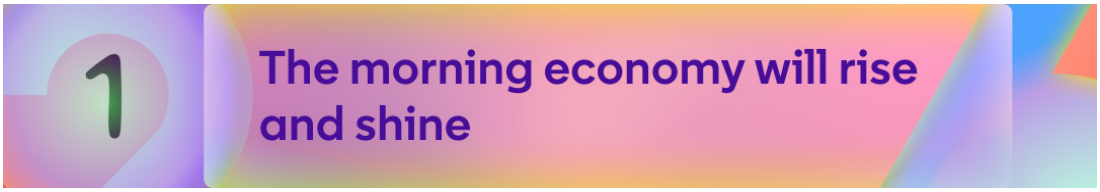
Signals in the Noise

BIG IDEAS AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND 2025: 15 PREDICTIONS THAT WILL DEFINE 2026

from Medium.com

2025 has been a groundbreaking year, with AI reshaping classrooms, careers and communities. So what's coming next?

Every December, the LinkedIn News team spotlights the bold ideas that could shape the year ahead. In 2026, we expect the morning economy to take centre stage as Australians double down on health and wellness; we predict Australia to get a seat at the AI table as data centres become the new currency of AI power; and the 'touch grass' trend will herald a revival of IRL communities and the end of phone-based childhood.



Asleep at 6am? Not anymore. Come 2026, Australians will welcome the morning economy and embrace socialising, leisure activities and even business deals over coffee. Across Australia, partygoers are flocking to morning coffee raves and run clubs, which offer a cheaper and healthier alternative to clubbing.

"Social engagement has always been squeezed between 'work' and 'sleep', and with alcohol as the default social lubricant, night time dominated how we think about leisure and connection," says Ivan Power, an investor who lives in Sydney. "Tectonic shifts in human behaviour and leaps in technology have changed this. By embracing both night and day, dawn and dusk, places become more inclusive and human-centred — with huge social and economic dividends."

These dividends include more flexibility, better health and safety. And he expects more businesses to capitalise on the trend.

"Businesses are starting to recognise the potential value of mornings and are experimenting with how they can respond — from earlier opening hours to morning events," he says. In 2026, Power expects initiatives such as Swimmable Cities to bring the morning economy to the outer suburbs as more Australians build their routine around morning swims. "Locally, I expect a breakout year for mornings in our inland suburbs," he predicts.

Signals in the Noise

BIG IDEAS AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND 2025: 15 PREDICTIONS THAT WILL DEFINE 2026

2 ... and the night economy will find a purpose

Pre-pandemic, nights were for drinking, dancing and socialising. In 2026, night-times will be for wellbeing and productivity, alcohol optional. Across Australia, health-conscious professionals are hiking the night and kayaking under the moonlight, while 24-hour libraries are buzzing with teenagers studying and socialising late into the night. "Over the past 10 years, we've seen a big shift from thinking about the night-time economy as something to be suppressed because of the alcohol-related violence," says 24-hour economy expert Dr Anna Edwards (PhD).

"We're actually starting to think about how we can actively grow our night-time economies and diversify both the types of activities that are happening at night and also the range of people who are taking part in the nighttime activities."

A range of factors are driving this trend, but affordability is the biggest one. According to the latest Visa Australian Night-time Economy Index, more than half of Australians want more cheaper options at night due to cost-of-living concerns. The way we prioritise our health and wellbeing post-pandemic is also playing a role, as is the rise of hybrid work. "Getting the commute time back also added so much flexibility to our schedule. Many of us now have an extra one to two hours a day that can be spent on socialising and being part of a community," Dr Edwards says.

Come 2026, Dr Edwards expects the night-time to play an even bigger role in bringing communities together in a healthy, productive way. "Looking forward to 2026, I expect the night-time economy to become even more inclusive — less about bars and clubs and more about wellbeing and connection," she says.

3 AI layoffs will fuel a wave of returning employees

Your first hire of 2026 might just be a former colleague.

Companies that leaned into AI this year and cut staff along the way will start bringing some of those same employees back after realising certain work still needs a human touch, especially when customer trust is at stake. In fact, 55% of employers who laid off workers because of AI now regret that decision, according to recent research from Forrester.

Consider what's happening at Klarna, the Swedish buy-now-pay-later giant. In 2024, it touted a customer service chatbot that could do the work of 700 full-time agents. But as its workforce shrank, so did customer satisfaction. This year, CEO Sebastian Siemiatkowski admitted those initial cuts were cost-driven and led to "lower quality". He says Klarna is now rehiring agents and "really investing in the quality of human support as the way of the future".

Other companies are recalibrating, too. Earlier this year, Duolingo said it would phase out contractors in favour of AI and only add staff "if a team cannot automate

more of their work". Public backlash was swift, and the company's chief executive soon walked the comments back.

These early reversals hint at a growing trend: more returning employees. A recent Visier analysis of 2.4 million workers at 142 global companies found that roughly 5% of laid-off employees were rehired by a former employer in the past year — a small but rising share.

The appeal? Rehired employees already know the culture, ramp up faster and often return with a fresh perspective.

In 2026, the scarcest resource in AI won't be talent or chips — it will be land for data centres.

A Deloitte report ranks data centres as a top real estate opportunity for 2026. Australia is at the forefront of the trend, securing $10 billion in data centre investment last year, second only to the US, and recently launching an industry body.

The government's National AI Plan aims to develop Australia's reputation as a global data centre hub, with the recent deal between OpenAI and Australian company NEXTDC to build a $7 billion AI facility in Sydney proof of the economic potential. "Sovereign capability is now a strategic asset," writes NEXTDC CEO Craig Scroggie. Industrial land prices for data centres are already surging. In the US state of Virginia, the world's largest data centre hub, plots trade above $9 million per acre. In Europe, hyperscalers like Nvidia are committing over $87 billion to new real estate projects. In the Nordics, demand could quadruple by 2032.

This land rush will bring ripple effects: commercial zones, housing markets and tech jobs will likely surge near AI hubs. Professionals who keep an eye on these dynamics could be critical and lucrative, says businessman Kevin O'Leary. But environmental concerns loom over centres' significant water usage and supply of electricity to fuel them. Sustainability experts such as Tim Buckley, Director of Climate Energy Finance, are calling for simultaneous investment in renewable power sources.

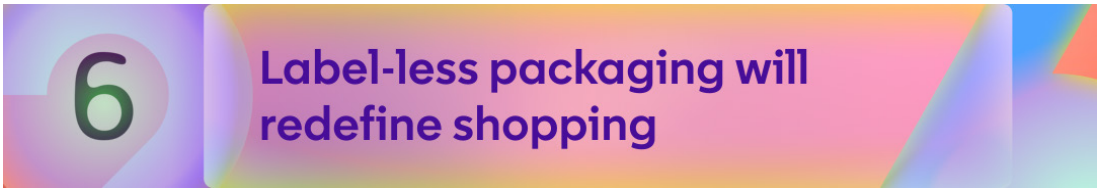
"Data centres can be a win-lose for investors-consumers or converted to a win-win by enabling the financing of firmed renewable energy as part of the approval process, ensuring that location chosen has then enabling grid infrastructure to allow development, along with the associated water infrastructure," he writes.

The morning cup of coffee will shift from daily habit to luxury, as rising costs push the takeaway cup beyond the everyday budget. Climate shocks and supply constraints — already driving raw coffee prices up more than 40% over the past year — will continue to squeeze the market, redefining coffee's place in daily life.

Brands will adapt quickly, positioning coffee as an aspirational product to soften the sticker shock. "I expect to see smaller formats, more private-label products, optimised arabica and robusta blends, and subscription models with freshly ground coffee to build customer loyalty," says Giuseppe Stigliano, marketing professor and executive advisor. This approach will increasingly be influenced by gen Z consumers, who see coffee as a treat that adds meaning to daily life rather than a default morning necessity.

Luxury brands will move in as well. Seeing someone carrying a Louis Vuitton or Prada-branded cappuccino cup may become a common sight in 2026, as fashion houses open their own cafes and transform coffee culture into a premium experience built around exclusivity. "This isn't just a creative whim, but a deliberate strategy in experiential retail: turning the brand into something to be lived, while increasing touchpoints with customers," Stigliano says.

At the same time, coffee knowledge will evolve into its own form of cultural capital, from schools training future 'coffee sommeliers' to creators who build careers around technique and storytelling. As coffee becomes more premium, consumers will increasingly look to these voices to shape their preferences.



2026 marks the start of a packaging revolution: the move to label-less consumer products. Brands will begin stripping away printed labels and shifting product information to digital platforms to comply with increasingly strict disclosure standards, to give consumers access to a wealth of information and to satisfy sustainability goals.

"We're seeing the beginnings of this shift globally," says Kiarne Treacy, CEO of Sustainable Choice Group. "Frameworks like the EU's Digital Product Passport and Australia's sustainable packaging reforms under APCO demand a level of detail that simply won't fit on a label — from supply chain data, material breakdowns, emissions and even proof behind environmental claims. That's pushing information off the pack and into the digital world." What starts as muted palettes and minimal ink will evolve into bottles and containers carrying only a discreet code or embossed mark, she predicts.

The advent of information-rich 2D barcodes under GS1's 'Sunrise 2027' initiative

in the US means every product will soon act as its own digital gateway, updating certifications and data in real time. The shift will enable brands to reduce their carbon footprint by using less ink, less packaging and producing less waste. And consumers will expect to scan products with smartphones or view details through augmented reality overlays.

“The reason it matters is because people don’t want generic information anymore. We all live inside algorithms now; our feeds, our ads, our recommendations are personalised to us. So why would packaging be any different?” says Treacy. “A digital label lets each of us see what we care about most. For some, that’s sugar content; for others, it’s carbon footprint.”

7 Women's health will finally get the attention it deserves

We’re about to enter a new era for women’s health, powered by breakthrough research, smarter technology and a growing recognition that investing in women unlocks progress for everyone.

Women are demanding better, and they deserve it. For too long, women’s health has been treated as an afterthought — underfunded, under-researched and poorly understood. Whether women are fighting for their lives during childbirth, searching for answers to years of unexplained pain or having heart disease misdiagnosed because their symptoms look different than men’s, they’ve been forced to live with conditions that science hasn’t fully explored, and certainly not with women in mind. The result: Women spend 25% more of their lives in poor health than men do.

But we’ve recently seen some exciting technological advances, including a single-dose HPV vaccine, easier-to-use contraceptives, blood tests that detect ovarian cancer earlier and AI tools that help doctors spot problems and personalise care. New companies are developing promising approaches to treating conditions, like menopause and migraines, that uniquely or disproportionately affect women — while organisations are finding better ways to support community-based efforts that are offering women better care and health education around the world.

With innovative care models and serious investment in research and development, the gender health gap could close faster than anyone thought possible. In 2026, we’ll stop seeing women’s health as a niche issue and start treating it as a foundation for human progress.

8 Your workout will define your workday

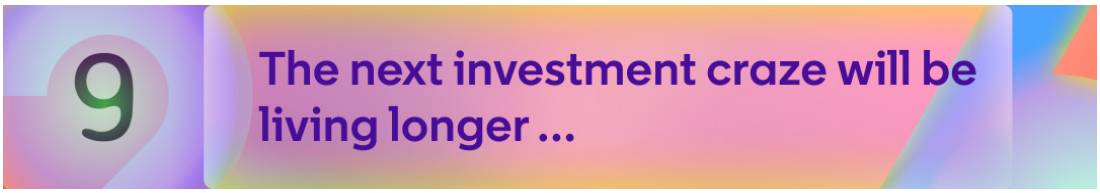
From the gym to the boardroom, we won’t just track biometric data in the year ahead — we’ll translate it into action.

A new era of biometric-driven training, powered by data once reserved for elite athletes, is taking hold. Large-scale events like Hyrox have normalised data-rich

preparation, and Bertie Wilkins, founder of tech-forward fitness studio One City, says everyday exercisers now expect feedback and recovery plans that mirror professional sport.

In 2026 and beyond, this data-driven mindset looks likely to extend beyond the gym. Workplace wellness will move from tracking to adapting: using biometric signals to shape schedules, environments and team dynamics. Imagine offices that subtly respond to collective physiology, adjusting lighting, temperature and meeting length based on energy and focus patterns. Teams could even be assembled for circadian compatibility and recovery profiles, optimising wellbeing and output.

Burnout prevention could be the most compelling frontier — a predicament thought to be costing an average company with 1,000 employees about $7.5 million a year. Data from companies like Whoop, Oura, Garmin and Apple Watch could guide flexible work policies, such as prompting later starts to avoid commuter rush hours. Wilkins even imagines HR roles dedicated to interpreting biometric insights. Before long, wearables could be calling the shots better than any manager ever could.



In 2026, ‘biohacking’ will go mainstream, as consumers gain access to products and tools once out of reach in pursuit of extended lifespans. The longevity economy is projected to reach $95 billion by 2035, nearly triple its 2024 value, and a wave of new companies is helping fuel that growth. Take Function Health, which offers preventative care via more than 100 lab tests for everything from cancer detection to genetic heart risks and counts Matt Damon, Kevin Hart and Colin Kaepernick among its backers. Closer to home, Melbourne-based longevity startup Everlab raised $15 million this year thanks to growing interest in the company’s diagnostic tests.

Culturally, Netflix’s Don’t Die documentary speaks to the consumer fascination with biohacking, while tech leaders from Peter Thiel to Sam Altman are investing billions in longevity startups. Money from major investment groups is flowing in, too. “The private equity companies love the health services space,” says Kim (Ramko) Dalla Torre, a health leader at consulting firm EY. “Just in the last three years, we’ve seen a large increase in the amount of funds they’re pushing into this area.”

The hype will grow as people take more ownership of their health. The number of tools for tracking everything from sleep to blood sugar has exploded, and many are being marketed directly to consumers. With healthcare systems globally strained by doctor shortages, individuals, especially those with higher incomes, will seek out their own tests and treatments. Longevity companies cater to the growing interest in wellness and prevention, and offer more personalised concierge services to data-obsessed consumers. “And people are willing to pay,” Dalla Torre adds.

10 ... and labour markets will be reshaped for longer lives

The pursuit of living longer will have far-reaching consequences on the way we work. As longevity science accelerates and more people expect to remain active well into their 70s and 80s, employers and governments will redesign work around a population that simply isn't ageing the way it used to. In Australia, semi-retirement is growing, blurring what was once a clear boundary between work and retirement. KPMG Australia urban economist Terry Rawnsley explains in a video Australians on average are retiring from full-time work much earlier at 64 years for men and 62 years for women, compared with 67 and 65 a decade ago.

"More people now have the flexibility to pursue semi-retirement. This allows them to engage in flexible work, which can supplement retirement income, support a comfortable lifestyle and provide financial help to their children," he says.

Companies will be pushed to rehire older employees and create programs to support employment of workers. In Japan, air-conditioning maker Daikin Industries now rehires employees up to age 70 with performance-based bonuses. French tech firm Atos and insurer AXA UK are moving in the same direction, reskilling and retaining workers over 50 to help them stay in the workforce. Meanwhile in Australia, hardware retailer Bunnings, where 30% of store team members are aged 50+, runs a Retiring Well program that allows employees to reduce their working hours over time for a gradual transition into retirement.

Countries will also adapt. We could see retirement ages rise, governments expand grants for flexible work and lifelong retraining, and more retirees allowed to work tax-free without losing benefits.

11 AI will make recruitment fairer and more transparent

Job seekers will increasingly welcome AI into the hiring process in 2026, as early evidence shows the technology can create fairer and more transparent experiences than human-led recruitment alone. Employers are already using AI to wade through the flood of job applications (many, ironically, created by the technology) and narrow the pool to a manageable number of qualified candidates. The next phase will be testing if AI can fairly evaluate those finalists and select the person who will perform best and last longest in the role.

Job seekers are coming around to the idea of AI-assisted hiring, too. In a recent University of Chicago study, more than three-quarters of applicants chose to be interviewed by AI rather than by a human recruiter. Those who did generally found the AI interviews to be "less intimidating and more efficient", according to the researchers. What's more, the AI interviews led to 12% more job offers, 18% more

job starters and 16% higher retention rates after 30 days of employment among the 70,000 applicants across several industries like healthcare and tech. A human still made the final decision, but AI helped surface the strongest matches.

Ellis Taylor, Director at Real Time Australia, says providing AI with better data is key to making it fairer and more transparent. "When we feed it real performance data, it can analyse skills without bias and move us out of Talent Puddles to actual Talent Pools," he writes on LinkedIn.

While there are reasons to be cautious — from hiring biases to limited critical thinking abilities — the technology is poised to overhaul the hiring landscape to better match job seekers with roles in which they can thrive. Even humans wary of the technology will find it difficult to argue against the results.

Loneliness will hit a breaking point in 2026 — and as AI companionship surges in response, an outsized opportunity for real-world connection will emerge. New research from the American Psychological Association found that nearly seven in 10 US adults say they needed more emotional support in the past year than they received. And the issue is multi-generational, with a study by Australia's peak loneliness body, Ending Loneliness Together, revealing two in five young Australians aged 15-25 feel socially disconnected and it's impacting their health and wellbeing.

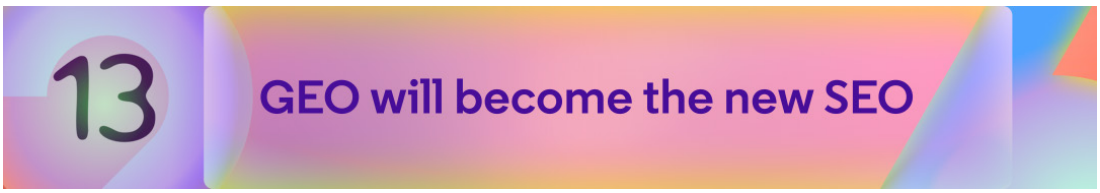
Despite technology's role in driving isolation, many are turning to realistic AI chatbots that offer convincing-but-controversial companionship. New innovations will draw hype, but time and continued research will show their true role in the loneliness crisis: a band-aid at best, an active contributor at worst.

In 2026, investments in genuine human connection will prove the most effective salve. The social media ban for those under 16 and phone-free policies at Australian schools will lay the groundwork for a cultural rebalance away from screens for young people. Brands are recognising in-person community-building as an emerging business opportunity, fueling a revival of offline connection-seeking — from book clubs and adult sports leagues to networking nights and old-school meetups.

Even tech-invested professionals such as Charlotte Connell, Director of Innovation and Investment at Greenhouse, predict a shift. "Technology permeates everything we do," she writes . "But what this over-reliance on AI to write polite emails, friendships based on liking a social media post in lieu of a conversation is proving, is that no technology, no matter how advanced,can replace genuine human connection. In 2026 I think we're going to see people stepping away from tech to 'play together' more."

Signals in the Noise

BIG IDEAS AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND 2025: 15 PREDICTIONS THAT WILL DEFINE 2026



Generative engine optimisation (GEO) is set to replace search engine optimisation (SEO) as the way brands get discovered in the year ahead. As consumers turn to AI chatbots, agentic workflows and answer engines, appearing prominently in generative outputs will matter more than ranking in search engines. The field of GEO is so new that there isn't even an agreed upon name yet. A look at Google Trends shows GEO to be the most popular term, but answer engine optimisation (AEO) and generative search optimisation (GSO) are also in play. Regardless of terminology, the shift is already reshaping digital strategies.

"The SEO industry is being pulled reluctantly into the GEO era," says Michael King, founder of iPullRank. There's still significant overlap between SEO and GEO practices for brands and marketers. But that won't last forever, according to King. "That's why we've shifted to a framework called 'relevance engineering', which is a fusion of AI, information retrieval, content strategy, UX and digital PR. It's designed to define this new era rather than be defined by it."

For media and ecommerce businesses focused on monetisation, it may still be too early to offer a clear path forward. Ads are not yet commonly inserted in leading chatbots and it's unclear what they'll look like when they do arrive or if they'll even be disclosed as such. Nevertheless, new models and payout systems will need to evolve or the concept of a "dead internet", or an ecosystem dominated by bots interacting with other bots, could become a real concern.

Traditional cultural criticism will undergo a major shift as content proliferates and audiences splinter. The critic's role as a centralised authority will fade, replaced by influencer-critics and niche online communities that drive their own forms of cultural discovery. The trend is already visible in the rise of Letterboxd for film lovers and the #BookTok phenomenon for books. Legacy outlets are also pulling back: the Associated Press has shut down its weekly reviews, while The New York Times has reassigned four of its leading critics to other roles.

Consumers have new expectations. "The audience has fragmented, and the same is happening to criticism," film critic Gianmaria Tammaro says. "The classic review needs to be rethought, recommendations need to be more personalised." Brevity and focus on niche areas will be key in an era of content overload and filter bubbles: "The days of criticism ignoring specific phenomena — like anime or certain independent cinema — are definitely over," he adds.

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Critics will increasingly become content creators who cultivate their own targeted communities, speaking directly to followers rather than broad, mass audiences. And their influence will extend beyond podcasts and newsletters. Research from PwC shows consumers are spending more on offline cultural experiences, from live music to cinema. Tammaro believes critics will need to meet audiences there, too: “They’ll have to build channels where people not only follow them, but join them for in-person events.” Cultural criticism will no longer be about offering opinions, but building thriving communities prepared to engage both online and offline.

In 2026, the movement to pull kids off smartphones will go mainstream, reshaping everything from government policy to school rules and the devices parents buy. Next year, the conversation will significantly shift into policy, with more countries poised to follow Australia’s world-first ban on social media platforms for children under 16. It has inspired at least one Sydney primary school to prohibit students from owning a smartphone from January, with parents asked to purchase a basic Nokia instead.

Denmark will also ban smartphones in schools during the 2026-27 academic year and is among the European countries proposing plans to block social media for under-15-year-olds. In the US, 20 states have already banned phones in the classroom — a number expected to grow as lawmakers respond to rising pressure from parents and educators.

Debate on the issue has been growing for some time, with social psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s bestseller, The Anxious Generation, arguing smartphones and social media have transformed childhood and fuelled a surge in anxiety, depression and loneliness. And calls for change are growing. Adolescence, Netflix’s most-watched limited series in 2025, ignited conversations about how the internet shapes children’s mental health, while the UK’s Smartphone Free Childhood campaign has gained support from thousands of parents.

Changes to smartphones themselves are also on the cards. London-based smartphone maker Nothing has partnered with Mumsnet, an online community for parents, to launch a safety-focused phone for teenagers, called the Other Phone.

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