Twenty Predictions, Twenty Years

Idea In Short

Read beyond the stock pages. Fast Company's twenty-year predictions reward critical engagement: speed and iteration beat information advantage, empathy stays defensible against machines and simplicity keeps getting harder. Agree, disagree, but form a view, because interesting conversationalists are made by reading widely.

An Anniversary Worth Annotating

Fast Company is an iconoclastic magazine, easy to read, fun and cheap at roughly a dollar per issue through discount subscriptions.1 For its twentieth anniversary, the editors published predictions for the next twenty years, and the list rewards active reading, meaning agreement, pushback and honest grading rather than passive nodding. What follows is that annotated read, one consultant's commentary attached to each forecast.

Speed Will Triumph

Complete agreement here, and it may be the most important item on the list. In the digital age, information is no longer a differentiator. It has become a common ingredient, available to all competitors to mix, match and iterate into value. The enormous value sits with teams who capture the imagination of early adopters and continuously iterate toward a solution. Clay Christensen's innovator's dilemma explains the mechanism of offering less for less, and the story of Xiaomi, the Chinese handset maker, converts any remaining skeptics on the primacy of speed.2

People to Watch

Three personality predictions anchor the list. Mark Zuckerberg will lead, and the trajectory supports it: 19 million users in 2007, a refused one-billion-dollar buyout and then 1.5 billion users alongside a 30-billion-dollar net worth, all while learning Mandarin and getting more commercially savvy. Malala Yousafzai will build, a forecast worth studying further about the

Nobel laureate. Elon Musk will inspire, and a few unfiltered television interviews establish him as visionary, maverick and juggernaut at once, with Tesla scoring 103 out of 100 on one consumer test as supporting evidence.

Technology's Broad Promises

Several predictions cluster around technology improving life, and they earn different grades. Technology will improve the human condition: true and not deep. Digital tools will unlock opportunity: absolutely true, with massive open online courses (MOOC) democratizing education, flattening global learning barriers and letting the most talented, motivated and poor children learn from the best, a genuine threat to all but the strongest higher-education franchises. Democracy will be digital: agreed and uncontroversial. Diversity will deepen: one hopes so. DNA will be unstoppable: entirely believable, as any dinner conversation about consumer genetic testing confirms. Cash will disappear: check your own wallet for the verdict.

Mission Over Money

The most intellectually interesting prediction says mission will triumph over money. A University of Chicago-style, neoclassical thinker begrudgingly admits the new generation is different, wanting meaning and not just money, without a fully satisfying explanation of why. Perhaps money shows diminishing returns in the developed world, where privileged Americans, Europeans, Japanese and Koreans simply want something beyond luxury brands. The honest annotation is agreement with the observation and suspended judgment on the cause.

Medicine, Empathy and Machines

Two related predictions deserve joint reading. Medical training will be rewritten, the thesis being that clinicians will stop memorizing treatments and instead leverage machine diagnostic capabilities to interpret data. Plausible, with one caveat: time-tested professions change slowly, and medicine will likely be among the slowest. Human empathy will be central, and here agreement comes easily. The human ability to contextualize, empathize and relate remains an enduring difference from machines, even as McKinsey estimates that 13 percent of jobs could be further automated once computers understand human language at median proficiency.3

The Sober Predictions

Several forecasts read like risk warnings. Entrepreneurship will not be for everyone, a point consultants prove daily as we advise clients on risks we personally decline, our Master of Business Administration (MBA) training having made us risk averse. Bubbles will burst: clearly. Cybersecurity will be more costly: it already is, in direct protection spending and in the opportunity cost of time wasted worrying about identity theft and fraudulent charges, since digital attack remains the easiest way for bad actors to disturb the system. Simple will be more difficult: complete agreement, echoing Bain's repeated point that the world grows more cross-functional, multi-variable and complex. Blaise Pascal said it centuries ago: "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have time." China and India will dominate: already true. Food will be healthier: the growth of premium grocers suggests yes.

We Will Not All Be Family

The final prediction claims we will all be family, and here a Generation X reader dissents. Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter give the semblance of intimacy, a false proximity. You think you know me, but you really do not. The Korean word for friend, chin-goo, literally combines friend and long, meaning friendship forms over long time and through deep, intense experience. That was true twenty years ago and will hold twenty years from now, whatever the feeds suggest.

How to Read Predictions Professionally

Forecast lists reward a particular reading discipline. Grade each claim on two axes, direction and mechanism. Many predictions get the direction right through sheer optimism while missing the mechanism entirely, and the mechanism is what an executive can act on. Speed triumphing works as a prediction because it names the cause: information commoditized, so iteration became the scarce skill. Predictions without mechanisms, like technology improving the human condition, are horoscopes, pleasant and unfalsifiable. The second discipline is tracking your own annotations over time. A prediction list marked up today becomes a calibration record in five years, showing where your judgment runs hot or cold. Consultants sell judgment, and judgment improves only when its past errors stay visible.

Read Beyond the Stock Market

The closing advice is simple. Read magazines full of innovation and thought-provoking argument, because they make you a more interesting conversationalist at holiday parties. Do not be boring, and do not let your reading list collapse into share prices. The better question for any executive is the one the exercise models: what are the trends you believe will define the next twenty years?

- 1Fast Company
- 2The Innovator's Dilemma
- 3McKinsey featured insights

Summary

Twenty predictions, graded honestly, teach more than any single forecast. Speed wins, digital tools democratize learning, empathy endures and social networks sell false proximity. Read iconoclastic magazines, annotate them with your own views and bring something better than stock prices to the dinner table.