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Keynote Gerd Leonhard

# A CASE FOR ‘AWESOME HUMANS ON TOP OF AMAZING TECHNOLOGY’

For planners, technology is a key factor in reaching efficiency targets, but futurist and author Gerd Leonhard argues it could be too much of a good thing. In his keynote talk he urges planners never to put convenience over humanity. ‘If we go down that road,’ he says, ‘we are going to feel like machines.’

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Gerd Leonhard freely admits humans are imperfect. ‘Humans are inefficient by nature,’ he says. ‘We forget things. We make mistakes. We get drunk. We fall in love. That’s not efficient.’

Yet in a future—and in many ways a present—full of technological reliance in business and planning, Leonhard says our inefficiency should not mean the human touch is erased from the workplace. ‘In terms of efficiency, machines will beat us,’ he says. ‘But should we protect this? Should we be allowed to remain human?’

## **The future not extension of the present**

Not that he is against change. ‘The future will not be at all like the present, and he thinks that is good news.. ‘I used to be in the music business. If you buy a CD for your child today, they will call you a therapist. Music today is a service not a product.’ With a Spotify account, you can have access to 21 million

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songs for around €10 per month, he points out.

Businesses today have to think about the present and the future simultaneously. Leonhard identifies nine game-changers that will make the future a very different place: Data Everything, Cloud Everything, Connect Everything, Smart Everything, Compute Anything, Transact Anything, Make/Print Anything, See Everything and Become Anything.

He gives several examples of industries that will undergo major transitions because of them. The car industry: The future is not to have one, so car manufacturers will instead focus on mobility, providing transportation tickets or electronic scooters. The healthcare industry: The emphasis will shift from caring for sick people to helping people stay healthy. The construction industry is changing due to 3D printing, while meat production is moving from the fields into the laboratories.

### **A gift or a bomb?**

These are all very exciting developments, but the question Leonhard poses is: Who makes sure it is safe? When we connect everything, we create a lot of liability. 'Technology is in many ways a present, but if it becomes too good it becomes a bit of a bomb,' he says. 'Social media is a blessing and a curse.'

Although technology can do great things, it does not do it because it wants to. It looks for logic and numbers, not feeling, whereas humans ask: 'What does it feel like?' Leonard argues that we must have rules. 'If we automate everything, who controls what is happening?'

He envisions an 'Environmental Protection Agency for technology,' something of an ethics commission. 'It would be people in companies and countries that say what is the right thing to do with technology,' he says. 'These questions will come up every day. Do we do it because we can or because it is the right thing to do? Ethics is the difference between the power and the right to do something.'



The robots are coming and the impact will be enormous. 'In the future, robots will harvest our fields, drive our cars,' he says. 'If call centers are coming, that is 20 million jobs lost globally. So do we pay back some of the benefits? Have an automation tax? A universal basic income? What do we do?'

### **The future of planning**

'As planners, you will have to navigate the game-changers, learn to respond to them,' Leonard says. 'This will take foresight. And the faster you go, the farther ahead you have to look.'

Paying attention is the number one skill of a planner. You have to observe, understand, imagine and create. These are the distinctly human skills that technology cannot offer. 'Getting the right balance of human and machine will be tricky,' Leonard says. 'We cannot have success without technology. Use it as a tool. Embrace it, but do not become it.'

He ends with a reminder that customer relationships are not about efficiency, but about trust. 'The bottom line,' he says, 'is there is no such thing as tech that makes us happy. Trust is not digital. Relationships are not downloaded. Customers are not algorithms. Trust is a feeling. It is a relationship. Our brain is set up for relationships, engagement, experiences. That goes beyond the universe of technology.'

By: Tracy Brown