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futurist

We're moving
into a
transformation
economy

THE RISE OF AI
THE CODING OF ETHICS
SEAMLESS
PSYCHOGRAPHIC FASHION
KELLERMAN







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At some point we have all thought or spoken about what we might wish to do or be ‘in the future’, whether in our personal or professional lives. In doing so most of us will also have cast our thinking nets over a reasonable time span, perhaps into retirement, or the next major career change, or having started a family. Yet, with today’s seemingly turbo-charged advances in technology along with seismic shifts in the world’s demographic plates, any firm ideas we might have of the future and our place in it increasingly appear about as solid as a bubble on quicksand.

FOR THE YEAR 2017 alone the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT) is anticipating major breakthroughs in self-driving delivery trucks, paralysis reversal through brain implants, face-detecting payment systems (already live in China), gene therapy to solve hereditary illness, and computers of a power unimaginable in recent years. This kind of accelerating change has many futurists emphasising the critical need to

microscopically scrutinise what is happening today and to harness the power of the winds of change blowing strongly about us. For some of them, such as Anders Sorman-Nilsson, a futurist and innovation strategist at *Thinq Inc.*, it is also important to think from a future point with a rear-view mirror perspective to understand how to grasp the full potential of today to maintain and drive business success.

“Think about your business not from a ‘post-mortem’, but a ‘pre-mortem’ perspective”

“A lot of the work we do with businesses is around getting people to think in a ‘pre-mortem’ style, so I often ask clients to imagine that it’s a certain date in the future and that on their watch the company went belly up, so my questions are what were the trends that they missed, what were the signals that they chose to ignore, and what were the investment decisions that they delayed that led to this demise,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “I then follow it up with asking what change they are going to make now to prevent that from happening.”

“Many of our clients do step up to the plate and do something different, not just as a result of that question, but I think that it’s a provoking one to ask people – to think about your business not from a ‘post-mortem’, but a ‘pre-mortem’ perspective, assuming that things didn’t go as planned and then taking steps to prevent a bad scenario from happening. We’re all motivated by carrots and sticks, so sometimes we have to take the stick approach to things as well.”

From the more traditional post-mortem angle Anders Sorman-Nilsson is equally happy to take the stick to himself in sketching out what prompted a Swedish schoolboy to become a scholarship-winning

graduate at an Australian university and evolve into a globally renowned futurist advising major corporations on how to wrestle the challenges of modern society and technology to ensure their enduring efficiency and success.

“I grew up in a family very much of technophobes back in the 1980s in an era when technology was really making a splash, but whenever we were with my grandparents in the Lake Mälaren archipelago outside of Stockholm the central source of entertainment was the fireplace,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “It sounds really romantic, but they were against everything to do with technology and my grandfather was a man of silence, so as kids we were sort of bored, because it was sitting around and not saying much.”

“I think this agitated me as a kid, because if we weren’t going to have great storytelling we needed other types of technological entertainment, which they were against. My ambition and role as a futurist was probably born there, as a reaction to having grown up in a world where there wasn’t much technology available, so I had to go and seek it out elsewhere, playing around with computers and watching sci-fi movies in the 1980s.”







“The main course is the transformational event that you go to”

“Later on my father was lucky enough to have a posting to Canberra, Australia, as Swedish Defence Attaché, so as a family we moved there for three years,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “As the posting came to an end I had just finished school and was awarded a scholarship at the *Australian National University* to study a dual degree of International Relations and Law. During these studies, however, I lost the love of learning and started looking outside the world of law and international relations for what I really enjoyed, which had to do more with personal and professional development, business and entrepreneurship. Although I completed the degrees, I wanted to be an entrepreneur myself and I could see how entrepreneurial thinking could be quite empowering.”

“I then had the opportunity to work for marketing consultants back in the early to mid 2000s and particularly focusing on generational trends, so we were looking very much at how to connect with the Gen Y consumer,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “This was at the time when social media and the likes of Facebook was just emerging, so the work was very much focusing initially on engaging Gen Y

and demographic trends. After that I then started up Thinqe back in 2005, since then I’ve added a Global Executive MBA as well, so there’s been more strategy work and scenario planning and this kind of stuff over the last six or seven years.”

Starting the company was the launch pad into areas of innovative thinking that have led to Anders Sorman-Nilsson spending up to 240 days a year criss-crossing the globe and presenting to corporate executives his ideas on how people and businesses need to adapt to stay efficient, effective and, ultimately, successful in a world of mushrooming disruptive flux, both of the social and technological kinds. For some of his cutting-edge futurist ideas inspiration again stemmed from sources closer to home back in Sweden.

“In terms of my mother being able to change her own business fortunes and development of the business back in Stockholm I could really see in first hand challenges that the root of all evil very much came from an aversion to new technologies,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “I could see how in the part of Stockholm where my mother’s shop is, the consumption habits and demographics had

changed, which combined with technological changes led to a change in her business fortunes. For her it was about carrying on a legacy and doing the same thing, and I could see the deep inefficiencies of that in a world of digital disruption and changing consumption habits. She had ‘missed’ what was going on and preferred to complain about how the Gen Y and Gen Z consumers were ‘difficult’, so I told her that she had every opportunity in the world to change her fortunes in the business, but that she just needed to adapt.”

“I think that as exciting as it is when technology changes, I get really excited when humans change, so it’s equally about technology and anthropology. From my perspective, when the rate of external change around you trumps the rate of internal change, agility and innovation inside a company then the company is going to be in deep trouble. For me there is therefore this sort of urge to travel around the world and do scenario planning and help bigger companies.”

Sharpening his innovative thinking through such personal experience took Anders Sorman-Nilsson into deep excavation on how these two worlds – that he prefers to label the

“We’re running the risk of letting AI do to our brains what machines and robots have been doing to our brawns”

‘analogue’ and the ‘digital’ – could be merged, an intellectual pursuit that even saw him manage to eke out the time to write a book on it.

“We have the privilege that one of our biggest clients is Westpac, an Australian retail bank and one of the country’s big four banks, and they have based their idea of ‘clicks meeting bricks’ – or the analogue meeting the digital – on the idea in my previous book called *Digilogue: How to win the Digital Minds and Analogue Hearts of Tomorrow’s Customers*,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “They’ve very much used this idea of digilogue internally when it comes to really building the retail banking strategy of their clicks meeting bricks.”

“For those of our clients who really embrace the excitement of a new world it doesn’t have to be about throwing away the analogue baby with the digital bathwater, as I believe you can equally retain the heritage, the legacy and the good bits about history, but I also think that if you’re so focused on the past and the history [of a company] then you run the risk of having no future in business. I’ve always said that to win the ‘analogue hearts and the digital minds’ of tomorrow’s customers, including my

customers, I think that a large part of it is in acknowledging where people have come from. Many futurists tend to overhype the extent of change we’ll see in 12 months time and then under-hype the amount of change we’ll see in ten years time. I often step in and say that there’s merit in some of the things that a company has done in the past and that tends to get some level of buy in when you say it isn’t an either/or with the digital and analogue worlds, but that they can augment one another.”

For the digital and analogue worlds to augment each other nevertheless implies a considerable behavioural shake-up in corporate practice and with consequences that will impact upon every line of business, the meeting and event industry clearly being no exception.

“I think that for event planners and events of the future, looking at the younger demographic and in Asia in particular – whether that be Gen Y, Gen Z or even the Generation Alphas of this world – is really the future lab for this, in terms of how they’re behaving and how they’re using technologies,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “In the events industry specifically you can just look at the sort of duality of approaches and I

look, for example, at the compounded annual growth rates of 20+ percent when it comes to the growth of esports events and esports revenues around the world. These are of course digital natives who come together in a stadium or a forum to watch people play computer games, which is kind of an odd notion, but it’s something that digital natives love doing, so there’s still a social aspect to turning up to an event.”

“We therefore need to make sure that future events are much more immersive and I think that too much focus has traditionally been placed on just the experience at the event and been very, very poor at follow through. I think that if we look at the event itself as a glue-building exercise whereby the magic still happens in the hallways and in the main sessions, taking a really creative approach as they do in *SXSW* or the *TED* conferences, or even something like what *Burning Man* is doing in terms of getting people to a place to really take them on a ‘pilgrimage’ and to immerse them for more than just the event, might be a way forward.”

Reaching this meeting planner apex where the mindset of Gens Y, Z and Alpha are not merely to be understood, but also technologically





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catered for via the optimum communication tools for meaningful meetings and events will require something of a quantum leap in both the skills of future event planners and, quite possibly, also the demographic base that they will come from. Whilst such a transition might suggest turbulent times ahead, Anders Sorman-Nilsson has been categorical on the need for this kind of change, as well as many other corporate learning shifts, to be ‘seamless’.

“By this I mean creating that seamless interweaving between the analogue and digital modes of communication and I think that some events are better at it than others which follow the old school formula that might not be that enticing for the next few generations, particularly when you see an innovation event but it has exactly the same structure of workshops, break out and plenaries as they’ve always had,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “I don’t know if that structure is going to be the one for generations that have grown up with virtual gaming and leading virtual teams.”

“For meeting planners this mantra of ‘digital minds and analogue hearts’ is then fairly apt, as they have to ask

themselves how they can connect with and add value to the increasingly digitised, mobilised, virtualised and rational minds of tomorrow’s customers and event participants, but still enduringly connect with their analogue, experiential, emotional hearts. I think that’s a very good starting point as well as just looking at how to both create a really amazing, immersive, physical experience when people turn up, because people value their time a lot more these days. So for us to invest in the time to go to an event you just want it to be world class and amazing, and transformational too. Looking at the digital mode as a way to get information across is therefore a good starting point, like an appetiser in some ways, but then the main course is the transformational event that you go to – the analogue is great for transformation, the digital great for information.”

Future delegates expecting to be ‘transformed’ by events they have carefully chosen to dedicate their time to will clearly have to be served with transformed events, compared to the events of today, for them to achieve these goals. One of the tools at the forefront of how such transformation may be molded is the rise of

Artificial Intelligence (AI) alongside the widespread use of apps within and behind events.

“At the moment we’re running the risk of letting AI do to our brains what machines and robots have been doing and will continue to do to our brawns, so both blue collar and white collar work will be equally impacted and that can potentially be very divisive, with a number of skills and a lot of activities in our everyday work lives being outsourced to robots and AI,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “However, I think it can be used from a variety of different perspectives, such as the big data and analytics it can provide on how people move around [at events], and it can offer engagement levels that people have in the different sessions by reviews and ratings, and whether people have been on their mobile devices the whole time during a keynote, either tweeting about it or doing something else.”

“These reams of data would be difficult for a human to sit down and plug into a spreadsheet, but of course through AI conference or convention organisers will be able to gauge whether to invite a speaker back, or what kind of speakers work with an audience, or what time of the day a

“The rise of robotisation and automation can be fairly cyber dystopic”

speaker should be on, or should the day start and end with a plenary – so AI might be able to point to some flaws and actually puncture some commonly held beliefs and challenge some holy cows of the industry, just in terms of how they even structure their events.”

“Of course it also allows them, in a much more psychographic fashion, to follow up with people who they know have been in particular sessions and who they’ve been able to geo-contextually track around their conventions, and it should make it easier for them to entice them back to the convention next year and also to utilise the attendees much better in terms of connecting with their social networks and then marketing to people who are like them,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “These are all things that in the past was very challenging for us to do when we couldn’t have that level of insight, but now through cloud-enabled technologies we’ll be able to monitor that data and then make new analyses of it, which should be helpful.”

Better understanding the movements, behaviour and connections of delegates in a hyper-digitised future and with decision-making potentially in the hands (or rather,

the robotic arms) of AI devices erodes the idea of ‘the human touch’ in the fundamentally people-centric meetings industry and raises the issue of whether similar levels of trust can then be had in such a brave new meetings world of a digital future.

“In fact I think there are now a variety of different ways in which digital trust is emerging and there is a new sort of trust architecture that’s emerging with it, so contrary to the common perception that the digital world is largely digitally de-humanised I actually think that it can be more humanised and more empathetic, and thus building greater levels of trust,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “Airbnb, for example, is all about digital trust, because you’re giving up your home to a total stranger. Uber does the same thing based on a review and rating system. We’re also going to have a new sense of digital trust through, for example, blockchain technologies.”

“The other thing today is that trust used to be built at a 1-1 level, but we can now build digital trust at scale, with something like LinkedIn, an example of this in building a level of digital trust through the recommendations and verifications,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “Similarly

if you’re a convention curator you can now build amazing amounts of trust in an amplified fashion using the likes of YouTube or Wistia, digital distribution of videos and via Twitter, via endorsements or via video testimonials. These aren’t all new, but we can build that sense of trust to have people trusting in our conventions.”

“Talking again about the rise of AI, I also think that when it comes to the coding of ethics into our devices and Internet of Things-enabled devices this will be absolutely critical, so we’ll certainly see the rise of coding ethicists who will ensure that our technologies maybe even have a better moral compass than we as humans do.”

This vision of a technology-dominated future setting our moral compass, shifting a sense of trust from the personal to the crowd, and determining the events we attend and get invited to by our movements and contacts may seem to many to be a cyber utopia, but for those less ready to be tech-trusting and outside the generational pool immersed in such tech use there might be a sense of a looming storm of cyber dystopia ahead.

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because people derive a lot of meaning from their work and their career and people also get a lot of purpose and their identity from their jobs,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “For the people inventing the technology and who own the companies – the Silicon Valley elites of the world – it will be very much a cyber utopia, and of a concentration of wealth as well.”

“I was speaking to one of my retail banking clients recently and pointed out that their profits were largely derived from the fact that people have jobs and can pay their mortgages, so what’s going to happen in a world where people are in the gig economy, for example, and have become Uber-style, on-demand workers for maybe five different companies, like micro-entrepreneurs, and where will the profits then come from and how will the business model shift to allow for people in the gig economy to service their mortgages? At the same time questions also remain around people spending their time in some amazing virtual reality in a world where robots are doing the jobs for us, but at the moment we don’t have a tax base for robots or know how that will affect governments.”

In whatever form the future materialises what is certain is that

technology is driving major transformation, including the forging of a transformation economy. Whilst the futurists are doing the analytical work for us, signalling what are the key drivers of change and what they will mean for us, the job of a meeting planner will be to learn and adapt to them, which will in turn mean shaping a very different meetings and event industry with very different events for a successful path into the future.

“I think what consumers and customers are really looking for today is not just an experience,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “While the experience economy still matters we’re moving into a ‘transformation economy’, where people want to deal with brands or organisations that are going to help them self-actualise in some way, shape or form, such as how Nike or Burning Man do particularly well, because people go there with an expectation to be transformed on some level.”

“We can be nudged in a smaller or bigger fashion into making smarter decisions that will see us transform as humans and I think that’s a really important development in terms of running events and wanting people to be changed in a bigger or a smaller

way,” says Anders Sorman-Nilsson. “I think we can learn from companies that have moved into that transformation economy, and look at how we design experiences, but also content that’s going to both inspire avant-garde ideas for rational minds and also lead to a change of heart, which then opens us all up for learning that can be more seamless. The convention industry is already in the transformation economy – it’s just that some conventions do it better than others.”