What Will the Future of Work Look Like?
By Jim Ware - December 17, 2013

As a self-proclaimed workplace futurist I get asked all the time "What will the future of work really look like?" And it's an appropriate question to contemplate at the end of the year, which is always filled with both looking back and looking forward.

But rather than pretend that I can tell you anything definitive about the future of work, instead I want to offer some observations about why predictions of any kind are difficult, and could even be dangerous.

At home my wife and I have a "simplistic" refrigerator magnet that keeps us on our toes: Think about it. Each of us creates the future one moment at a time, one day at a time, every day. The future unfolds as a global group exercise in decision-making, learning, and responding to other people and external events. Each day and every event comes into being as a complex combination of natural occurrences, millions of individual choices, and secondary responses to what has just happened.

Of course there are many recurring patterns and experiences that we can anticipate reasonably well even 10 or 20 years in advance. The American humorist Mark Twain reportedly once said "History may not repeat itself, but it rhymes."

We do know what time the sun will rise tomorrow, and every day after that. We know approximately when winter will begin. We can estimate the power and processing speed of a microchip in 2040, and even predict its probable cost. We can estimate the world's population with reasonable accuracy many years in advance (assuming the absence of war, pestilence, a global epidemic, and major natural disasters -but notice how quickly I had to qualify that certainty by allowing for those possibilities).

Those predictions are generally based on statistical analysis, trends, and an understanding of the physical laws of nature. But we know much less about human behavior, which will ultimately determine how (and why) the economy will grow (or shrink), where people will be choosing to live when 2040 rolls around, and most of the other aspects of the future that we really care about.

However, that uncertainty is basically good news. Just imagine how dull life would be if the future were completely predetermined and well-known. It's exactly our opportunity to make choices, and to invent new ways of working, that makes our lives both interesting and meaningful.

The difficulty with making accurate predictions is that most of us are not very good at anticipating truly disruptive events -natural disasters, market meltdowns (like the one in 2008), major technology breakthroughs. Just think about how dramatically inventions like the steam engine, the telephone, the personal computer, the cell phone, the Internet, and- most recently- the smart phone and WiFi have changed both our work practices and our personal lives.

In spite of our experience with technology-driven social discontinuities, we generally act as if the future will be very much like today. We have a powerful need to "know" what is ahead of us, but in the absence of a crystal ball we tend to believe that most aspects of our lives will stay very nearly the same, or that they will grow or shrink incrementally.

Our tendency to underestimate change in our work and our lives, and to ignore the possibility of dramatic surprises, is perfectly understandable; we yearn for a stable, predictable world because it is much easier to imagine and to plan for than it would be if the future were a dynamic, always-changing environment (which we would probably experience as chaos).
Given that the future will ultimately be a complex mix of the possible, the preferable, and the probable, there are four things you can do now to increase your sense of where it is all going.

1. **Recognize that there are two kinds of trends: linear and exponential.**
   Linear trends are those that increase at a simple, incremental, and stable rate. They are reasonably predictable, and generally comfortable. Exponential trends are those steep upward sloping curves that signal a rapid – and increasing - growth rate. When something "goes viral" it is demonstrating exponential growth; and we find it hard to adapt, and difficult to know how long it's going to last.

2. **Don't assume that exponential growth will go on forever.**
   It never does, because it just isn't physically possible for anything to keep on doubling, or tripling, without absorbing all the resources in the world. We live in a finite world; don't ever assume never-ending growth!

3. **Cultivate your peripheral vision.**
   The best way to minimize surprises is to look actively for early signs of change. In spite of our perceptions about discontinuities, even the most dramatic changes almost always start small, and grow slowly for some time before they hit that "tipping point" that makes all of us sit up and take notice. Peripheral vision enables you to see change before it becomes surprising and uncontrollable.

4. **Play "What if!" games all the time.**
   Be aggressive in presuming that the future will not be like the past. Expect the unexpected. Ask "Why not?" as a matter of course. Question your most basic assumptions; challenge your core beliefs; and don't ever expect things to remain stable. It's far better to be prepared for dramatic change and settle for more stability than you expected, than to be surprised by change that completely transforms your marketplace or your customers' buying habits.

   Finally, above all else, learn how to ask the right questions. Be willing to admit you don't know everything, and that the world is changing all the time. Recognizing uncertainty is the first step to coping with it- or actually taking advantage of it.

   Better yet, follow the advice of the former chairman of a global 100 company, who once said that "We have to stop being surprised by external events and start creating surprise instead." If you recognize deep down that the future is being created every day, you'll be ready to make choices, to initiate discoveries, and to create the kind of future you want to live in.

Source: Jim Ware of *The Future of Work...Unlimited.*