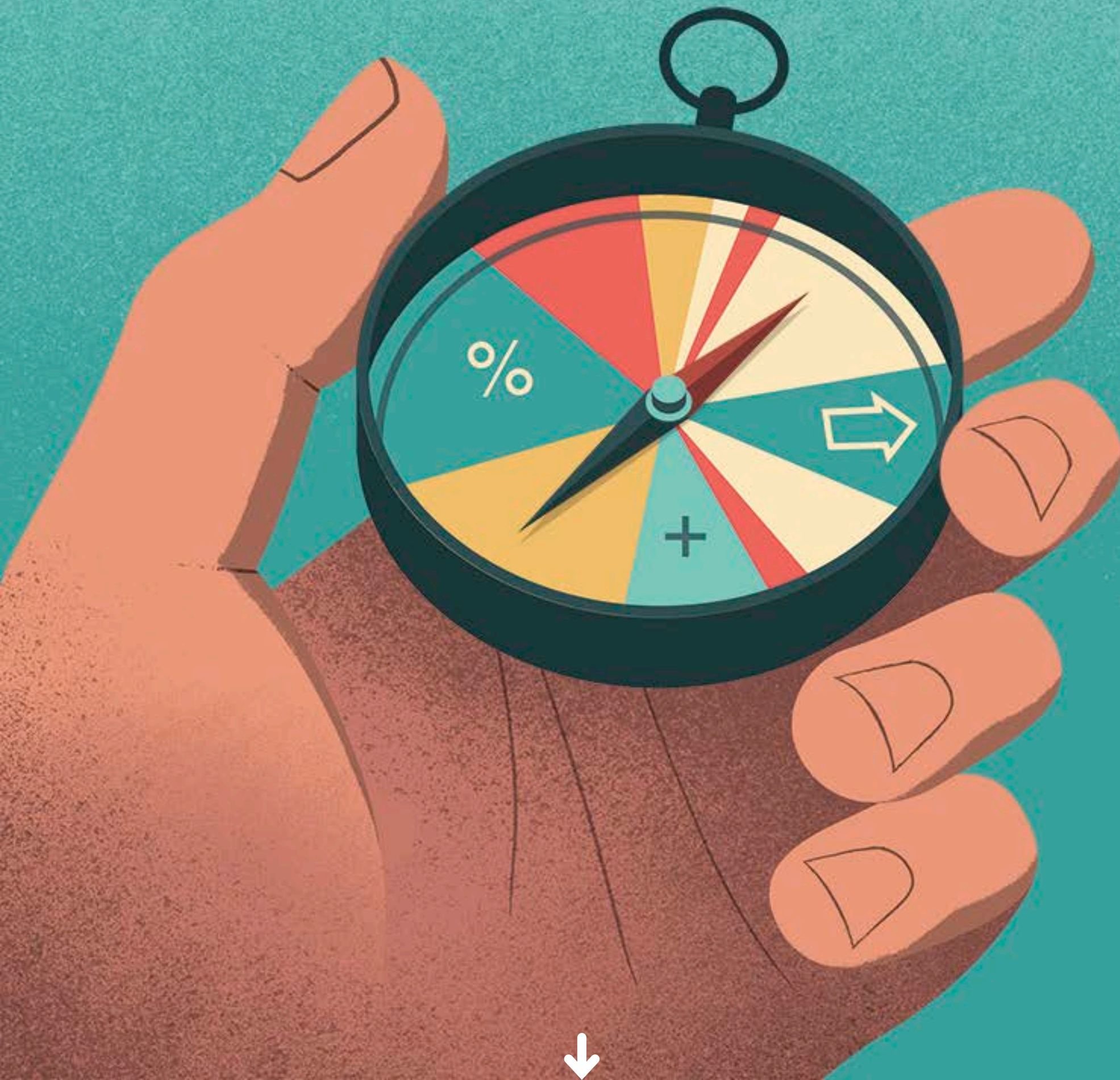


FINDING A WAY TO THE FUTURE



An increasing number of organisations are employing futurists to tell them what the future holds, writes James Hipwell. But who are they, what do they do, and can anyone really accurately predict the future for business and finance?

With the rapid speed of change in business driven by the likes of cloud technology, artificial intelligence, flexible working, and big data, the skill of being able to anticipate what lies ahead has obvious advantages. It has led to companies of every size and in every sector hiring corporate futurists to give them guidance on how things might play out for their businesses over the next decade and beyond.

Companies that have hired them include carmakers such as Ford, Toyota, and GM; tech companies Intel, Samsung, Cisco, Microsoft, and Google; and others including UNESCO, Accenture, and advertising agency McGarryBowen. It's a small but growing job title at corporations, and most futurists are independent consultants who are contracted by companies.

"One of the interesting ideas used in futurology is looking at niche products and behaviours to see if they are the precursor to something larger," says Mark Priestley, head of product and service strategy at Adaptive Lab.

"For example, what will happen if virtual reality really takes off? Will it change the way we interact with media and each other? Could it reduce the need to meet up with other people in person? Will it be the

FEATURE: FUTURISTS

FUTURECASTING

end of the office environment as we know it?"

Part of their own appeal, say industry practitioners, is due to the sheer complexity of business systems in the 21st century, and the feeling that if you don't keep on top of technology, you and your company will become extinct through lack of adaptation and change.

Brian David Johnson, who spent 14 years as an in-house futurist at Intel until last year, says the future, as far as a company is concerned, doesn't just happen.

"You have to be active, you can't be passive. As a futurist I work with organisations that need to make big bets today that might not pay off for 10 to 15 years. The future is not fixed. It is built every day by the actions of people," he says.

"I believe that we all must be active participants in our future, not only having a vision for tomorrow but also asking what potential future we want to avoid. I collaborate with corporations, universities, trade associations, and startups to model these futures and then work with them to identify the specific steps they need to take today, tomorrow, and five years from now to realise the future they envision. It is a process I call 'futurecasting', and it's a mix of social science, technical research, economic and trends data, history, expert interviews, and storytelling."

At Intel, Johnson was a key part of the 100-person Interaction and Experience Research Lab (IXR Lab), focused on defining new user experiences and new computing platforms. He spent his time reimagining how all of us will experience computing in the future and, of course, how we experience news and media content and interaction on digital devices.

FEATURE: FUTURISTS

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Now as a futurist working with the clients of Frost & Sullivan, which develops growth strategies for emerging businesses, the public sector, and the investment community, he comes into contact with many financial managers, some of whom are uncomfortable with his work because of their mandate to maximise shareholder value in the near term.

Every futurist you speak to invokes the name Alvin Toffler, the celebrated author of *Future Shock*, who died in 2016. The best-selling book, published in 1970, forecast how people and institutions of the late 20th century would contend with the immense strains and soaring opportunities of accelerating change. It sold millions of copies and was translated into dozens of languages, catapulting Toffler to international fame and spawning the business of futurism that exists today.

His predictions about the consequences to culture, the family, government, and the economy were remarkably accurate, and he foresaw the development of cloning, the popularity and influence of personal computers, and the invention of the internet, cable television, and telecommuting.

One futurist explained futurism as simply staying keenly attuned to trends in the laboratories and

FEATURE: FUTURISTS

research centres around the world, taking note of even things that seem impractical or useless.

Futurists then ask: "What if they found a way to do that thing 10,000 times as quickly/powerfully/well? What if someone weaponised it? Monopolised it? Or commercialised it, enabling millions of people to do this new thing routinely? What would society look like if everybody took this new thing for granted?"

So, if you think your business could benefit from the services of a futurist, how do you go about hiring one with the right mix of skills and capabilities?

As with many sectors, the calibre of talent is highly variable, but the best in the business have sizeable capacity to illuminate potential risks, opportunities, and routes of navigation to the envisaged future.

Melissa Sterry, who describes herself as a "design scientist, systems theorist, transdisciplinary designer, and biofuturist", says the business of futurism is generally expanding and diversifying, both in Europe and worldwide, but the sector remains "niche, and top-level expertise is a relative rarity".

"The sort of markers a client needs to look for in a high-calibre futurist are reputation, industry recognition, evidence of relevant technical expertise, a strong client folio, and links to respected public and/or private sector institutions," says Sterry.

"Some futurists, myself included, tend to work on assignments that, given their highly strategic nature, are subject to NDAs, so they cannot be discussed in the public domain. However, even in such instances, the most sought-after futurists invariably have a folio of 'here's one I did earlier' works as evidence of their ability to walk their futurist talk."