

Gerd Leonhard: Who is mission control for humanity?



One of the world's top-rated futurists, Gerd Leonhard, addressed the crowd at Xerocon London 2018. Focusing on the five to 10-year future, he provided actionable foresight across society, business and technology. Gerd's provocative, yet inspiring talk questioned the opportunities and challenges that will arise from automation, AI and big data.

With technological advances rapidly increasing, Gerd asked us, "How will we define what is human and what is not? How will we determine the roles humans will play, versus what will be done by technology? Will we really become just useless humans?"

Science fiction to science fact

"The future is already here, we have just been too busy to notice it," Gerd says. In a world where genetic engineering and cognitive computing is now possible, much of what we used to see as science fiction is now becoming a reality. Gerd spoke of what the consequences on society and business may

be, “What do we need to do today to make sure the ultimate result will still be human advancement?”

“Technology is evolving exponentially, changing our world at a mind-boggling pace. We’re at the pivot point of every technological change. Data is indeed the new oil, and AI is the new electricity.”

“We should not let Silicon Valley be the mission control for humanity. While there are many positives to AI and big data, such as helping eradicate disease and poverty by generating efficiencies, there are also risks associated with them. Technology is not something we should allow to rule our lives – we should be governing it,” he warns.

Megashifts

Gerd spoke of the mega-shifts – landscape changes that will affect business, commerce and society in the next 10 years. “The world is going digital at a furious pace. We will see far more change over the next 20 years than we have over the past 300.”



“Hyperconnectivity, smart ‘everything’, robotisation, automation and datafication are just some of the mega-shifts we’re already experiencing,” Gerd comments.

These shifts can be seen as a threat to job extinction becoming an increasing possibility. But not if we take control. “The end of routines is NOT the end of our jobs,” he says.

“I think we’re switching to a world where the left brain will be handled by our digital assistants, and the right brain will become more important for humans,” notes Gerd.

Anything that can’t be digitised or automated will become far more valuable, including compassion, intuition and empathy. Core skills of industries will be disrupted and will be replaced with ‘human’ skills – critical thinking, creativity, complex problem-solving.

Wake up call

Although humorous and personal, Gerd’s hard-hitting truths resonated with the Xerocon crowd. It challenged their daily concerns and questioned the very core of what it means to be human.

To his point, we need to be embracing technology, not becoming it. Utilising these advances to do new things and develop new skills, rather than just letting it take over our jobs. Machines may be better at data, but humans are better at relationships, experiences and engagement. And these values cannot be automated.

“Will we blindly outsource and abdicate big chunks of our lives to the global technology companies? Or will we take back our autonomy and demand a more sustainable balance between tech and humanity? We need to be discussing the moral framework that will govern this evolution and bridge the gap between big data and digital ethics.”

The future is better than we think so let’s adopt a wider view! As Gerd puts it: develop foresight. Question your assumptions. Don’t obsess over hyper-

efficiency. Instead, focus on what we humans do best.