

How to Forecast Future Trends: 6 Waves + 4 Steps

The "Big Picture"

To forecast future trends effectively, and with precision, you must step back to see the "big picture" of how current and upcoming trends might evolve over various time intervals, and then assess their trajectory, speed, and interaction.

Essentially, you compile a "jigsaw puzzle" of what the future will be like. You never have all the pieces, and they constantly change in shape, size, and color, thus reflecting the world in a state of flux. By looking for trend patterns, you can anticipate their magnitude — and thus "see" or envision their outcome with a high degree of accuracy. It is akin to very long-range weather forecasting, using satellite imagery to track the biggest trends.

Future trends emerge in two major, matrix-like dimensions:

"6-WAVE": 6 layered waves of future trends, each wave overlapped by the next, as society develops and modernizes; and

"4-STEP": 58-year mega-cycle of social, technical, economic, and political trends.

The resulting mega-cycling waves of future trends bring a "6-WAVE + 4-STEP" kaleidoscope of change — a giant multi-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. You then plot this satellite "map" of anticipated future trends across a 20-Year Timetable of 5-year intervals. It serves as a guide to decision-making and action — by individuals, societies, professions, organizations, industries, and governments.

"6-WAVE" Layers

In his book *The Third Wave*, futurist Alvin Toffler referred to the Agricultural Era and the Industrial Age as 1st-Wave Society and 2nd-Wave Society respectively. Third Wave Society is the post-Industrial period already well underway since about 1950 in the West.

Under-developed countries are stuck in a rut; bogged down as 1st-Wave agrarian societies, with people still living hand to mouth, working on a labor-intensive basis, just as people in Western countries did in their Agricultural Age. By contrast, rapidly-developing countries, such as China, are seeing a continual shift into the industrial and service sectors.

All economies modernize across this "1st-2nd-3rd Wave" path of development. Western nations have already moved beyond the 3rd-Wave, which is now so large that it employs about 85% of the North American work force. Indeed, Toffler's "Third Wave" must now itself be divided into four distinct waves, giving us 6 waves or economic layers in total:

1st Wave: Agriculture (and natural resources)

2nd Wave: Industry (manufacturing, transport)

3rd Wave: Services (financial, health, personal)

4th Wave: Information (knowledge, high-tech, bio-tech)

5th Wave: Leisure (entertainment, travel, tourism)

6th Wave: Outer Space.

These 6 waves exist simultaneously, though at any one time one wave predominates. The new waves pile on top of the old ones, building the economy higher. The old waves rarely disappear; the new waves complement them. For example, 2nd-wave machines also modernize 1st-wave agriculture. The 4th-Wave is not just spawning the digital economy; it is modernizing every sector — farm, factory, office, hospital, hotel, airline. The 4th-Wave is now the main employer in the West.

National fortunes vary, depending on the urge to change, the degree of innovation, and the political climate. In the future, the leading nations will be those with strong 4th- and 5th-Wave sectors. Indeed, countries such as China and India already have ambitious 6th-Wave space programs.

"4-STEP" Mega-Cycle

These 6 massive waves interact in a "4-STEP" long-wave cycle, about 58 years long. "4-STEP" stands for a Social, Technical, Economic, and Political sequence of change. The current long wave started around 1990. Within it are six 9.5-year midi-cycles, which is why the economy currently is slowing in 2008-9. The next 9.5-year cycle will peak in 2018-9, and so on, until the full long-wave culminates in a major slowdown around 2048.

STEP 1 — Social Motivation

Change is driven by human forces. As we progress through the “hierarchy of needs,” we generate new ideas to sustain our progress. We apply these ideas to techno-innovation. Today, as the 4th Wave spreads globally, innovations spread like lightning, again changing needs and aspirations. Any society that fails to innovate will stay stuck in the old wave, often missing several long wave cycles.

STEP 2 — Techno-Innovation

New ideas spur research, pushing back the frontiers of science, and spawning still more future trends in technology. The more efficient and productive the new technology, the greater its economic and social benefit. The greatest techno-change in world history is the Internet Revolution, or what I call the Webolution, which is a huge wealth-creation phenomenon.

STEP 3 — Eco-Modernization

The third step, therefore, is the effective management of technology to restructure and modernize the economy — to orchestrate the production of worldwide wealth. The Webolution is creating massive productivity gains, which always lead to real increases in wealth.

STEP 4 — Political Reform

Finally, to ensure that people benefit from this new wave of modernization, the entire 4-STEP cycle must be elevated to a higher level, so that people are incentivized to start the process all over again. To allow this, political systems inevitably will reform — preferably by consensus, but by upheaval if necessary. Otherwise, corrupt regimes and despots garner all the gains. Bureaucracy and entrenched power bases arise. Thus disenfranchised and disenchanted, people lose all incentive to innovate. Eventually, however, trends will overwhelm the system’s resistance to change. It will reform or be overthrown.

In sum, the world is in constant transition, climbing 6 waves of modernization and crossing the 4-STEP cycle of change. This occurs in varying degrees and speeds, over different timeframes.

The task of the futurist is to identify, track, and forecast the next future, identifying threats and opportunities. Anyone who can “see” and “map” their future in this way, and takes the necessary steps to change, will grow and succeed in every way. Those who fail to “see” their future will simply end up in the wrong place.

About the Author

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