

# PLAYING WITH THE FUTURE



By David Krause

**Futurist David Zach has a confession: He can't predict the future. And he cautions against listening to those who say they can. "Forecasts about the future quite often have more to say about the time in which they were made than the time for which they were intended," Zach says.**

"Didn't the futurists back in the 1970s say that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century we were going to be living in a leisure-based society?" Zach notes that many of those who made such predictions were wearing—no surprise—leisure suits.

Zach cites what he calls the convenience-tool test, which illustrates the paradoxical promise of technology allowing more time for leisure: If you have a laptop computer, a wireless phone, and access to a fax machine, you will on average work eight hours more per week than people without the same technology.

So what happened to all the leisure time we were promised? Instead of a leisure-based society, Zach says, what we have today is a society filled with choices. "The problem is, we don't know how to choose."

As the keynote speaker for the College of Health Sciences retreat on June 20, Zach challenged the faculty and staff to look carefully at what's going on around them while taking in the larger lessons of history, which provide clues to the future. Zach has a master's degree in studies of the future from the University of Houston, and has worked with more than 1,000 companies, including Harley-Davidson, Apple Computer, Abbott Labs, 3M, and IBM.

Allan Hoffman, Ed.D., CHES, dean of the College of Health Sciences, says his purpose in bringing a futurist to the retreat was to get people thinking in new ways about trends that could shape their future. "By combining this with what we're doing in the quality movement, we'll always be thinking futuristically as we re-engineer and move forward," Dr. Hoffman says. "We're always in a state of change."

"We always have to engage the future into our thought process even though there are many elements we can't





predict,” Dr. Hoffman says. “When we did our original strategic plan several years ago, no one could accurately predict the numerous changes in our environment. Issues like homeland security, bioterrorism, and the stock market downturn are just a few examples of these changes.”

Zach brings a lighthearted approach to his presentation on the future, never taking himself too seriously. He punctuates his points with thoughtful quotes and illustrations as he prods people past their comfort zones.

He tosses out some questions to those at the retreat. “How many of you own a house? A car?” Hands go up. “Now, how much attention do you put into the care of those versus the care of your future? And which one ultimately has more value?” Point made.

One of the characteristics of today’s society, Zach says, is uncertainty. The stock market is a good example. Quoting *Money Magazine*, Zach says that before 2001 people suffered from a dangerous illusion of certainty. In the late 1990s, all the charts were up. And even though people knew from history that the stock market can go down, there was shock and disbelief when their portfolios took a nosedive.

“We have to get used to the future being something you didn’t expect,” Zach says. “And within that uncertainty lie opportunities—if you know how to look for them.

“Maybe uncertainty is better than certainty in that when things are certain, you know exactly how things are going to work out,” Zach says. “And when something doesn’t fit that, there are lots of new opportunities that emerge. Unfortunately, people don’t like uncertainty.”

One of the ways we’ve tried to undercut uncertainty is through projections. Zach gives an illustration. “How many of you are a little uncertain about the future of your jobs, your careers? I will take away all that uncertainty and give you certainty based on trend extrapolation,” he says in mock reassurance.

If you follow the growth of Elvis impersonators starting in the 1970s through today, Zach says, you’ll see that the number has grown steadily. “Based on trend extrapolation, by the year 2100, one of every four people in this country will be an Elvis impersonator.” But there’s more: “If you follow the growth of attorneys just from the state of California, if they keep growing at their current rate, by the year 2100 the other three-fourths are going to be attorneys.

“Now there is a third choice, which is not to trust futurists, and that’s the one I’m going with,” Zach says. “We cannot know the future. That is my professional opinion. But we can know today if we look around and take off the blinders that we all wear, and look back in history as a believer in history and learning from history. Because things change, but people don’t.”

So how do you approach the future if it can’t be known? One of the keys is the ability to play.

“Play is what you do when you don’t know,” Zach says. “A child doesn’t know how to do things, doesn’t know the future. Do you know how to play, and do you know the value of play in that regard? Because play is where you can safely make mistakes.

“Something went wrong along the way. We forgot how to play. So in part, one of the most important values and perspectives you can have, when you try to get into the future, is to play with it.”

This leads to one of Zach’s foundational premises on the future: *Play with fads, work with trends, live by principles.*

*Fads* are fun. They are the colors of our clothes, the styles of our shoes, the kinds of music we listen to—things that add spice to life. Fads are the culture and character of who we are. They are market driven, and tend to be pushed. And as soon as something stops pushing them, fads fall away. They are continually replaced by other fads.

*Trends* tend to be from the ground up. They are longer term, and grow out of needs rather than wants.

*Principles*, however, don’t change. A principle is something you can rely on, knowing it will never change.

The challenge is knowing which is which. Too often, Zach says, fads come dressed up as principles presented by articulate incompetents who have a profit motive and convince us this is the new answer. Principles, however, are things we need to be reminded of since they usually don’t present themselves as something new.

The danger in looking toward the future is that we may forget the principles and become distracted by fads and trends. “If you’re going to make plans, you have to know which is which,” Zach says. “If you try to make plans before you distinguish them, you are quite likely to go off in a direction that isn’t valid.”

Which leads to another of his premises—what Zach calls the four-part economy based on *experience, attention, promise, and attitude*. Put all four elements together and you have what Zach calls

the concierge model for customer service. “If you want to make the future work, if you want to make this economy work, you have to start thinking like a concierge.”

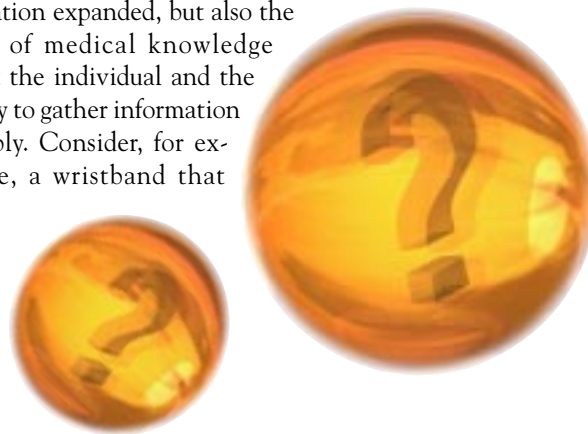
He puts it into a formula: *The concierge is professionally trained to recognize individual attitudes such that they know how to route that attitude to the right exceptional experience that holds their attention and fulfills a promise.*

“That is customer satisfaction, and that is how it will work in the future,” Zach says. “Think about your college and university. Who are the people that are natural concierges?”

History plays a pivotal role in Zach’s views on the future, which doesn’t necessarily mean abandoning what has gone before. (Zach, by the way, wears a 1930s wind-up wristwatch.) In fact, not all change is progress. “There’s an awful lot about the future that doesn’t have to change,” Zach says. “The question is, what elements of your life in the orga-

plosion of medical information on the Internet, for example, physicians are seeing patients armed with reams of information. As a result, patients have already formed opinions on what they need rather than looking solely to the doctor for advice and treatment.

And not only has access to medical information expanded, but also the level of medical knowledge about the individual and the ability to gather information cheaply. Consider, for example, a wristband that



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nization do you have to bring into the future, and what can be left?”

Zach identifies six key areas that provide context for viewing the future: philosophy, theology, history, biography, biology, and design.

“Those are the sources for answers to the questions we’re now facing,” Zach says. “The future comes from mavericks, artists, entrepreneurs, designers, inventors, travelers, and lifelong learners. Pay attention to those people and how you feel about them.”

Another key point to understanding the future has to do with connections. Everything wants to be connected, Zach says, and therein is the pathway to wealth. “Our ability to connect people, things, and ideas, and especially people, things, and ideas we didn’t think were connectable—that’s how we create wealth. And not just dollars and cents, but anything you value.

“Think about all the things in your life that you value. Somebody connected them. And think about all the things we haven’t yet connected. What is still undiscovered, uninvented, unimagined?”

New connections that brought greater access to information and increased automation have already changed medicine and health care. With the ex-

provides continuous monitoring of biometrics. Would such a device, at some level, automate the role of the doctor, nurse, or other caregiver? And if so, how would that automation change the role of caregivers?

The way to approach such innovations, or connections, is to take an if/then approach to see where things might go. With the biometrics wristband, for example, you would look not only at the implications for caregivers, but also at implications for those who would use the information, such as health systems and insurers. The potential is there for information to be used against the patient as well as for a benefit.

“This is an incredibly powerful thing for figuring out the playing field for a trend,” Zach says.

In closing, Zach returns to the importance of distinguishing the temporary from what will last. “Think about your school: What will never, ever change? What are the principles? What trends are you going to work with, and what fads are you going to play with as you move into the future?” ●

