# Shift happening - taking charge

By Mark Baker

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The title of this article is derived from the thought-provoking Shift Happens presentation, many variants of which are widely available from the internet. It reflects on the period of unprecedented technological change that we are living through.

Around the time of The Millennium there was a news article reporting the death of an elderly lady, perhaps Britain's oldest citizen at the time, aged about 110 years. It prompted me to reflect on the incredible changes that had taken place during her lifetime. Transport developed from being predominantly wind, steam and animal powered to the point at which astronauts were successfully landed on the Moon and returned to Earth, an international space station was being constructed and countless satellites orbited the planet. Countries merged, fractured, were created and disappeared. Empires grew and disintegrated and the balance of world power ebbed and flowed, a process punctuated by many different conflicts, both global and local. Medical science took massive leaps forward, as did technology, especially in the field of electronics.

I imagined her lifetime represented by a graph with a ski-slope profile, with change increasing exponentially and reflected on this with a sense of awe. It was not until later that I started to consider my own place on the latter half of that graph, where the slope was increasing rapidly. I tried to extrapolate mentally where the graph would get to, should I live to a similar age – what changes would I end up living through? Will the rate of change eventually start to slow?
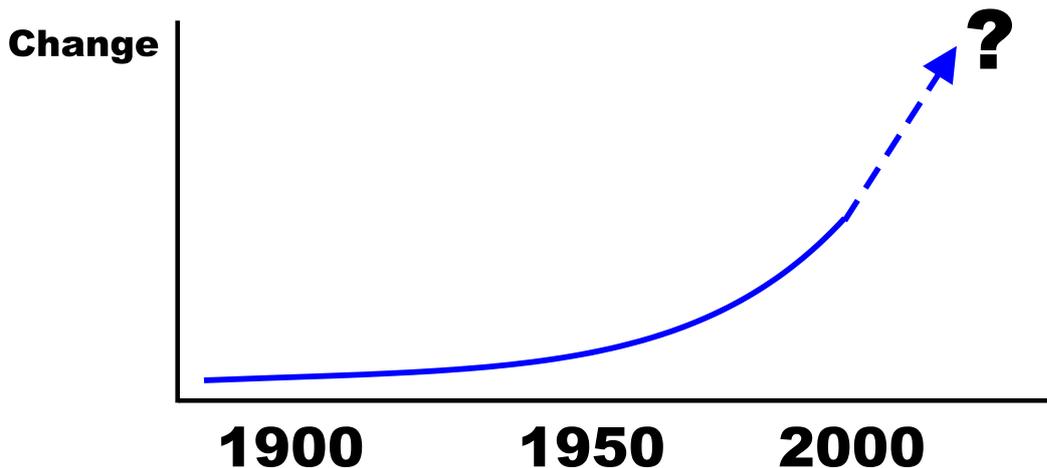
It is easy to think back on some of the changes seen already – mobile phones, the birth of the internet, the end of the Berlin Wall, the emergence of AIDs, a growing awareness of global warming and the need for sustainable living and so on. It is less easy to identify the changes that I am living through now, let alone predict those yet to come, but one thing

seems certain. I am likely to live to see far greater change than the Millennium Lady.

Whilst technology can change very rapidly indeed, our ability to fully exploit new developments and ideas can lag behind significantly. This will continue to provide fuel for future change as new applications of older technologies emerge.

In the face of rapid change, it is easy to drift towards one of two possible extremes. One involves sticking your


head in the sand and refusing to accept new ideas, whilst clinging desperately to increasingly outmoded ideas and customs. The other extreme is enthusiastically rushing to adopt every new idea and trend with little thought about the consequences. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges is trying to decide what we should grab hold of with determination and what we should just let go.

Taking just one example, I tend to guard my privacy zealously, whilst others seem content to share all sorts of intimate details and photographs with the world, via numerous social networking and other outlets. Is one way better than the other? Is this trend an unstoppable cultural change and my approach that of an increasingly obsolete older generation? Or does being older give me the benefit of wisdom and should we in education do our best to encourage younger learners to treat their personal privacy with greater respect? I won't pretend to have the answer to this. I am confident of one thing however, we cannot hang on to all the "old ways" and that trying to maintain a focus on an evolving vision of what we want the future to be like will give us greater control over the eventual outcomes.

Developing technology and increasing rates of change point towards growing international competition for jobs and the likelihood that today's learners will be changing roles, jobs and careers, far more than previous generations. This highlights the importance of developing relevant and readily transferable skills, as well as associated attitudes and characteristics, such as greater flexibility and resilience. The importance of developing life-long learning capability seems clear. These ideas have been circulating for some time.

The changes will bring further challenges. For example we have access to ever-growing oceans of data and information, to the extent that it becomes increasingly difficult to find what we need the most, in order to achieve the greatest impact. The crucial is lost, all too often, within the mundane. New tools and services will help with this, but we will need to work smarter too.

Not all aspects of life are changing with increasing rapidity, following the ski-slope profile. Cultural change tends to be slower. What would the graphs of health and happiness look like? The graph of world peacefulness or fairness?
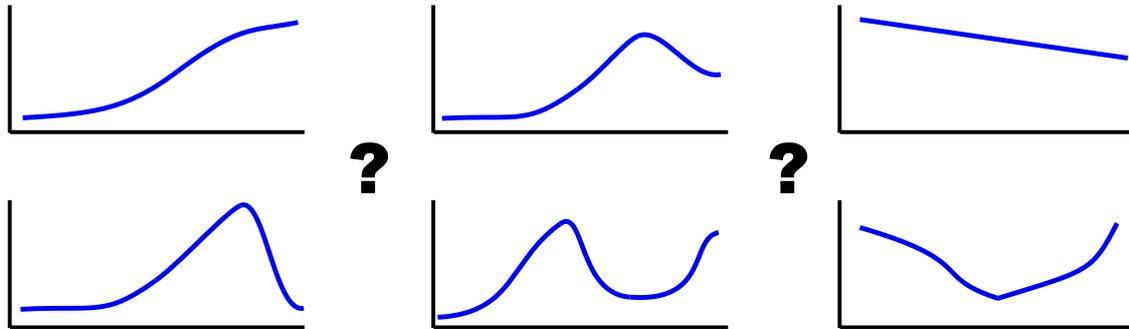
Whilst guessing the future is fraught with difficulty and error, we do appear to have a clear choice. We can sit back and allow technological changes to drive what we do. Alternatively we can develop a vision of what we want the future to look like and take charge of technology to try and make sure it delivers what we want from it. This whilst educating our learners so that they have the skills and the confidence to do the same in their turn.

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