

explore

more



HOW TO RESEARCH TRENDS

/ Els Dragt

Move beyond trend watching
to kickstart innovation

Let's explore
tomorrow together!



BIS Publishers

Borneostraat 80 A
1094 CP Amsterdam
The Netherlands
T(31) 020 515 02 30
bis@bispublishers.com
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Intro

WHY THIS BOOK?

The profession of trend researcher is still highly charged with stereotypes. Many think it's mainly about hip and trendy fashion styles or following hypes and fads. But the scope of a trend researcher's job extends far beyond that. My mission is to demystify the trend process, so that you'll understand how it works and have the tools to conduct trend research yourself.

This book will show you how to study change and understand emerging shifts in people's needs and wants. These trend insights are essential during any innovation or transition process and serve as the foundation for making decisions that improve your quality of life and that of others. Understanding trends empowers you to shape more responsible futures.

Education is key in training your trend muscles. This means practice, practice, practice and experiencing the process in-depth. These are things that buying a yearly trend report or using generative AI tools can never replace. When I started out in trend research there weren't many books explaining the process. Sure, there were loads of reports presenting next year's trends, and plenty of books with a more academic approach. But where was the book explaining the process of applied trend research for use in a day-to-day organisational context? Eventually I decided to write one myself. And that's the book you're reading right now.

WHO'S IT FOR?

If you're looking for vague trend guru talk, then you might as well put this book down and keep looking. But if what you're looking for is a transparent, down-to-earth approach to trends, look no further. Understanding trends, the emerging values and needs of groups in society, will provide you with a springboard for innovating and creating change. That's something that students and teachers, beginners and professionals, marketers and policymakers, designers and analysts, entrepreneurs and executives, and researchers and strategists can all use.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

For the past twenty years I have immersed myself in trend research, worked as a trend lecturer and trained professionals in the trend research cycle. I've collaborated with numerous public and private organisations and brands with a local and international scope, across a wide variety of sectors, ranging from finance to fashion and from telecom to food. The lessons I learned on this journey I am now sharing with you. This is the revised version of my book, which I decided to update in view of the growing number of professionals integrating trends into their daily work by tailoring the format to be more helpful in incorporating trends within organisations. With this in mind I selected specific professionals to interview, added relevant theories and provided practical suggestions on establishing a trend practice within an organisation. Updating also means deleting, so I've scrapped all the interviews, quotes and case studies from the previous edition.

Each chapter includes the following elements:

- Theoretical information regarding the subject at hand, collected, analysed and synthesised from various sources in combination with experience by practice.
- Learning points from professionals who actively engage with trends in their company.
- Activities and worksheets to get going right away individually or in a team.
- Suggestions for further reading, watching and clicking.

WHAT'S NOT INSIDE?

No numbers: this book is about qualitative trend research and does not shed light on the quantitative approach of trend forecasting. It won't explain how to use spreadsheets and computer models to extrapolate numerical data from the past and present into the future.

No science: although I have used some academic sources for this book, I won't be offering a scientific approach for exploring the future. We won't be focusing on the complete field of futures studies, but rather on the fundamentals of applied trend research.

No next year's trends: this book does not double as a trend report or showcase what is hot or not. It also doesn't include many trend descriptions, because I would like you to keep an open mind and not get too stuck on one specific way of reporting trends. You can find many free trend reports online for inspiration, and I'll be referring to some of these throughout the book.

HAPPY READING

Trend research is a field that is always developing, which is why this book is also a work in progress and permanently in beta. You are more than welcome to contribute, add, suggest or ask anything. You can find more information and material at www.studio-elsewhere.com.

Now let's start our trend expedition!

Els Dragt

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Your guides

Along with sharing my own expertise on researching trends, I've invited six other professionals with different backgrounds to be your navigators of the trend landscape. They openly share their insights on scanning, analysing and applying trends in their workplace. You can find their experiences in the "In Practice" sections of each chapter. Let's get to know your guides!*

Simone Mutsaers

Innovation Researcher at NPO

Simone is part of the innovation team at NPO, the umbrella organisation of the Dutch public broadcasting system. She holds a master's in media psychology and has extensive knowledge and experience in the media research field. On the innovation team Simone is the voice of current and future audiences. She conducts trend research and feeds the trend insights into innovation processes and projects at NPO.

Sean Durkan

Global Insight Manager at Royal Swinkels Family Brewers

Sean works in the global marketing team and holds a bachelor's (hons) in Design Management. He is a seasoned marketing and brand manager and has experience with working in private and public organisations. At Swinkels he is responsible for getting the outside in, making sure that everyone in the company is up to date on current and emerging consumer values and needs.

Eva Burm

Port of the Future Advisor at Port of Antwerp-Bruges

Eva is part of the innovation enablement team and has a master's in Communication and Media Studies as well as a degree in International Relations. She is dedicated to creating an innovation culture at Port of Antwerp-Bruges by introducing creativity, ideation, design thinking, systemic design and trendwatching techniques. She facilitates her colleagues in picking up new skills and integrating them into their daily work.

Maud Donga

Lecturer in trend research at Fontys University of Applied Sciences

Maud teaches students how to research trends at the bachelor's program in Trend Research & Concept Creation in Lifestyle (TCL). She has a bachelor's in Fashion Communication and a master's in Crossover Creativity. Throughout the four-year program at Fontys, Maud gives students their foundation in trend research. She knows how to activate young people and introduce them to the trend field.

Bas van de Poel

Co-Founder & Innovation Director at Modem

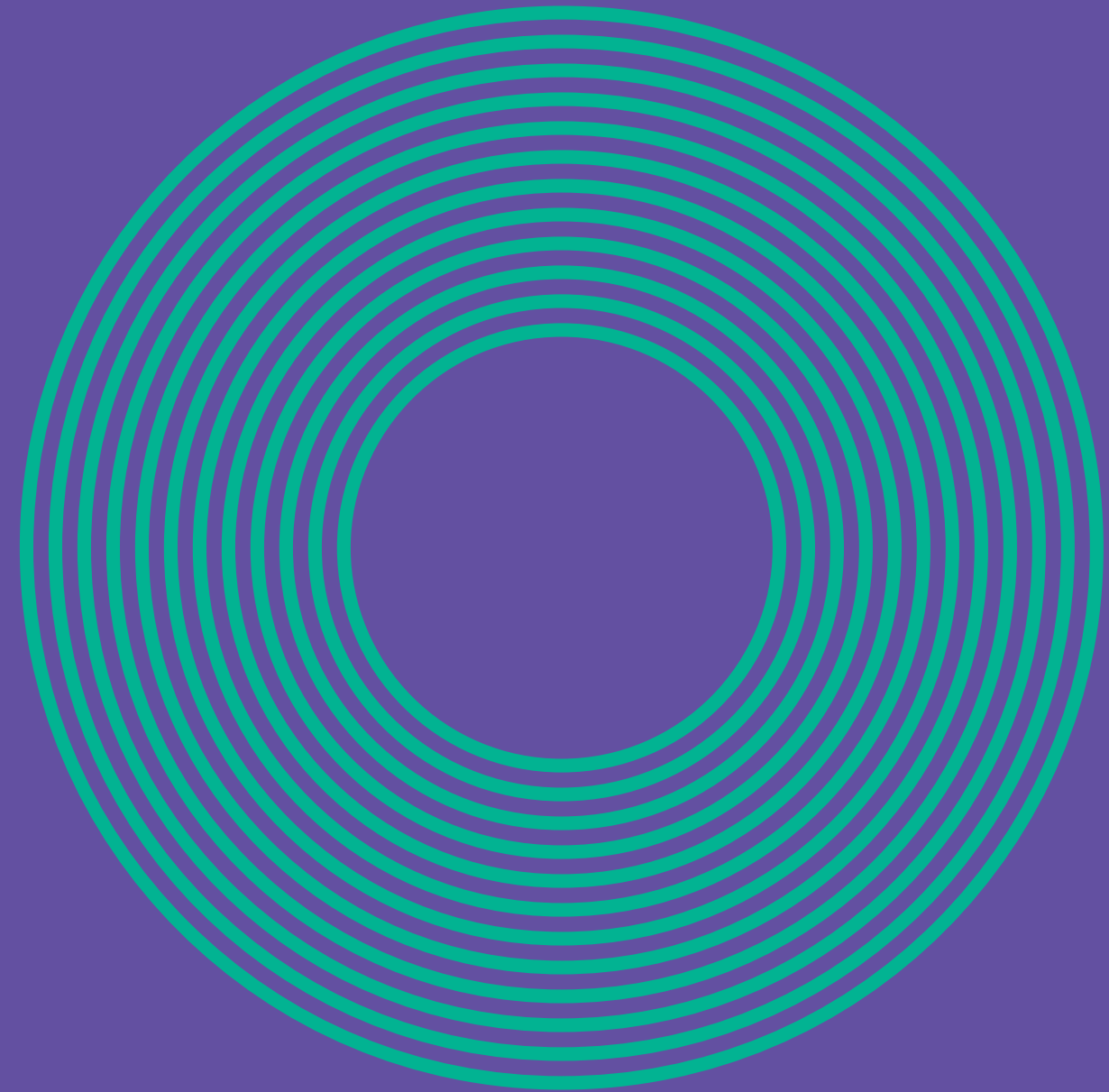
Bas is co-founder of Modem, an office for design and innovation working at the intersection of the physical and digital. He holds a bachelor's from the Willem de Kooning art academy in Rotterdam. After a stint in the field of communications and at Space10 he started Modem. Modem works for clients like Chanel, Nike, Google, Ikea and The Barbican.

Anna Lena Götzmann

Cultural Strategy Director at Protein Agency

Anna Lena is part of Protein Agency, a global brand consultancy specialising in cultural insight, strategy, and community-led activation. She has a bachelor's degree in Fashion & Branding from Amsterdam Fashion Institute AMFI. She is driven by an inexhaustible curiosity and eagerness to understand people's behaviour. At Protein Agency she helps brands such as Nike, Calvin Klein and Google make sense of the world and make more culturally progressive decisions.

** For the first edition of this book I interviewed over thirty professionals and their knowledge is incorporated in this edition. You can find their names in the appendix in the back.*



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We are all futurists. We can think and plan ahead in some way or another. You probably thought of something in the future today? From checking the weather forecast and deciding on what to wear and which activity to do in a couple of hours to thinking forward career-wise five years from now to imagining life when pensioned in forty years. This tendency to be curious about the future and trying to anticipate it is not a specific symptom of current modern times. For centuries there has been a constant search for ways to get a hold of uncertain futures. From the ancient Greeks visiting the oracle of Delphi to the current computer based algorithms trying to model and predict the future.

Isn't it amazing that we, as humans, can imagine something that is not there yet and take concrete actions in the present to block or accelerate this potential future? We sometimes seem to forget we have this talent. Engaging in future related activities will help you to activate this innate skill. One of these activities is trend research.

In this chapter you will hit rewind and take a first step into the world of trend research. You will read about the effects of researching trends and how past, present and future are interconnected. You will also be updated on the history of research into the future, read about predicting versus exploring futures and pick up on the status quo of the trend profession. This will help you to navigate the trend research domain and understand its roots.

Why research trends?

Research in general is aimed at finding new knowledge. It is the systematic investigation of a certain topic in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions. But when everything in our interconnected, complex world is in a state of flux and there is a lot of uncertainty to deal with daily, is it even possible to research this?

CULTIVATE THE LONG VIEW

In the context of an ever-changing world, the field of futures studies encapsulates various approaches to researching, anticipating and shaping multiple futures. Futures studies is the art and science of taking responsibility for the long-term consequences of our decisions and actions today (Gidley, 2017). To ensure a high quality of life for current and future generations, you need to think about the long-term impact of the decisions you make today. This is especially urgent in a world where short-termism thrives. It requires a long-term mindset, consideration of the needs of those who are yet to be born and the will to care for the world beyond our lifetimes. Indigenous communities, such as the Native American community of Haudenosaunee, have long practised intergenerational justice in the form of the Seventh Generation Principle. It is based on their philosophy that all our present decisions should be decisions that will keep the world sustainable seven generations into the future. Approaches like forecasting, scenario planning, strategic foresight and trend research, which fall under the umbrella of futures studies, also cultivate the long view. By incorporating these approaches into your work and decision-making processes, you can break free from the cycle of short-term thinking and become more future literate.

SPOTLIGHT ON WALES

In 2015 the Welsh government passed the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions. The goal of the act is to help these bodies work better with people, communities and each other, and to address persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. Alongside the act, the government created the Future Generations Commissioner role to advise the government and other public bodies in Wales. To ensure a collective focus, the act sets seven wellbeing goals for the future that all listed public bodies must work towards.

TRAIN YOUR FUTURES CONSCIOUSNESS


Engaging in future-related activities, such as trend research, helps develop your futures consciousness. The concept of "future consciousness" was developed by researchers at the Finland Futures Research Centre (University of Turku and University of Geneva). It describes and

measures the human capacity to understand, anticipate, prepare for and embrace the future. It consists of five dimensions: time perspective, agency beliefs, openness to alternatives, systems perception and concern for others. You can develop these five dimensions through practice to help you to make better long-term decisions. For example, agency belief relates to the extent to which we feel our actions influence the world. Stimulating this belief can empower people, especially the younger generation, and show they can contribute to change, from their neighbourhood to the global stage. Acquiring the tools to engage with the future early in life will better equip you to navigate uncertainties and challenges and become a change agent rather than a victim of change.

ROLE OF TRENDS

This book focuses entirely on trend research. It is a method for identifying and understanding change in a structured way and gaining insights into potential directions of change. Trend research can be applied to both public and commercial challenges. A trend is a change in values and needs being driven by forces and manifesting itself in various ways within certain groups in society. Chapter 2 will give you more information on the definition of a trend and the framework of trend research. The research itself is a means to an end and should be action-oriented. Trend insights help you to see various pathways into the future and reflect on and prioritise which trends you would like to see become a daily reality. Trends provide inspiration for strategic decisions and actions. Trend research works best when integrated at the very beginning of exploratory challenges and open-ended projects, for example creating new visions and strategies or developing new services and products. Along with stimulating your long-term thinking and futures consciousness, what other specific uses does trend research have? Engaging in trend research has a threefold effect: it enables you to detect change, understand change and act upon change. Let's explore each of these effects:

- **Detect**
Trend research is firstly about detecting manifestations of change happening right now. By immersing yourself in trend research you become more attuned and receptive to change and able to detect signs of change more easily and earlier. It helps you to develop an outside-in perspective instead of an inside-out one. You can detect shifts by doing specific scanning activities, which are detailed in chapter 3 of this book.
- **Understand**
Secondly, trend research is about understanding change. By analysing the detected signals of change and interpreting their underlying drivers you will understand them from a wider, cross-industry perspective. You then move beyond mere observations and really get a feel of what lies beneath. Understanding the underlying values and needs driving change is at the core of any trend analysis. You can analyse change using clustering and validating tools, which you can read about in chapter 4 of this book.
- **Act**
Trend research serves as a foundation for vision building, strategy development and decision making. It draws your attention to potential opportunities and challenges. This creates a sense of urgency and influences what is on your political, organisational or personal agenda for the years to come. You can act on trends to improve people's quality of life using prioritising and translation tools outlined in chapter 5 of this book.



DOWNLOAD
UTOPIA P2P

Futures' past

To understand the domain of trend research you need to understand its roots. The desire to know the future has arisen in many forms over the centuries. From prophecy to philosophy to military strategy, many intellectual traditions have defined the current framework of thinking about the future and about trends. This timeline sheds some light on the genealogy of futures research and where it stands now.

TIMELINE – A History of Futures Studies. (Son, 2015 & Asselt, 2010)

1. **3000 BCE > Mesopotamia** – The kings in ancient Mesopotamia tried predicting the future using the position of stars and sheep livers. These rulers attempted to build their empires on anticipated economic and political futures.
2. **600 BCE > Oracle of Delphi** – For hundreds of years people visited the site of Delphi in ancient Greece, relying on the oracle to help them choose the best course of action for the future. Their questions ranged from crop growth to romance to military strategies. The prophecies given tended to be rather cryptic and ambiguous. How the inquirers interpreted these divine communications shaped their future actions.
3. **500 CE > Rise of religions** – In medieval times the focus on religion played a key role in peoples' idea of the future. People's behaviour and actions during their daily life concentrated on getting to an afterlife. Many religions also claimed that divine prophets have the power to see into the future and change it.
4. **1400 CE > Renaissance** – Instead of the future being determined by the stars or a divine entity, philosophers like Machiavelli argued that humans have, to a certain extent, control over their lives. In Machiavelli's view success depended on the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. In 1516 Thomas More published his book *Utopia*, which set off a tradition of utopian stories describing ideal future societies.
5. **1700 CE > Enlightenment** – This period was defined by a rise, mainly in Europe, of reason, analysis and individualism rather than adherence to traditional lines of authority. The concept of the future shifted to become more open-ended and the view that people can plan or shape the future in line with their needs to create progress in society began to take hold.
6. **1900 CE > Systematic futures thinking** – In 1902 the article "The Discovery of the Future" by writer H.G. Wells is published in scientific journal *Nature*. Wells promoted a future-forward mindset as being more creative, masterful and modern than the predominant historical way of thinking. His views became a catalyst for the discipline of futures studies.

7. **1950 CE > Planning with military precision** – Following two World Wars in the first half of the century, a period of recovery and rebuilding of nations began. Ideas about predictability and manipulability of societies became the norm. Think tanks and planning agencies popped up, such as RAND, a renowned American think tank applying military techniques like scenario planning to think about the future.
8. **1960 CE > Futures institutes** – During the nineteen-sixties and seventies, platforms and networks of futures studies emerged, like the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF). A period of awareness of the darker side of growing consumerism began. In 1972 the Club of Rome published their famous report "Limits of Growth", showing the possible future consequences of exponential economic and population growth in a world of finite natural resources.
9. **1970 CE > Profitable futures** – Studies into trends and futures became more attuned to generating input for business strategies. Oil company Shell, for instance, used scenario planning techniques to prepare for possible futures like a resources crisis. When in 1973 an oil crisis became reality, Shell was able to rapidly change their business strategy to become a world player in the oil industry.
10. **1990 CE > Getting with the gurus** – From the nineties onwards the trend gurus entered the scene. These charismatic individuals monitored mainly short-term future signals and presented them in a visual and engaging way. They inspired many business leaders with fast-paced trend talks and stimulated them to be more open to change.
11. **2000 CE > The power of trends** – World-wide terrorism attacks and economic recessions pave the way for a more open and innovative mindset in society: if the old ways don't work, then try new ones. Trend researchers join innovation teams and provide input for strategies. Educational programs integrating trend research in their curriculum are on the rise.
12. **2020 CE > Futures for all** – The global covid pandemic creates awareness of how rapid things can change for everyone on earth. The ability to deal with uncertainty and not knowing becomes more relevant. Attention increases for the democratisation of futures studies and creating participatory future visions that are more inclusive and diverse.

Time

Researching trends involves dealing with people's notions of time. Time is a social construct; it is something we, as humans, make up ourselves. How you perceive and engage with time is shaped by your cultural background. Are you used to a linear time frame (*chronos*), in which time is divided into segments such as past, present and future and measured in years, days, hours and minutes? Or are you living according to a cyclical time frame (*kairos*), governed by the rhythms of seasons and lunar cycles, in which time is seen as a flow and an eternal now? Many of us live in an environment dominated by the linear time frame, where clocks dictate our lives. Clock time, once an innovative technology, has been so widely adopted now that most of us perceive it as an unchangeable law of nature, as something you cannot escape.

The linear time frame dominates for most of us, so let's focus specifically on the interconnected concepts of past, present and future. We use the past to guide our present-day behaviour, which, in turn, influences the way we imagine the future. How you reflect on the past and are behaving in the present influences how you perceive your future. (Bell, 2003; Bishop, 2012). When researching trends it is important to be aware of your own beliefs and perceptions of the past, present and future, because they influence the way you observe the world.

PAST

When you took history classes in school, you probably had to learn all kinds of historical dates and events by heart. Most history classes present stories about the past as if they are factual information. But historical accounts can be subjective and shaped by specific cultural angles. Take, for instance, colonialism: history is presented very differently from the colonisers' perspectives than it is from the perspective of those invaded and subjugated. History is often the story people tell themselves about who they want to be. That's why you should be aware that there are many pasts. This helps to put current changes into perspective and create a better understanding of our present-day behaviour.

PRESENT

Just as your reflection on the past guides your current behaviour, your behaviour in the present influences which futures will become a reality. The present contains a collection of turning points that create paths into a range of potential futures. The downside of leaning too much on the present is that it can make you narrow-minded in seeing a variety of alternative futures. We are more open to evidence reinforcing our beliefs than to anything contradicting them. People tend to project current issues onto the future as if nothing else might change along the way: as if it is a linear, continuous storyline, even though countless unexpected events can change our present-day reality within the blink of an eye.

FUTURE(S)

As we just described, the future should not be seen as a linear continuation of the past and present. Just like time, the future is a social construct, shaped by people's perceptions of the past and present and their expectations of the future. There are as many futures as there are individuals, so why are we addressing it as THE future, as if there is only one singular future that is fixed? Using the plural, futureS, immediately opens your thinking and helps you consider many more futures. These futures are in the making right now, being shaped as we speak by ourselves as a society. As a trend researcher you can investigate the manifestations of these changes, using these as inputs to uncover the multitude of potential futures.

Working with trends strengthens your time-travelling muscles as you navigate between the pasts, present and futures. Becoming polytemporal means being able to exist in many times and dance across various time horizons. This will help you contemplate the world in the near future and even beyond your own lifetime (Krznaric, 2020).

Prediction or exploration?

A persistent image of trend researchers is that they claim to predict the future. Statements like "In 2050 we will all have self-sustaining lifestyles, transport ourselves via self-driving cars and 3D-print our food" are very common in presentations by trend gurus. On the other hand, if you type "predictions gone wrong" in an online search engine you can find a lot of examples of experts predicting future events that never came true. Is prediction of the future possible at all? That depends mainly on how you look at the future in a philosophical kind of way. There are many different ways of looking at the future depending on your cultural background and roots. The following three perspectives on the future (Asselt, 2010) are widely used:

- The future is determined. This approach sees the future as fixed and determined by fate and destiny.
- The future is open but not empty. This approach sees our future as open but not a completely blank page, because it is partly shaped by our actions in the past and present.
- The future is open. This approach believes that the future is open and can be completely influenced by human beings.

As a researcher of trends it is important to be aware of your own beliefs and perceptions regarding the future, because they will influence the way you analyse signs of change. What are your ideas about the future? How uncertain or how predetermined do you feel it is? Many trend researchers do not see the future as an open and empty black void, but not as a fixed and prewritten storyline

either. Most of them agree upon the notion that the future is uncertain and open within limits. While a trend guru here and there may well tell you that they can give a one-hundred-percent accurate forecast of the coming years, most trend researchers adhere to the idea that it is impossible to accurately predict the future. There's just too much uncertainty in predicting the outcome of a process involving human beings combined with elements of nature. Besides that, information about the future cannot be verified in a traditional manner, because the future has not happened yet and is not seen as observable in a traditional scientific way. That means it's not (yet) possible for anyone to predict the future with one-hundred-percent accuracy (Bell, 2003; Hines, 2012). The trend research process therefore focuses on exploration instead of prediction.

UNCERTAINTY

The future is not the realm of the "true or false" but the realm of the "possibles": it abounds with degrees of freedom. If you are too focused on precise predictions down to fractions of a percentage point, you are narrowing down the future too much. This type of rigid reasoning doesn't spark inspiration about the future. Let's take Big Data, for example, which relies on existing data to predict people's future behaviour. While it provides insights, it doesn't yield to unexpected variables. Big Data therefore leans too much on the present, and does not open up insights into future scenarios (Van der Duin, 2016 interview).

As you might have figured out by now, working with trends means dealing with a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity. You may detect early signs of change, but still won't know if they will spread, or at what pace and in what manner. The farther into the future you explore, the more uncertainty comes into play. Predictive analytics focused on guessing what you will buy next online are a totally different ball game compared to exploring what the world might be like ten to twenty years from now. Being comfortable with not knowing everything is key when working with trends.

EDUCATED GUESS

As a trend researcher you may not be able to predict the future, but you can definitely use your trend insights to explore and envision various futures. You can make an educated guess about how trends might play out in different ways in the near future and act on these insights to make your preferred future happen. The domain of trend research provides a framework for systematic exploration of changes happening right now that point to many possible future pathways. Mind you, exploring various futures does not mean that you are merely fantasising about the future. Trend professionals will always back their trend findings with a solid analysis. And let's face it, isn't it better to at least try to explore the future than to ignore it altogether?

A profession

The domain of trend research is fairly new, and some wonder if it really is a domain or a legitimate profession at all. While many other professions have manifestos, codes of conduct and ethical guidelines, anyone can call themselves a futurist or trend researcher; you don't need a specific

stamp of approval needed from a trend inspector. This transdisciplinary field is still very much under construction and in the process of building a shared body of knowledge. Literature studies that try to establish an overview, for example Foundations of Futures Studies by Wendell Bell, are very helpful in finding common ground. On the other hand, should a domain focused on understanding and embracing change need a rigid framework or structure at all? As Bell (2002) states, you can find examples of both good and bad work in any type of field, and only a stagnant field is entirely free of controversy.

The practitioners of trend research come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and every professional has their own unique trend journey. Because there was no formal education on researching trends known to them or available, many trend professionals are self-taught. Most did not even know it was a profession at all, and many became acquainted with it by chance. There are trend experts with backgrounds in psychology or economics, and those who studied communication, design or engineering. These different backgrounds and educations make trend research a very interdisciplinary and diverse domain. The variety in backgrounds has also led to a broad spectrum of job titles, ranging from trendwatcher, coolhunter and forecaster to trend consultant, innovation strategist and change analyst. For the outside world this is often confusing, because the differences and similarities between the different job titles are not clear. This makes it harder for people to decide who to hire or collaborate with for a trend-oriented project.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that trend researchers do not have a shared consensus about definitions, terminologies and methodologies to use in trend research. Although it might not fit an open domain like trend research to have a fixed framework, the other extreme of having an all-open approach overwhelms outsiders who need guidance. To address this, chapter 2 provides a framework to use as a foundation to build your trend research on. In recent decades a range of trend programs has emerged, from full-blown master's and bachelor's programs to trend modules integrated into curricula and short courses, workshops or webinars on how to research trends. There are also initiatives promoting futures thinking at an early stage and enabling children and youngsters to think about the future in an accessible and playful manner, such as the global network of Teach the Future.

Trend research is not only something for the full-time trend expert: professionals from other domains are adding trend research to their skillsets. Job requirements for work in strategy, design and innovation frequently mention trend-related competencies, such as being able to stay updated and the ability to use trends as a springboard for innovation. A growing number of organisations have taken trend research in-house and have one or more dedicated professionals integrating trend research into their daily job activities. If you are looking for ways to integrate trend research into your job profile, take note of what the interviewees share throughout this book. And don't forget to read the last chapter, which will help you to set up your own trend practice. As someone reading this book and interested in trend research you can also be part of the professional development of the trend field and help to spread the trend mindset and skills.

Skillset

Although there is no official quality mark for trend researchers, a specific skillset is needed to detect and analyse change. There are competences anyone working with trends should try to train and cultivate. Take a look at this list of the characteristics of a trend researcher. A trend researcher should be:

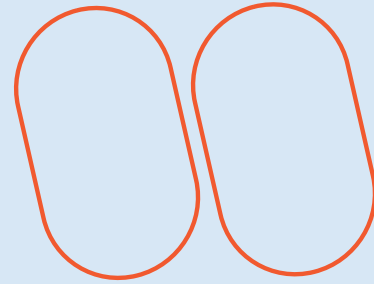
- **Curious:** you are eager to absorb knowledge and experiences, you have an inquisitive nature, are observant, are a good listener and always wonder about the "why" of things happening around you. You ask questions more than you voice your own opinions.
- **Non-judgmental:** you have an open-minded personality and are able to empathise. You are aware of your own values and opinions and know how to postpone making a judgement when encountering ideas and behaviours that differ from your own. Instead of immediately thinking "that's not right", you think, "that's interesting!"
- **Interdisciplinary:** you have a varied skill set involving many areas of knowledge. You can easily think and work across boundaries, combining knowledge from different fields and domains. Your interests are broad and are more of a generalist than a specialist.
- **Holistic:** you look at the bigger picture and how it fits the details. When researching trends, you can shift from zooming in to zooming out. You feel the whole is more than merely the sum of the parts.
- **Analytic:** you use a structured approach to examine signs of change and operate in a careful, critical and objective way to identify causes and key factors behind shifts. You like to arrange information in an organised way and use a system for this, like colour codes or categories.
- **Creative:** you are able to see connections between shreds and snippets of information that seem unrelated at first. You can combine these into inspiring and imaginative trend stories.
- **Persistent:** you are not satisfied easily and want to research beyond the baseline and dive deep into matters. You don't settle for the first search hit provided by a search engine, but check other sources to collect more information.
- **Recognisable:** you do research in a way that sets you apart from others, and you leave a personal fingerprint on your reports and presentations. When you use a visual style or write a text, people can identify it as created by you.
- **Storyteller:** you are able to get your trend story across and adapt it to different audiences without losing your personal touch. You have a flair for textual and visual language and can combine these to create a coherent, logical and inspiring storyline.

Don't worry if you can't tick off all of the above characteristics right now. Trend research is not something you can learn by just reading a textbook. You will develop the skills described above with practice, and this book will give you tips and tricks throughout to get you started.



In practice

Let's hear what your guides have experienced on the topics addressed in this chapter:



Simone Mutsaers

Innovation researcher at NPO

"The ultimate goal of trend research is to enable people to implement trend insights in their work so they can adjust their policies or create new solutions. When you understand the changing values and needs of your audience or target groups you will always be able to align to these needs in a better way and thus create better innovations. It's quite hard for most people to rise above the here and now. In our organisation people are mostly concerned with existing media content and titles, current services and platforms. It can be very hard to detach from the present and create space for the long view. Hearing about trends helps to break out of the now, even if it's just for a moment."

Sean Durkan

Global Insight Manager at Royal Swinkels Family Brewers

"Most of my colleagues have an annual plan and make decisions that basically improve the chances of success for the current year. You've got to get it right this year, and then think about the following year. I feel it's really important for me in my role to be that person who takes a step back and looks into the future and shares what they are seeing. And I think the more I do that, the more it influences other colleagues to have one eye on the future as well. I'm trying to create a culture of curiosity and longer-term thinking. Okay, we see these trends at the minute, where do we think they're going to go? And is that in three, five, or ten years' time going to have a big impact on our business? If you stick to the vision of your industry that you're familiar with, you're not going to learn anything new."

Maud Donga

Lecturer in trend research at Fontys University of Applied Sciences

"There is a looming danger of tunnel vision or having blind spots when you don't engage with changes happening around you and the uncertainties that they bring. I'm convinced you can't predict the future, but you can sketch out multiple futures. You need to broaden your frame of reference and put your imaginative powers to use to create future visions. Working with trends provides the space to open up, to explore, to stretch your mind and fuel your imagination. Being aware of trends can give you a lot of insights, on a personal level as well as on a societal level."

Eva Burm

Port of the Future Advisor at Port of Antwerp-Bruges

"My goal is to create an innovation culture where people have the skills to get from a challenge to a solution. Training and facilitating my colleagues in doing trend research enables them to explore wider and spot changes inside and outside of their own industry. It pushes them to think in a future-minded way. Our management is stimulating long-term thinking, which inspires us all to focus more on sustainability in all our activities and processes. I'm convinced that when you are more aware of all the changes that are coming at you, you will be able to handle them in a better way."

Bas van de Poel

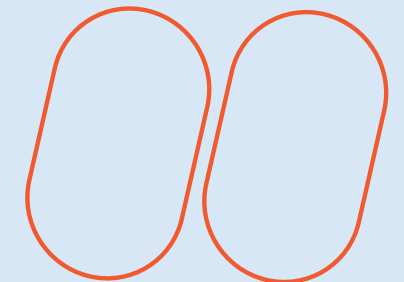
Co-Founder & Innovation Director at Modem

"Conventional design studios are very output-driven, not taking input from the outside world into account. Modem is a bit different in this regard. Working as the hybrid of a think tank and design studio, we anticipate and respond to new and emerging technological futures. I believe that the future is a verb, that it is malleable and can be shaped. As we are researching the future, we are at the same time also designing the future. In that sense it is kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy or a flying wheel. Our research papers show plausible technological futures that shape the agendas of different trend-driven agencies and organisations."

Anna Lena Götzmann

Cultural Strategy Director at Protein Agency

"I'm cautious about rigid predictions of the future. There are so many factors playing a role in making a future possible. Companies are working with timelines and need to make some sort of calls about where they are going to invest their resources in. If you investigate this by looking at forward-heading audiences you can get a bit of assurance and validation instead of just acting on your own personal hypotheses. I'm mostly interested in understanding people's perceptions of the future. Are they optimistic or pessimistic, and how are they responding to shifts? To research trends you have to be very curious and kind of nosy. Always observing people and being very aware."



Activities

Let's activate some of the concepts and ideas of this chapter. The following activities can be done individually as well as in a group and in an offline or online setting. They are a great way to get a better grasp on sometimes abstract notions and enable people to reflect together on them.

/YOUR FUTURE THOUGHTS

To underscore the idea that we are all futurists and we all think about the future throughout the day, you can ask yourself or your team the following question: *what future-related thoughts have you had recently?* In an in-person group you can ask people to share any of their thoughts. If online, you can ask people to share on camera or via chat. Reflect on the future thoughts by looking at their time horizon (are they more short-term or long-term thoughts?) and the underlying emotions (are people feeling happy, anxious, excited, worried, something else?).

/OPEN OR DETERMINED?

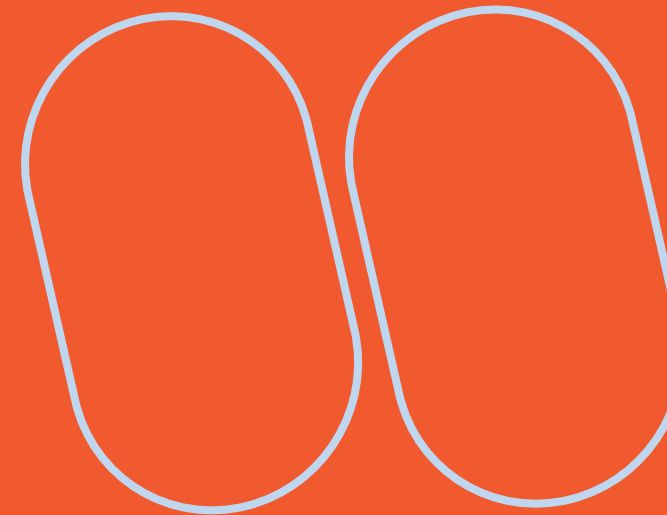
To get a sense of your own or a group's view on the openness of the future you can ask: *What is your perspective on the future: is the future determined, open or somewhere in between? Where are you on the spectrum from determined to open?* If you are in a group and meeting face-to-face, the following technique works wonders: create an imaginary line on the floor to indicate the spectrum from determined to open, and have everyone take their position on this line by physically placing themselves on it. Online, you can create a board with a line and have people place dots with their name on this line. Reflect on your own and others' positions by asking why they took the position they did and if they can give examples of how this position plays out in their personal or professional life. Get ready for some philosophical discussions and to learn more about your team members than ever before!

/PREDICTIONS GONE WRONG

Trend research is about exploring many futures instead of predicting one singular future. Sometimes it's hard for people to swallow the idea that prediction is not possible, so let's have some fun with this! Search online for predictions gone wrong. Choose one or more examples of these bad predictions that interest you, and then analyse them with the benefit of hindsight. Why didn't the predictions come true? What were the opposing forces? Can you identify which factors played a role? Create a list of the most noteworthy bad predictions. In a face-to-face group you can do the exercise in pairs or teams and create a bad predictions wall (or a board, if online). Another variant of this activity is to also do the opposite and find predictions that did come true.

/DATE THE FUTURE

A simple exercise to warp yourself into the future inspired by the Long Now Foundation: place a zero in front of the year every time you write the date. It helps you to imagine many years into the future. For example: I'm writing this book in the year 02023.



The present is no more than material for the future.

H.G. Wells,
writer



Worksheets

YOUR SKILL LEVEL

There are some competences anyone working with trends should try to train and cultivate. First, let's find out what your skill level is right now. Take a look at the list of characteristics that define a good trend researcher. Then complete the form in an honest and self-critical way. Provide evidence of the characteristics you rated yourself high on by giving examples from your daily life. Think of ways to train the skills you score medium or low on.

How will you try to develop these? Keep this worksheet for future reference. You'll find it interesting to take a look at it after some time has passed and reflect on how your skills have (hopefully) improved. If you're working in a team you can also have others fill out the form for you and compare your perception of your skills with that of others. Provide each other with tips and advice on how to train and develop certain skills, and track each other's progress once in a while.

SKILL LEVEL LIST

How do you rate yourself on?

CHARACTERISTICS		MARK YOUR ANSWERS		
<i>Curious</i>	You are eager to absorb knowledge and experiences, you have an inquisitive nature.	low	medium	high
<i>Non-judgmental</i>	You are open towards opinions and behaviours that differ from your own personal standards.	low	medium	high
<i>Interdisciplinary</i>	You can easily think across boundaries, combining knowledge from different fields.	low	medium	high
<i>Holistic</i>	You can look at the bigger picture and how this maps onto the details.	low	medium	high
<i>Analytic</i>	You like to arrange information in an organised way and use a system for this.	low	medium	high
<i>Creative</i>	You are able to see connections between snippets of information that seem unrelated at first.	low	medium	high
<i>Persistent</i>	You are not satisfied easily and want to research beyond the baseline.	low	medium	high
<i>Recognisable</i>	You research in a way that sets you apart from others and leave a personal fingerprint.	low	medium	high
<i>Storyteller</i>	You are able to get your trend story across in text and visuals and adapt it to different audiences.	low	medium	high

THE TREND LANDSCAPE

Practitioners of trend research come from a wide variety of backgrounds. One result of this variety in backgrounds is the wide spectrum of job titles and different usages of terminologies and methodologies they use to explain their trend research processes.

Find various trend researchers worldwide and create a profile overview of them using the worksheet. To which type of profile do you feel drawn to most, and which the least?

TREND LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

Name	Name
Company	Company
Job title	Job title
Education	Education
Methods	Methods
Specialisation	Specialisation
Name	Name
Company	Company
Job title	Job title
Education	Education
Methods	Methods
Specialisation	Specialisation

Summary

- People have been fascinated about the future since the dawn of humanity.
- Futures studies cultivate the long view and stimulate futures consciousness.
- The purpose of trend research is to detect change, understand why change happens and act upon it to create change.
- Thinking about the future has evolved from prophecy to philosophy to business strategy to a life skill.
- How you perceive the past affects your present behaviour and this influences your take on the future.
- Trend research is not about predicting the future but about exploring current changes and the paths they show to alternative futures.
- Trend research as a profession has roots in various disciplines and is continuously developing.
- Trend researchers have a specific skill set that allows them to detect, understand and act on change.

Want to know more?

Eager to learn more about futures studies and trend research? Here you can find some suggestions for further reading, watching and clicking. This is a selection of a vast array of futures-oriented networks, universities and books.

Networks

Currently, networks of futurists are more common than networks specifically oriented towards trend researchers. There are several events organised around the world dedicated to futures and trend research. Check the event calendars of the following networks to stay updated on them.

- **Association of Professional Futurists (APF).** The APF is a global community of professional futurists aiming to advance the practice of professional foresight. They are dedicated to promoting professional excellence and demonstrating the value of futures thinking.
- **World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF).** The WFSF is a non-profit global NGO that is independent, non-commercial in focus and geared towards strengthening scholarship on futures research.
- **The Millennium Project (TMP).** The Millennium Project is an independent non-profit global participatory futures research think tank aimed at improving humanity's prospects for building a better future. It has local nodes around the world.
- **UNESCO Global Futures Literacy Network.** This network is a diverse community of futures researchers, practitioners, and supporters. Spanning the globe, the network shares design practices, resources, ongoing work and progress updates with the goal of advancing Futures Literacy.
- **Regional futures networks.** Examples of regional and local initiatives include the Asia Pacific Futures Network (APFN), Red Iberoamericana de Prospective (RIBER), Foresight Europe Network (FEN) and Dutch Future Society (DFS). In all of these, professionals who work with futures and trends come together to exchange views on future-related topics. If you're interested in such initiatives, why not start by finding out if there is a community in your country, too?
- **Speculative Futures Chapters.** The Design Futures Initiative connects designers, strategists, engineers, scientists, artists and futurists from around the world. Their international network of Speculative Futures chapters brings communities together through a variety of events.
- **La Futura.** A global trend network that aims to bridge the gap between trends, innovation and tomorrow's opportunities. La Futura connects industries and trend experts and is mainly business-oriented.
- **Trend Atelier.** Trend Atelier is a community and education hybrid platform where future forecasters and futuring creatives can connect and exchange approaches.

Want to know more?

Education

If you want to learn more about the future, you can enrol in several bachelor's or master's-level programs that incorporate trend research into their curriculum. To name a few:

Creative studies

- Trend Research & Concept Creation in Lifestyle (TCL), Fontys Academy for the Creative Economy (ACI): bachelor's studies in Tilburg, the Netherlands.
- Creative Cultures, Universidade de Lisboa: various programs related to culture communication and trends, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Strategic foresight, The Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD-U): master's program in Toronto, Canada.
- Trends & Identity, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste in Zürich, Switzerland: specialised bachelor's and master's program.
- Trendwatching, HoGent: post-graduate program in Gent, Belgium.

Social sciences

- Social foresight, University of Trento, Italy: post-master's studies.
- Futures Studies, Tamkang University, Taiwan: master's program.
- Futures Studies, University of Hawaii, USA: master's program in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Business studies

- Futures studies, University of Turku, Finland: master's program.
- Foresight, University of Houston, USA: master's program.

There are also a growing number of schools integrating trends as a module or a minor within their academic programs, such as Copenhagen School of Design and Technology (KEA), Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA), Mondragon University (MU) and Birmingham City University (BCU).

- **Teach the Future**, a global community bringing futures thinking to schools, educators, and students around the world.
- **TEDEd**, the education initiative by TED, has a section on futures thinking called Future Forward with videos and lessons to stimulate your futures consciousness. It is made possible with the cooperation of the European Commission.

Audio

Many of the networks mentioned also offer podcasts on the topics of futures and trends. There are also stand-alone audio experiences related to futures and time. Two examples are:

- The Long Time Academy: in six episodes, activist and storyteller Ella Saltmarshe takes you on a journey to discover how to become a better ancestor.
- Deep Time Walk: a guided walk that takes you on a transformative journey through 4.6bn years of Earth history and helps you to experience deep time.

Books

If you want to do some in-depth reading on futures studies and related topics, check out the following books.

- *Foundations of Futures Studies*, volumes 1 & 2 by Wendell Bell
- *Teaching the Future* by Peter Bishop and Andy Hines
- *The Future, a Very Short Introduction* by Jennifer M. Gidley
- *How to Future* by Scott Smith and Madeline Ashby
- *Three Horizons* by Bill Sharpe
- *The good ancestor* by Roman Krznaric
- *Afrofuturism* by Ytasha L. Womack
- *Foresight in Organizations*, edited by Patrick van der Duin
- *Becoming Futurists*, Phd thesis by Tessa Cramer
- *The Discovery of the Future* by Herbert George Wells
- *Utopia* by Thomas More
- *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler

This is just the start of learning how to research trends. Want to continue your journey?

Buy the book ↘