



QUEST INTERVIEW

HOW DO WE BUILD "THE GOOD FUTURE"?

Gerd Leonhard on AI, global collaboration
and a new economic logic

An interview by Westernacher Group

Clean reading edition

THE CONVERSATION

THE FUTURE IS HERE. THE QUESTION IS WHAT WE DO WITH IT.

In our latest interview, we had the privilege of sitting down with Gerd Leonhard, a leading futurist renowned for his captivating keynote presentations and bestselling book, *Technology vs. Humanity, The Coming Clash Between Man and Machine*. With over two decades of experience, Gerd has influenced millions with his insights into technology, ethics, and sustainability.

As a fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts and a visiting professor at the Fundacao Dom Cabral in Brazil, Gerd continues to push the boundaries of what's possible, both in academia and in the real world. In our conversation, we dive into pressing questions about the future of AI, the need for global collaboration, and the urgent call for a new economic logic.

Join us as we explore the frontiers of tomorrow with one of the most influential minds of our time.



Gerd Leonhard speaking on technology, humanity, and the choices ahead.

01 / THE FUTURE HAS ARRIVED

THE FUTURE HAS ARRIVED

QUEST

There are so many topics we could discuss about the future of our planet, technology, and AI. I don't think half an hour is enough time to cover everything, but we want to make sure to hear your insights. What are people most interested in regarding the future and what are some of the hottest topics right now on people's mind?

First of all, I think it's important to realize that the future is no longer about tomorrow. The future is here. We just haven't paid enough attention, as I like to keep saying.

Science fiction is becoming science fact. So we have machines that can speak. We have machines that can fly an airplane, drive a car, pretend to be human, you know, and so on.

We're escalating. So now my job as a futurist is basically talking about today with a view on 10, 15 years maximum, because even 20 years is not totally everything that's going to be possible. So it has changed everything. And as a futurist, I'm becoming more of a nowist. It's about what's happening today because the future is arriving. And the key topics are, of course, there's really three key topics. They're not new, but they're very urgent now. So first one is, of course, climate change, sustainability, how we're going to create or recreate a green planet, how we're going to change and go away from fossil fuel. That is the number one topic. Also, pollution, environment, planet. The second topic is what's happening with machines and smart computing, cognitive computing, artificial intelligence. We are about to create machines that have some sort of intelligence. Not human intelligence yet, but it is possible to create eventually a machine that has human-like intelligence. That would be very confusing for us and also potentially dangerous. And the third topic is we are rebooting the complete economic logic about the world.

What do we want? So far, all we wanted was growth and better jobs, more money, more progress. It was a very simple capitalism, in some ways, in Europe, social capitalism. But now we have a future where we have to say, well, it's really about more than that. It can't just be about growing. So the way that people have been describing that for a long time is people, planet, purpose, which I add, and prosperity.

So we have now the quadruple bottom line, people, planet, purpose, prosperity, coming to take over from the simple bottom line of money and capitalism. And you see that everywhere. You see that in politics. You see that in European Union regulation. You see that, you know, we want to make sure we can stay human. We want to make sure we have equality.

We want to make sure we don't kill the planet. So that's a much bigger story than just making more money. And the making more money story has died just before COVID. And COVID has made the whole discussion a push into what in the world are we doing here? You know, what is the good future? Is the good future just more money for people like us who are, relatively speaking, rich compared to others? Or are we going to build a global sense of well-being and working together? That is really the top-level topic, you know, the sort of social capitalism, natural capitalism, as Al Gore said, sustainable capitalism. This is what we're doing right now.

So we are rewriting everything about the planet and green energy. We are rewriting everything about technology. And we're rewriting the purpose of society, you know, the sort of economic logic. All three of those. Those are the big topics.

The future is no longer about tomorrow. The future is here.

02 / THE DECISIVE DECADE

THE DECISIVE DECADE

QUEST

Thank you for that, Gerd. Can you expand a little bit on what you mean when you say the next 10 years will bring more change than the past 100?

Yes, and I say this full of optimism because basically we have to realise that we have at our fingertips most of the practical solutions that we need to solve most of our practical problems. You know, we have enough science and technology to do pretty much what we want. We have enough money too, as we saw in COVID.

So, yes, fixing climate change is going to cost \$150 trillion. But after we do that, we have a whole new economy that's worth, you know, quadrillions. And so I always say, basically, we have the science. We're inventing nuclear fusion. We're inventing quantum computing. We're inventing human genome changes. We're inventing all a lot of really great things. But we have to have the right policy and the right purpose and the right governments. Like we have, for example, in artificial intelligence, we have great invention, but we have no governance whatsoever. That is just not going to work. So we need to put more sense into what we're inventing. Otherwise, we're going to blow up because of the speed of invention.

So the next 10 years is the key to the future of humanity. If we are wise and if we collaborate, it could become a kind of nirvana, you know, a kind of heavenly world. In theory, if we do the wrong thing and don't collaborate, then it could become hell, too.

So it's heaven or hell. It's really up to us.

The next 10 years are the key to the future of humanity.

03 / THE CASE FOR OPTIMISM

THE CASE FOR OPTIMISM

QUEST

In preparation for this interview, I've been reviewing some of your work. In reading your articles, as you said, you are optimistic. You're positive that this change or this collaboration will be possible. Where does your optimism come from? A lot of people have questions about the unknown, and I think many are also doubting that it will be possible to achieve these positive changes. But from what I saw from your messages, from your standpoints, is that you're very positive that it's possible.

You know, I think basically there are very few things in history that tell us that humans are evil. We have examples like Hitler and other people like Hitler, but that's not all humans. You know, we take those really bad examples, like we take social media, we take Ukraine, Russia, we take... And then we think this is what humans do. But that's actually not true. You know, what humans have always done is, yeah, we're kind of lazy and we don't really get going quick enough and all these kind of things.

But we know how to collaborate, right? We collaborated after we got nuclear weapons. We had two of them, big disaster. And then we decided we have to collaborate to survive. We did the same with genetic engineering, the genome project, you know, where we have rules in place, at least on a basic level. And we're quite good at reacting and working our way out when we have problems.

We are capable of doing good things. We're also capable of really doing bad things. But we're not evil by nature and we're not stupid by nature. In fact, we are so smart with inventing that we have all the solutions at our fingertips, but we can't agree on how to use them. So, and this is the crazy part, right? I'm always saying, like, the good future is entirely possible.

We just have to get off this idea that it's about power and money and who controls what. And in the end, we're going to come to a global consciousness, a global idea of who we are, because, you know, we're not the only living things in the universe, most likely. And we're going to unite under that flag in the next 20 years, or we're just going to become extinct like the dinosaurs.

And because, you know, we need to figure out a larger way of how we go about this. And so my optimism is really about looking back at history and at so many proofs that we can actually do this once we get out of our own way. And even if I look at technology companies who many people call evil, I don't see evil there.

I see a lot of sidetracking and losing the plot and not connecting with others. I don't see evil attitude, not even with Zuckerberg. I don't see evil in the sense of devil or something, you know. I just see a lot of confusion. And I think really what we need to do is we need to come on the same agenda. And this is happening in so many ways now.

So I'm optimistic that we can do that in the next decade. Also, I'm really optimistic because the Gen Y, the younger people between, say, 20 and 40, they're coming into power now. And right after them, the Gen Z, the Zillennials, you know, they're coming into power. And these people have an entirely different worldview. That's going to be different politics. It's going to be a different approach to sustainability.

And by 2030, 60% of all the major executive jobs and top positions in politics will be young people who are, compared to me, between, say, 25 and 45, you know. They're going to be not our generation. And this is really important because our generation

did not pay much attention to the side effects and, you know, was primarily economic.

And now we have a new generation coming in with our money because we're giving our money to them in many countries, you know, because they're coming in now. They're going to change everything. And so by 2030, I think we're looking at a kind of reset of society, a little bit like 1968. Remember that? You know, I was seven years old. 1968 to 1973, the whole world became a different place, different paradigm, different outlook, the sex revolution, the music revolution. We're kind of like in this human revolution right now. And this is why it's such an important moment.

04 / THE FORK IN THE ROAD

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

QUEST

I understand that. We're at a fork in the road. Either we managed to do that and we are positive we can achieve this positive change or what are other options?

Well, here's what I'm worried about. I'm worried about we're at the fork in the road. I'm only worried about that we are not becoming proactive enough, quickly enough. So we're waiting for the disaster. You know, we waited for the disaster with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that was huge. Millions of people died there.

Now, if we're going to have a disaster from climate change, we're talking about hundreds of millions of people who will die, not as soon as 10 years from now. I mean, we're talking, this is mind-boggling exponentially fast, right? And if we're going to wait for artificial intelligence to take over the world, that's basically, some people say, we'll have a thousand survivors from 8 billion.

You know, so now we can't have this kind of attitude to wait for the bomb before we start talking about the bomb. And this is what I'm worried about is that we are not proactive enough in anticipating the need to act.

05 / STORYTELLER, GUIDE, THERAPIST

STORYTELLER, GUIDE, THERAPIST

QUEST

As a futurist, I think at the beginning, you described your job as someone like a novelist who is telling the story of the future where we already are today. As I see it. You also have a mission, right? So you're not just reporting on the outlook, but you also have a goal, which drives you to bring people together to collaborate and to find these agreements in order to use technology in a meaningful way. So that we have artificial intelligence regulated And not only have a thousand survivors, but all eight billion.

Well, I think if you describe my role as kind of a mix of a storyteller and, of course, I make films, I tell stories, and a therapist. So as a therapist, you know, you're sitting down, it's really serious, you know, it's basically survival or not. And the therapist doesn't provide answers.

He doesn't say, your wife is useless, you have to move on or whatever, right? The therapist creates a situation where somebody discovers the possibilities. And so all of a sudden you realize, if I did this, then something could change and we could start again, right?

And so I'm a way, like a therapist, where I say, okay, here are the options, and here's everything that we're doing, and all we have to do is change this little piece. And we are questioning our assumptions about how things work. Like a big assumption with people is that humans are bad.

And I'm saying this is really stupid. Because if you're assuming that people are bad and the world is bad, we're going to have a bad future. That is the outcome of bad thinking.

Optimists make the future, not pessimists. Pessimists get run over by the future or killed by the future, basically. So that's why my role is a little bit like, you know, a guide or a storyteller that, you know, basically creates stories about this that people can believe in.

Because the most important thing in human life is stories. We don't exist because we have great data, or we have proof, or focus groups, or, you know, we exist because we have great experiences, relationships, we tell stories. And our entire life is driven by stories.

And so we need to have better stories for the good future, as I call it. And then we need to be able to have a good guideline as to the therapeutic process, you know, so that we can come to the table and say, you know what, I don't want to die. So what do I need to do?

Optimists make the future, not pessimists.



The futurist as storyteller: helping audiences see choices, not inevitabilities.

06 / PAIN, LOVE, AND CHANGE

PAIN, LOVE, AND CHANGE

QUEST

I like that picture of being a therapist and helping people to realize for themselves what options there are available. A perfect analogy to describe what you are doing.

I think, you know, one of the things that I always say, you know, people don't change very easily. And they really change for two reasons, and that's pain and love. So this is what humans are.

And, you know, we have yet to learn a lot there. So we change when we have pain because we realize all of a sudden, oh, my God, it's just a disaster, you know? So we have pain.

And then we fall in love with a person or an idea or a place, and we change because of that. And I think in general, you know, if we're looking at our economic logic in our lives, it's not good to have too much pain all the time about how we have to change because it makes it despondent, and then you kind of go, you know, off drinking or something, you know, because you can't deal with it. So it's much better to say that, you know, a little bit of pain is not a bad thing, but really, we want to fall in love with a concept, you know?

And I think if we can fall in love with a good future and the potential of what we're going to have there and what it means for my kids, you know, because we're not talking about our lives. Our lives are over in 20, 30 years, but our kids will have to live in this world where they're going to be 100 or 120 or 150 years old, where we go to other planets, right? And I want my kids to have the good future, so I got to think about what that means.

07 / WHAT A GOOD FUTURE MEANS

WHAT A GOOD FUTURE MEANS

QUEST

To make our audience fall in love with This Good Future, we can recommend, or I can recommend, to watch our movies, but if you only watch one, watch The Good Future. Could you describe for us what This Good Future would be like?

Well, it's really simple. If you take the Maslow need pyramid, which everybody knows, you know, the Maslow needs our food, water, shelter, and, you know, and then going up, it's awareness, self-realization. It's kind of like this.

The good future would be to say that everything on the bottom of this pyramid is covered. So you have water, you have food, you have shelter, you have a job, you can have children, you have civil rights of a sort. Further up, you know, self-realization or money or, you know, that's kind of more optional.

Well, self-realization isn't optional, but it's kind of, if you go up the pyramid, there will be differences as to what good is. Some people say good means having two cars or a big house or so, but I'm talking about basically good. So that means you're not dying, you're not starving, you can self-express, you have basic rights, you can have family, you can grow, you can stay alive, you can prosper.

You know, those are good things pretty much for whether you're a Taliban or a Maori from New Zealand, you know, this will be the same basic things. So how can we assume that we can have this? Well, basically, we have the means technology-wise to create unlimited energy and solar energy and next generation nuclear fusion, maybe, and so on.

We can solve medical issues like cancer with genetic approaches and CRISPR-Cas9, and that's already all here. We just have to, you know, speed it up a little bit. And, you know, in 30, 40 years, cancer will be prevented. Not all of it, of course, but we're talking about one of the major things here. And, you know, 400 million people die of obesity and diabetes every year. We're going to solve that using technology.

We're going to solve water because once we have unlimited energy, we can desalinate water. And we're going to solve energy because once we have the solar nuclear combination going in full swing, we have unlimited energy. Okay, so that leads me to believe that we can make the future from all these good pieces of technology and science.

There's only one big if, right, and that if is we have to get together on the same page to describe what we want. So, for example, it won't do us any good if Europe and America and maybe Canada also is going green and we're entirely sustainable net zero in five years. It will not do any good because we need Indonesia, India, Africa, Brazil to come along.

If they're not coming along, we're still going to die, right? So that means we have to change our approach to the global landscape, right? And we have to allow other countries to come along into that good future.

We have to bring them along. In many ways, that means we have to pay for them. For example, I'm a great proponent of saying we're going to have a global carbon tax or a carbon coin, as Kim Stanley Robertson calls it, and we'll generate so much money that we can afford to give money to Indonesia and to African countries to build their own solar plants and their own little nuclear stations when it comes for that so that we can solve on a global scale.

So the only way that we as a human species will survive is if we dramatically collaborate to figure out the hurdles to actually put technology in place and the policy behind it. And that has been the goal of the UN and other organizations for a long time. But we haven't realized how serious this is because there's three extinction events for us.

One is climate change. You know, six, seven, eight degrees of warming, we're finished. The other one is intelligent machines taking over.

Then we're immediately finished, all of us. That's like if you go up to the mountain and step on a few ants, you wouldn't even know. That's what AI will think about us.

You don't think about the thousand of ants that you killed. It just happens. And so this is all the existential stuff that happens today. We have to get on the same page there.

The good future is entirely possible.

PEOPLE

PLANET

PURPOSE

PROSPERITY

08 / AI: PROMISE AND PERIL

AI: PROMISE AND PERIL

QUEST

I understand. You mentioned the dangers associated with AI. Could you elaborate on why AI inventors are warning us about these risks?

Well, yeah, there aren't just dangers there. There's also many great things. Because imagine if we could solve very large problems like energy or pollution or so using intelligent systems.

We have to use that. We can solve cancer using AI. We can make new medications using AI. That's all good. The only thing that we have right now is that we have this gold rush to where artificial intelligence is becoming a storyteller. So ChatGPT and generative AI can make text. It can make images. It can make videos. It can make films sooner or later. It can be the anchor person on your TV show. And it can be a real person looking like a real person. Very soon, a year or two from now, we don't even know what is real or not because it will be so good that we have no idea of understanding it.

And that could kill our society. It would basically kill the perception of truth. The whole idea of what is real and what's not. You know, that would obviously be a major issue, the first one. And it would take away a lot of jobs and automate jobs. And the truth would basically go away.

And we wouldn't know what that is. And our society would fail then. The second step is once we have a machine that is connected to every human, you know, 8 billion sooner or later, and it understands all languages, and it knows everything that goes on, and it's looking through our smart glasses, and, you know, it will be so powerful that we have no idea of what it does inside.

It's like a huge black box. And then it could say, you know, we really have to stop wasting energy on traveling, and it will just shut down all air traffic, and then 100,000 planes crash. You know, those are the kind of, I mean, this is not science fiction. This is a control issue. So we have that issue with AI. And the not so good thing that's happening now is that artificial intelligence stands to potentially increase GDP by 10x, 10 times of what we have today.

So we're talking about roughly \$13.5 quadrillion. And all of those companies involved in AI, they're looking at this like a gold rush or an arms race, when it's about military, like super smart soldiers. And so they're stepping forward, because they're looking for, you know, \$13.5 quadrillion. And this is not a good idea, because we don't have any supervision. We don't have any agreement. We don't have any collaboration on rules and social contracts.

We have the European Commission trying to do that.

But generally speaking, we have failed to put up the guardrails, because we're just looking for money. And that will not play out well.

09 / GOVERNING THE OPPORTUNITY

GOVERNING THE OPPORTUNITY

QUEST

Thank you, Gerd, for expanding on that to balance out our discussion and give our audience some optimism. Can you provide a more promising outlook on the future of AI?

Totally obvious what we have to do is we have this once in a lifetime, once in a million years opportunity to reinvent pretty much everything using intelligent machines. So what we need to do is not to say, no, no, no, we're not going to do that. That would be stupid. It's like nuclear power. Yeah, it can be stupid to use nuclear power. It can be very dangerous. It can make bombs, but it can also make energy. So it's not as simple as that. So I think Marshall McLuhan or was it William Gibson once said, technology is morally neutral until we use it.

So we need to figure out how we're going to use artificial intelligence in the basic sense, which I call IA, intelligent assistance, you know, software like Google Maps. And we have to have guidelines for that. And we have to make sure that people are ready to change their jobs and support them in this.

And then we have to make sure that we can still control what goes on inside the system. And that means we have to have rules, international rules as to what is allowed and what is not. And we have to be able to contain the power of what we're inventing here.

I mean, this would be otherwise like saying, I'm going to invent nuclear power. That's the size of my briefcase like this. And then anybody can make this because, you know, it's just code. It's not plutonium. And then they can carry it off somewhere else and make another 5,000 from it. And obviously, that would not end well.

So that is the process that we're going through right now. So we need to come together with scientists, with politicians. We need a summit on this global conversation.

And part of that has to do, of course, with military applications. And there's, you know, drones that can direct themselves. We have to get on the same page as to what we want from this.

I think AI is the first instance to where global collaboration on a large level is existential after nuclear weapons. The only thing is, of course, that what we have here is nuclear weapons are very hard to make. You can't just go somewhere and buy plutonium to make a weapon. And so therefore, we haven't had so many people trying to make one. Well, not successfully. But AI is code.

So we need to figure out what are the rules for existential things and what are the rules for things that aren't existential, like automation and things like this. And I think this is why I always say the future is better than we think. Because it's not that we are too late. It is not that we can't do it. It is not that we're too stupid. It's just that we're dragging our feet. And that may be a very dangerous process. We need to do the reverse of the DiCaprio movie, don't look up, where the asteroid is coming. And we're saying, no, no, no, it can't be.

It's not real. And everybody dies at the end. We have to look up now and say, let's welcome what it can do, but make sure we can control it and make sure we can govern it. So that is really what we have to do now. And I think that, by and large, that's a positive thing. Because imagine if we can increase GDP 10 times.

For us, that would be huge. But for poor people, it would mean no longer poor. And that is a huge opportunity that we should not forego.

Welcome what AI can do - but make sure we can control and govern it.

CLOSING THOUGHT

The path to a good future is paved with optimism, informed action, and collective will.

It's clear that our future hinges on the choices we make today. Gerd, your vision emphasizes the urgent need for global collaboration, the mindful use of technology, and a profound shift in our economic logic towards sustainability and equity. As we stand at this critical juncture, it's not just about avoiding disaster, but actively shaping a future where technology serves humanity and fosters a harmonious, thriving planet.

ABOUT GERD LEONHARD

FOR THE HUMAN FUTURE



Gerd Leonhard: “People, Planet, Purpose, and Prosperity” is Gerd's motto, and helping to design The Good Future is his key objective. Gerd is one of the top-rated contemporary futurists worldwide. He's presented at over 2000 leading conferences and events over the past 20 years, working with Mercedes-Benz, Microsoft, NBC, Visa, Google, the European Commission, L'Oréal, Audi, Deloitte, and IBM.

Gerd has influenced and inspired millions to “Imagine and create a better tomorrow”. Wired magazine named him one of the most influential Europeans, and he is listed as #7 in the global ranking of futurists.

As a leading voice on the future of humanity and the bestselling author of “Technology vs Humanity: The Coming Clash Between Man and Machine”, Gerd has built a storied reputation as the go-to keynote speaker and thought leader when it comes to digital ethics, human-beneficial technology, sustainability, and the need for a new, future-fit economic logic.

He is based in Zurich, Switzerland and often works from Las Brenas, Lanzarote. More about Gerd Leonhard: futuristgerd.com

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Accessed 6 September 2026.