

# Your Future in 5 Easy Steps

## The Wired Guide to Personal Scenario Planning

Tired of  
standing  
by while  
time and  
events  
hijack  
your life?  
Futurist  
**PETER  
SCHWARTZ**  
has a  
surefire  
method for  
anticipating  
what lies  
ahead.

**We live in uncertain times.** Swine flu rages. Nukes proliferate. Bailouts beget bailouts. Heaven forbid you should have to make a big decision amid such turbulence. Thinking about a career change? Moving to a new city? Paying for a child's education? Having a hard time deciding what to do? ► Thought so. That's why we asked Peter Schwartz, cofounder of the Global Business Network, to lead us through a tutorial on scenario planning. Schwartz typically does this for major corporations, but the technique works just as well for individuals. To be clear: Scenario planning is not prediction. The goal is to envision possible futures, which

will serve as guideposts to the path forward. The payoff is a clearer view of what the future may hold and of the most advantageous route through it. ► The process starts with a question, and we've chosen a test case for our examples: You're an aerospace engineer. How can you future-proof your career in the coming five years? Once you've formulated the issue, the method is simple: Identify forces likely to bear on the problem, organize them into future possibilities, envision paths that would lead to those futures, and devise a strategy for surviving them all. With a sharp picture of potential futures and corresponding plans of action, you'll always be one step ahead. ►

### Test Case

An aerospace engineer asks, How can I future-proof my career?





# 1 List Driving Forces

What variables, trends, and events will affect your mission? The first step is simply to list them. Next, divide them into uncertainties (for instance, economic, political, and social conditions) and relative certainties (such as global population growth and climate change). Finally, rank the items according to their importance, from most to least significant. The result: a catalog of factors that will determine the future of the area in question.

What things could change the aerospace industry?

## The future of aerospace

### KEY UNCERTAINTIES

1. Pace of technological change
2. Number of aerospace companies
3. Number of new planes and rockets
4. Variety of new vehicle designs
5. State of the economy
6. Amount of government funding
7. Regulation of carbon emissions
8. Energy costs, especially fuel
9. War, particularly a big, messy one
10. *Challenger*-type catastrophes
11. New business models
12. Success of big projects now under way

### KEY CERTAINTIES

1. More digital technology
2. More automation
3. More GPS

# 2 Make a Scenario Grid

Now it's time to map out possible futures. The two most important uncertainties—from the top of your list—form the axes of a grid, with each quadrant representing a potential future. Some may be more likely than others—and some might seem downright improbable—but they all depict the interplay of key forces. Thus, they're within the range of possibility and deserve your attention.

What possible futures does the grid show?

Pace of technological change

Number of aerospace manufacturers

### Fast change Few companies

Technology moves quickly but the number of manufacturers remains small.

### Fast change Many companies

A new golden age: Tech changes rapidly while the players proliferate.

### Slow change Few companies

Development is sluggish among only a few manufacturers.

### Slow change Many companies

Innovation lags even as competitors multiply, producing a profusion of familiar craft.

FEW

MANY

SLOW

FAST



# 3

## Imagine Possible Futures

Sketched as a simple grid, these four possible futures are so abstract that it would be hard to recognize them if they emerged. Make the scenarios more concrete by fleshing them out into imaginary, but plausible, news stories that are emblematic of the forces at play.

What could happen over the next five years?



### Carbon Caps on the Runway

WASHINGTON, DC  
JUNE 4, 2012

Already suffering from slack demand and a slide in defense funding, the aerospace industry was dealt another blow yesterday when the EPA announced new limits on carbon emissions from aircraft. "I see the cost taking off, not the Boeing 797," says analyst Pete Mitchell of Flight-Metrics. The revised standards are sure to put a drag on established companies and may well ground upstarts like Bigelow, Scaled Composites, SpaceX, and Xcor.

### Revolution in the Air

LOS ANGELES  
MAY 21, 2014

Carbon fiber—the gee-whiz material that revolutionized airplane design—may soon go the way of aluminum and steel. This morning, Northrup Grumman unveiled a proprietary material that looks like a game changer: nanocomposite. "It's stronger and more flexible than steel and nearly as light as cardboard," says a company spokesperson, who described applications ranging from private aircraft to guided missiles, as well as a host of non-aerospace uses. Research firm Black Box envisions \$12 billion in annual revenue from nanocomposite alone.

### Virgin Galactic Space Shuttle

WEST VALLEY, CA  
APRIL 12, 2012

In a move that shocked the burgeoning space tourism industry, Virgin Galactic transferred ownership of the International Space Station to Virgin Galactic. The move, worth more than \$1 billion, will allow the company to build what will become the world's first space hotel. "It's a use decade in the making, but it's reliable and it's comfortable," says Richard Branson. "We just have to wait."

← FEW MANUFACTURERS

MANY MANUFACTURERS →

# 4

## Brainstorm Implications and Actions

Now it's time to develop strategies for coping with the four futures you've imagined. Start by listing the implications of each scenario. Then come up with actions that would enable you to prosper under the new conditions. Some actions would apply to almost any scenario. These should form the basis of your plan, since they help you prepare for a range of possibilities. Bolster core actions with those related to the future you deem most likely.

What should I do?

### Implications

- ▶ Scarce funding
- ▶ Limited demand for new technology
- ▶ Few companies to work for
- ▶ Few new projects to work on

### Actions

- ▶ Concentrate on an established vehicle
- ▶ Develop an exit strategy
- ▶ Cultivate contacts at major firms
- ▶ Polish skills in areas of certainty

### Implications

- ▶ Ample funding
- ▶ Limited demand for new technology
- ▶ Many new projects to work on
- ▶ Few companies to work for

### Actions

- ▶ Get involved in a very large, ambitious project
- ▶ Cultivate contacts at major firms
- ▶ Polish skills in areas of certainty

### Implications

- ▶ Intense competition
- ▶ Limited investment in new technology
- ▶ Many competitors at major firms
- ▶ International market

### Actions

- ▶ Work for a large, aggressive firm
- ▶ Make global connections
- ▶ Cultivate contacts at major firms
- ▶ Polish skills in areas of certainty





### Federal Money Floods Aerospace

● MOJAVE, CALIFORNIA  
JANUARY 22, 2013

First-wave space tourists are queuing up to buy tickets from aerospace upstarts like Scaled Composites and SpaceX. Increasingly, though, they're competing for attention with a growing cadre of government agencies itching to fund robot vehicles, moon shots, and automated exploration. Scaled Composites is designing the Air Force's new Themis UAV, and SpaceX's navigation system is slated to guide NASA's next-gen lunar module—to say nothing of contracts from China, India, and Russia.

### Virgin Gets Space Station

● WEST SUSSEX, UK  
APRIL 17, 2015

In a move that boosts the burgeoning space tourism industry, NASA today transferred custody of the International Space Station to Virgin Galactic. The price: more than \$30 billion divided among 16 governments that built what is destined to become the first operating space hotel. "The ISS may use decade-old technology, but it's reliable, and the beds are comfy," Galactic CEO Richard Branson says. "Now we just have to redecorate."

▲ SLOW CHANGE

▶ FAST CHANGE

#### Implications

- ▶ Intense competition
- ▶ Limited investment in new technology
- ▶ Many companies to work for
- ▶ International markets

#### Actions

- ▶ Work for a low-cost, aggressive company
- ▶ Make global contacts
- ▶ Cultivate contacts at major firms
- ▶ Polish skills in areas of certainty

#### Implications

- ▶ Ample funding
- ▶ High demand for new technology
- ▶ Many companies to work for
- ▶ Many new projects to work on

#### Actions

- ▶ Start your own cutting-edge business
- ▶ Blog about promising new technologies
- ▶ Network with startups
- ▶ Develop skills in key areas of innovation
- ▶ Cultivate contacts at major firms
- ▶ Polish skills in areas of certainty

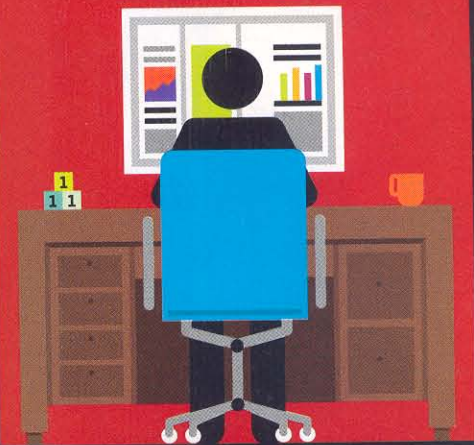


# 5

## Track Indicators

The main value of scenarios is that they sensitize you to the way the future is unfolding. Over time, the world is likely to gravitate toward one of your four quadrants. The trick is to recognize the shift in progress. ◀ As you monitor the news, look for signals that a particular possibility is becoming a concrete reality. Keep a file of news relevant to your scenarios, jotting down a quick note, along with the date, whenever you come across a significant story. ▶ Evaluate these developments on a quarterly basis so you can track the trends. Adjust your action strategy to anticipate the future as it emerges.

Which possible future is coming true?



**Of course,** it may be that none of your four quadrants describes the future as it actually comes to pass. That's OK. You can always reevaluate your sense of the forces at play and rework the grid to reflect reality more accurately. If you keep a sharp eye out for indicators and respond nimbly to shifting forces, the future will never arrive before you know it. ■