

# Adapting to change, staying human

Speakers at Sydney forum urge the cultivation of talent and innovation to cope with tech-driven social, industrial upheaval

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The theme of this year's World Business Forum (WBF) in Sydney was Humanification, or how to keep a human face in business amid the onslaught of technology, digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI).

*China Daily* was a media partner for the May 30-31 conference, which drew an audience of around 2,000 people and some of the most innovative business thinkers in the world today.

Opening the conference was Ken Robinson, a leading authority on creativity and innovation, who said companies that do not innovate and adapt to the new climate will not survive.

"The point is, technological change can wipe out whole industries," he said. "It doesn't make any difference how well you run a company. If you can't adapt to change you won't survive."

He presented a picture from around 1903 of a New York street full of horse-drawn carriages and one car.

He then showed another picture taken a decade later — the same street, full of cars. While one horse was still visible, it helped illustrate the sweeping change that advances in technology can bring.

"With the arrival of the car, entire industries associated with horse power — blacksmiths, carriage makers and the like — simply faded away in the space of about 10 years."

Robinson recalled an interview featuring Steve Jobs, the late Apple cofounder, from 1975.

"He said people underestimate the potential of computers.

"Jobs said computers will be the new medium. Like motorcars and aircraft, the computer will transform how we work and how we live ... it's inevitable.

"Ten years later he was right."

Noting that the average lifespan of a company is "around 30 years", Robinson said companies that renew themselves, innovate and keep ahead of change, survive.

To illustrate his point, he took Kodak as an example.

"It is easy to forget just how revolutionary Kodak was as a company," he said of the United States photography giant.

"In 1900 the company came out with the Brownie box camera. Now it was possible for anyone to take pictures and record life. The Brownie was as sensational as the iPhone when it came out.

"Before that, photographers hid under a thick cloth and ignited a chemical that left subjects blinded," he said jokingly. "The Brownie sold



**Ken Robinson**, a leading authority on creativity and innovation, warns that companies that do not adapt will not survive. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

for a dollar, but the film was expensive, and this was the cash cow for Kodak."

At its peak, Robinson said, Kodak had control of 80 percent of the US market, 50 percent of the global market, and employed 60,000 people in the US.

"Ten years ago, it went south and sought Chapter 11 protection from bankruptcy. Today it is a mere shadow of its former self."

US companies file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection when they are on the verge of bankruptcy but believe they can bounce back given the opportunity to reorganize assets, debts and business affairs.

So what happened?

"Kodak did not go out of business because people lost interest in taking pictures. To the contrary, more pictures are being taken today than ever before. Kodak's problem was that it was incapable of adapting its business model to digital photography.

"There is an irony here," Robinson said.

"In 1975, Kodak actually invested heavily in digital photography. They had a whole team looking into it. But the company could not break the idea that photos had to be printed."

Robinson said the Kodak story highlights that great companies do not just fade away, they collapse.

"We have seen this with great civilizations and it happens to companies all the time. They become complacent and think they will go on because of their reputation. They

fail to nurture talent and fail to innovate," he said.

Robinson said the best resource a company can have is its human talent. "The challenge facing companies is how to cultivate that talent.

"In many ways, human resources are like natural resources. They are buried within the company, but when you find them they must be refined and turned into something.

"That is the challenge that faces not only employers but educators, politicians or whoever. This is part of the agenda now."

Education in many ways "specializes in diminishing our sense of our own talents", Robinson said.

Learning and understanding "is a fabric and we have to weave it together ... there is no monopoly on knowledge or understanding", he added.

He said that over the last 300 years we have "lost sight of what makes us human and individual".

"We have to rethink what it is to be human and singular. We are all different. No one is you, will be you, or have your life. We are unique in that respect."

He said companies do not have to "fade away". "You need to tap the innovation pulse, and that only happens if you have a culture where innovation is nurtured."

As for technology, Robinson said AI is "one of those transformative technologies that will help us in ways we haven't even thought of yet".

"It is hard to predict what it is

going to do to us. Transformative tech helps us do things we never thought of"

"(Fifty years ago) if you showed someone a smartphone they would think you are Captain Kirk," he said, referring to the 1960s sci-fi TV series *Star Trek*. "But since the smartphone came out in 2007 it has utterly transformed the way we live.

"The question about technology is how we handle it. We humans are inherently creative."

Robinson said humans have a bottomless capacity for imagination that is taken for granted, particularly in education.

"We are the most intellectually fertile creatures ever to inhabit the planet. We are all born with these capacities but do not recognize them.

"Everyone can be creative," he said. "It all depends on how you think about it and get people involved. Creativity is the process of original ideas that bring value."

Another speaker at the WBF was Kelly Peters, CEO and cofounder of BEworks, the first management consulting firm dedicated to applying behavioral science to strategy, marketing and operations.

A lecturer in applied behavioral science at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and a lecturer at Cornell and Harvard, Peters said AI will bring about a social impact.

"We have to recognize with AI there will be a period of massive technological and social upheaval,"

she told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

She said it will take time for the impacts of AI to be played out and worked through. "There will be generations of people lost and displaced and who will need a social safety net."

Could it result in social unrest? "Potentially, yes," Peters said.

"Already we are seeing sectors like transport and service jobs being taken over by AI. We have talked a lot about that end of the spectrum — but what about the white-collar end? Doctors and lawyers, for example.

"In some cases AI will be for the better, but those who can augment their human creativity alongside technology will survive," she said.

Rachel Botsman, a global authority on the power of collaboration and trust, and a lecturer at Oxford University, said the "big question we face is not technical but ethical."

"When we talk to (smart speaker assistants) Siri or Alexa on our smartphones, who has access to that data?" she asked.

"We now have technologies where we can put a sensor in our pills. It can tell doctors if we are taking our medicine on time or not. But what happens if someone hacks into that information?"

"We have a generation growing up now that is highly tech-savvy from a very early age. What we, society, need to do is make sure we, human beings, are in control of the technology and not the technology in control of us," Botsman said.