



Written by Marion Scher & photo supplied

Change in the blink of an eye

The first thing you notice when you meet futurist Craig Wing is the enormous energy he emits. With his background in Silicon Valley and as Head of Small Business Marketing for Google South Africa, his passion for future thinking and innovation has made him into one of South Africa's leading strategists.



Craig Wing, Google South Africa



With technology changing at such an incredible rate is it even possible to predict what market forces will deliver even next week, let alone next year? According to Wing we're living through a fundamental shift in business.

"It's difficult today to navigate through the onslaught of technology changes, artificial intelligence, robotics and so much more," explains Wing.

"Trust has suddenly become an issue and not just within a political context. It's about whether employees trust their boss or manager and their strategies." Add to this the decentralisation of power and you're looking at a whole new world.

"If you look at the recent municipal elections where the electorate said you're not the holder of power anymore — it's also about transparency and openness. And it's not just South Africa but worldwide; look at the Arab Spring. Whereas in the past a lot could be hidden or even put down to a white lie — today with social media you can dig into someone's past and uncover and share the truth."

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS FUTURE PROOFING?

"If I have a cup of tea in front of me and leaves are left when I've finished then maybe I could look into the future," comments Wing with tongue firmly in cheek. "If anyone says they can tell you what the future holds they're a little bit crazy. There are possible permutations of a future and ways of crafting strategies to make yourself more robust around them.

"You could say it's a 'wicked problem' — a huge problem from many points with no one solution. There are often a lot of stakeholders involved and you generally have one shot to make something work — you can't go back. Brexit is a prime example of a wicked problem. No matter how bad the outcome may prove to be, they can't go back.

"It seemed simple. It was about not wanting to be reliant on one country to drive the economy and the immigration problem — but was it the right decision and will it future-proof the UK?"

RECESSION BLUES

The word recession is one South Africans have come to experience a lot recently, often causing



wondering what they should do. Maybe the bare minimum just to keep their job because if they try to do more they might mess up. So rather do nothing...”

IS THERE A GOOD TIME TO START SOMETHING NEW?

“You could say there are better times than others. One is where we are right now. Within the perfect storm there are cracks that appear. These are friction points within traditional ways of doing business. Take fintech players who found this out a couple of years ago when they started building their businesses around this. A prime example

converge towards your customer. I talk about it as seeing things from several points of view — solving the problem from within several boxes rather than one box. In other words, not just from an engineer or a CFO’s point of view, but as many places as it needs to solve an issue or meet a need.”

DIGITAL MINDFRAME

A perfect case study of embracing the digital onslaught is banking. Over the past 15 years, traditional banking has changed its business model to take internet banking on board, but have they got it right? “Today, digital banking, with its lower cost base, has a higher profitability than traditional banking, but traditional banks still have normal and digital banking. They should be asking how do we merge the two to make it a seamless experience? It boils down to their ‘paving the cowpath’ — doing things the same old way.”

INVESTING IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

“When we talk of diversifying investment, we should be talking about investing in young, sharp, hungry people. Who, rather than waiting for the future to happen, want to drive the future. Elon Musk saw electric cars and space travel, Mark Zuckerberg saw an easy way of connecting people socially. They were solving problems for multitudes of customers by thinking within several boxes.”

WHEN THE RAND GETS WEAK THE TOUGH GET GOING

Right across the country people’s hearts sink when they see their currency crashing but, according to Wing, this isn’t the way to look at it. “People watch the news, which reconfirms their negative bias to carry on bemoaning their fate. But you can either look at these situations as opportunities or threats. We should be looking at the weak rand and see how we could leverage this platform to reach a global audience, whether through tourism or our lower cost of labour.”

HARNESS THE POWER OF RETIREES

“A paradigm shift we need to make is one around age. There are so many retired people out there with 30, 40 years of experience, who could not only add value to companies but could be used as mentors. A whole new talent pool.” ■

“There are possible permutations of a future and ways of crafting strategies to make yourself more robust around them.” Craig Wing, Google South Africa

widespread panic and pullback of plans. Wing’s first reaction is to tell people not to panic. “People must ask themselves a few simple questions. What’s the vision of our organisation? Why do we exist? And it’s not to make money — Author Simon Sinek said: ‘People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe.’ Apple felt if you believed you could change your world, your work or society, you would buy one of their products — and it worked. Your vision has to be bigger than just making money. It’s also about the societal impact.

“If your vision is only to make a lot of money then you’re going to make short-term decisions, and in a recessionary environment you’re going to do ridiculous things such as cut the head count, getting rid of the most expensive people, probably those with the most experience.

“The next to go are the guys who have recently been hired, who you could maybe do without. Now your employees are

is Transferwise, the money transfer service started in 2011.”

HAVING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

“A lot of companies aren’t sure what they’re hiring for. Overseas the words ‘values-based hiring’ are common — not so much here. Companies have a vision, a mission and values, but they’re not real values unless the company is willing to hire and fire by them. Their values may look good on a shareholder’s compact or a calendar but do they really live their values, especially around customer centricity? Do they ask interviewees how have they gone over and above for a customer before? To future-proof your business you need people who think outside the norm.”

A CUSTOMER CENTRIC SOCIETY

The phrase ‘the customer comes first’ has always been a good base on which to grow a business but, according to Wing, this is more relevant than ever. “You have to totally