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As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with inspiring speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught up with Mike Walsh, a leading thinker on the future of technology, communication and business.



AV: Well, hello and welcome to another in the series of Cafe Insights. I'm Andrew Vine. Today I am in the presence of Mike Walsh at the Hyatt in Singapore. Welcome to Singapore again.

MW: It's wonderful to be back in Singapore Andrew.

AV: Well we have been working together this week on a couple of events so I wanted to just take this opportunity to have a little chat with you, hear a little bit about what you do. So you're known as a futurist, you're helping us map the future of our businesses.

MW: You know, in some ways I hate being called a "Futurist" because as soon as I say "futurist", people hear "astrologer"! (*laughter*). And there is a deeper truth to that because in many ways what I'm really interested in is not things five, ten, fifty years out, it's actually easy predicting things that far out. What is much harder is knowing what to pay attention to in the next 18 months. And that is the time horizon that is the *most* difficult for companies because it's the time horizon of which they have to make immediate investment decisions and very *difficult* decisions about what they need to do with their company.

AV: Well I know a lot of what you talk about is technology, but I think what differentiates you from a lot of people who do talk about technology is that you remind us, very clearly, that at the end of the day it's not about the technology per se, it's about human beings and how they are interacting with it.

MW: Absolutely, in fact it is *not* the technology -- it's the anthropology. And if you think about the kind of the beginnings of the Cambrian explosion around technology today, it originated not with the enterprise computer but with the personal computer. And so when you tip the mass of humanity and all their complexities and problems and difficulties and combine them with technology in the early eighties, that is what kicked off the *incredible* innovation we've had of the last couple of decades. It's the same with the Internet. So I think that whatever kind of company you are today, whether you deal with the business enterprise market or you deal directly with consumers, it's being close to the human dimensions, the human scale of your problems that really illuminates the opportunities and the possibility for innovation.

AV: And of course, even the working environments that we are creating is all about how people interact together, how they are using technology in a slightly different way.

MW: Absolutely! I mean the future of the office is not a better designed building or better technology, it is understanding the dynamics of how people want to work in the 21st century. We have this bizarre situation, of course, that modern technology allows people to work from anywhere and many

people have the *ability* now to work from home, but they don't *want* to work from home! They want to work in busy, noisy, crowded café-like environments, like the one we're in. Actually, office-like environments in some ways, but just not *your* office!

AV: Well, once upon a time people would view coffee shops in London as a frivolous waste of time, but actually what it proved was when people got together they started to talk and collaborate and, hello!, new ideas started to build -- it was a renaissance!

MW: Or generally start revolutions! (*laughter*)

AV: I think what's really interesting as well is where you combine technological innovations, the human spirit and high growth markets -- the great possibilities you see in the emerging markets, in particular. What does this mean, you think, for Asia? Is Asia about to see a boom, do you think?

MW: You know I actually think that Asia's always been degree zero for disruptive innovation and I say that because if you look at a lot of the technologies we take for granted today like smart phones, social networking, they really had their beginnings in things that happened in Asia for its unique properties. This was a market where you have incredible technical innovation, you have very young populations, you have constraints both in terms of space as well as economics and it has created a kind of a primordial soup of new ideas. You know, the first social network originated from Korea, mobile content came from Japan, because of space constraints and subways. So this was really the birthplace of ideas that then accelerated and found their way to Silicon Valley.

AV: I know it's a real challenge to kind of summarise in such a short space of time what it is in terms of creating the blueprint for the company of the 21st century -- but I thought it would be worth having a go at identifying what you think the characteristics are? When we look in the future and say "now that was a successful company", what would it look like? What are the key elements we are going to see?

MW: In some ways we are in a new phase of the Internet now, this is the industrial internet revolution and what's tricky is that you can look at a company and from the outside it looks no different to what it was five years ago. But what has changed *completely* is the way it operates at the back-end. You know, there's a big struggle going on in Germany at the moment because the German regulators want to regulate Amazon as a retailer, but Amazon says they're not a retailer, they are a logistics company! So if you were to start a company in the 21st century, I think you have to start with a clean sheet of paper. You have to question *every* aspect of the way the business operates, from the idea of do you have departments, do you have job titles, how do you pay people, do you *build* technology or do you *subscribe* to it, do you *build* business processes or do you subscribe to those as well? So I think the bold leader for the 21st century is one that is able to question every aspect of traditional business. Technology is a huge part of that... but it's those *human* aspects that are the most interesting. So that's why I think, you know, when you look at the hallmark of modern companies, what defines their success and their ability to innovate is actually the way their people work. And this is collaboration, but it's not collaboration technology. It's understanding the '*social graph*' of how people connect in an organisation. I think in the near future when we look at great companies, we'll actually model their internal social graphs -- a bit like looking at the x-ray scan of a healthy patient, to understand what really makes them tick.

AV: Hmm... I know that another thing you say quite often is that if you want to see what's going to happen tomorrow all you really need to do is look a little bit more carefully at things that are already

happening today. And in the event you throw out a few 'mind grenades' of things that you should go and test -- what do you suggest will be good indicators of that?

MW: I always think of people who have got children have an unfair advantage on everyone else because they have a frontline view of just how *different* their next generation of customers, employees, users is going to be, especially if you've got kids born after 2007 -- which is effectively the introduction of the first Smartphone. I mean, this is the ultimate litmus test on whether all your strategic planning has been for nothing. So what I often do in my speeches is offer, as you mentioned, what I call 'mind grenades,' and these are really just simple questions that are hopefully designed to illuminate just how much your thinking has to change in the next couple of years. So, I ask people to imagine if your kids joined your organisation, what is the first thing about your use of technology they would find utterly puzzling. I ask people to think, like, what are the roles in your team or your business which in five years will no longer exist and what are the competencies you'd pay *anything* to acquire.

AV: Well, Mike it's been great talking to you. We have an exciting future to look forward to and to anticipate. Thank you very much again. All the best as you fly out.

MW: It's my pleasure, thanks Andrew.