

March, 2025

As part of the Café Insights series of conversations with insightful speakers, The Insight Bureau was recently in conversation with Philipp Kristian Diekhöner, a strategist, author and advisor, who is known as a ‘digital humanist’ for his thought leadership around Trust and our relationship with technology. I spoke to him about the rising importance and consciousness of trust in world which is embracing AI.



**Andrew Vine:** Well, hello and welcome to another in the series of Cafe Insights. I'm Andrew Vine, founder and CEO of The Insight Bureau. And today I'm in conversation with Philipp Kristian Diekhöner. How are you?

**Philipp Kristian:** Very well.

**AV:** Philipp describes himself as a digital humanist and has focused much of his time around the critical role of trust in business. Indeed, you've been an author of a book called “The Trust Economy”, which talks all about building strong networks and value in the digital age, and also another book entitled “Reset”, which helps us rethink our world and how to create a new and different future. He's an innovation strategist, an advisor, and of course a global speaker. And that's where we come in, working together on events and conferences and things like that. So first of all, Philipp, you're based here in Singapore, although you do spend quite a lot of time in Europe. You're German by birth, but Singaporean by residency ...

**PK:** Perhaps, yes, by association. [laughter]

**AV:** How much time do you spend in Singapore?

**PK:** It really depends, I think. Perhaps we are a little bit less tethered than we used to be, especially after COVID.

**AV:** Well, you're always on the move. I know that.

**PK:** Yes.

**AV:** But I want to take this opportunity to talk about trust. It's one of those things we were just hatching earlier that we kind of take for granted in a way, but in other ways we don't really think deeply enough about this because this is a very interesting lens to look at how the world is changing. Tell us a little bit about how trust has been such a fundamental, important role for business.

**PK:** Well, you can't exclude trust from the relationship between humanity and technology and digital, which is so critical to our current experience. In a way, trust is involuntary, and involuntary things govern over 90%, some say, of our day-to-day decisions and lives. So, should

you not think about it? Absolutely, it is essential to think about these things. But because they're involuntary, we first of all have to notice them. And we have to notice the patterns. And that's really where trust plays such a massive role because it is really about involuntary patterns running every day. Do you choose why you dislike or distrust someone? Often you don't. It's more about fear and other deeper emotions.

**AV:** Is this something that's becoming more critical? I mean, is this something that's becoming much more front of mind? Are we deliberately thinking about our concerns about our level of trust?

**PK:** I think we are deliberately thinking about trust. We're also deliberately, consciously outsourcing conscious trust building to technology, meaning that we are freeing our rational mind from doing that, and we're sort of delegating it to technology, which may see us trusting much faster online than we do offline. And I would say across generations, this is the case. We quite willingly put in our credit card details into some online form without thinking about it. And yet, for some reason, in personal, even like kind of managerial leadership related contexts, we very often are confronted with trust issues. So, nothing's changed in that regard.

**AV:** Do you think, though, that there's a higher propensity for Gen Z to embrace this more readily than the Gen X and the Baby Boomer crowd?

**PK:** I do think Gen Z has a higher expectation of default trust, which means the speed of trust has increased, friction has been reduced, all of this because technology has created a precedent where we can almost trust each other by default. And I do think younger generations have come to expect that. It's also benefited all of society because who likes distrusting, who likes the friction, who likes what I would call the tax on trust, all of the money and time and data we spend on just getting on a baseline where we can do business and interact with each other. We're getting accustomed to the ease with which technology facilitates human and business interaction. And I think we've come to crave that. But of course, that also has an effect like fake news and election rigging and all of those are an effect of us trusting too much. So it is about balance, and balance comes from using technology wisely without using it blindly, which is really what has happened with AI. I think many of us have used it so by default that we may not even properly check whether what we are getting back is actually true. And it's highly likely that you have been fooled by or relying on some sort of AI product that hasn't actually given you the result that it promised. So, I think this is quite true to human experience right now.

**AV:** I was just thinking, the way we define Gen Z is we say that these are the digital natives.

**PK:** Definitely.

**AV:** People like me have had to struggle quite hard to become a digital immigrant -- I think I've done quite well. Do you think in parallel, you can talk about trust this way, that trust is inherently something that the younger, the Gen Z and the future Gen Alpha are going to just take for granted and have a much easier time with than perhaps the older generations.

**PK:** I do think we are going to have an easier time with overall because technology makes trusting much easier and it does it with the help of data. And sort of data scales trust is one of the things I wish to highlight here because it's kind of what it does. So digital technology scales

trust and that scales collaboration and scales connection, scales, well, productivity, if you really want to go there because it does scale all the good stuff. Now, before we get too excited, the real issue here is a different one. The real issue is that digital culture hasn't spread equally. Whereas digitally, most of us across generations use the same technologies in more or less the same ways. Whether we live by digital culture is a different thing. I'd say the younger generations more or less share the traits of digital culture. It's universal. Cultural differences might even be fading away. There is sort of such a thing as one global digital culture, and we see it very evidenced in Gen Z behaviour, Gen Z memes, Gen Z language. And a lot of us who are a little bit more senior are also coming on sort of board with that. We're kind of coming online to that. But at the same time, the offline reality often hasn't caught up properly. And this is, I think, what's causing the polarisation and the friction as well in the world, that we must sort of ensure this digital culture remains inclusive, that it's not just for the young, but that the promise of its ease and frictionlessness and the community that is built through this digital culture applies to all of us. It makes all of us happier and more productive.

**AV:** Yes, very well put. I think the emergence of AI, which has really accelerated in the last 18 months or so. I mean, this is the wild dance with technology that you sometimes like to talk about.

**PK:** It is a very wild dance!

**AV:** The stakes are just so high now. And it's not just going to peak and then go away. How is that really going to change the game, do you think? I mean, it is going to be a game changer. How do you see this with AI?

**PK:** So I think an example, if let's say you've familiarised yourself with OpenAI and ChatGPT, and perhaps you even managed an enterprise integration, and you went into production with that, and everyone's sort of happy, hopefully, and all of a sudden gets announced DeepSeek. And within days, everything that you build, more or less, has become, if not obsolete, then outdated. And all of a sudden, you realise there is a better, faster, more accurate solution to do much more, perhaps. And that's just, I think, going to be a reality that we face, that basically we have to, or it would be helpful for us to become exceedingly agile. But to understand that this agility comes with way more decisioning, it comes with more high frequency communication. It means that no longer do the segregations of job title and function, and any of those traditional structures really apply. So, it helps if we approach this, if we were to approach this, one might say, with a more organic understanding, a more, dare I say, humanistic understanding of business in general. Because if anything, the promise of the digital age is that technology is becoming increasingly able to support what one might call a human social construct, the way we naturally have related for millennia. And that's sort of undoing the rigidity of a corporation, which has sort of put us all in these functional boxes. So, I'd say if you're ready and energised by this, then the promise is great and vast. To embrace it means to understand this is a very different way of living and working. And I think it's a return to form. I think it's probably a return to how we are meant to live.

**AV:** I know we're talking about something quite different, but if you go back in time and look at the Internet, we started to combine the internet with so many other things, and we created new ways of doing things.

**PK:** 100%.

**AV:** We don't think anything of that today. It's just business. It's the way we do things. It's like turning on the tap and water comes out. Hopefully, we will build a human technology relationship such that we can trust that this is just the way things are. What we're feeling, at the moment, is at some level of anxiety.

**PK:** The chronic unease I think some people have termed.

**AV:** Chronic unease, yes.

**PL:** Which is a pretty, pretty sombre statement. But I loved your comparison. I talk about these tectonic trust shifts. So, when all of a sudden everything changes, and it sort of-- industrialisation was one of them. Even going all the way back, nomadism to agriculture was a huge one. And as you mentioned, the internet, information technology. So, all of these are tectonic shifts and the car for that matter, right? All of those initially challenge our understanding of how we live, and then they become perfectly normal, and who now would want to live without these things like electricity and cars and the internet? So, I think that's a really positive way of looking at artificial intelligence and also looking at that it is a tectonic shift. And this tectonic shift just enables us to reinvent humanity if one wishes to go there.

**AV:** I mean, there are massive opportunities in lots of different areas. But hopefully this is something that raises all boats, if you like, in terms of--

**PK:** I like that ... Raising all boats.

**AV:** It is going to be something that will benefit everybody. Clearly, we have a question mark over how democratic it really will be if those who own the technology and have the power rests in too few people's hands. I think that's one area to be somewhat concerned about.

**PK:** I think you can't not think about power in this case. The classic example, and we did talk about it briefly, is the polarisation, the rigging of elections, fake news. We're talking about an excessive power concentration and using technology for bad. But that very same technology, when it's used in a shared and healthy way, can bring about extraordinary good. So, we can't dehumanise the equation. In the end, it is us who make decisions either with good or bad intentions, one might say, that influence how technology is used. A car cannot be blamed for running over a human being. It's ultimately not the car that is to be blamed for its force. It is the engineers and the users. And so, in the end, we are more in the driving seat than we ever have. And so chronic unease almost suggests that we are not in the driving seat, that we are victims, but exactly the opposite is true. We are more in the driving seat than we ever have been. And I find that that is sort of a way of recognising the agency that we have. That literally we have everything now in our pockets, at our fingertips, and never before have we had such computing power for that matter that we can play with pretty much almost, not entirely, but almost free of charge.

**AV:** Wow. Such a lot to think about in this topic, isn't there? My mind is racing. But the thing is, we've talked a lot about the human level of it as individuals. But the aggregate of that, of course, is how do companies-- it's not just individuals that have to question mark, what is my future role value add is going to be? Many organisations are facing potentially an existential question. Are

they still going to be in business doing what they know they do today in 2, 5 years, 10 years' time?

**PK:** Perhaps in an old-fashioned way, this existential crisis may be a way of tabling the concept of mastery. Companies come and go, Fortune 500s come and go, yet some of the most extraordinary companies around the world have been around, and they have stood the test of time. So, in the end, this is, I think, a really strong urgent call for excellence. And if we're not too exhausted by this current world, but if we are rather fascinated and delighted by it and perhaps wondering curiously how we might use all this beautiful new potential, then it might actually lead us on a quest for mastery. And mastery is ultimately a very, very personal quest. It's also deeply purposeful and fulfilling. And I think it is highly infectious in a good way, that a leader that displays a personal quest for mastery is a leader that's easy to trust, easy to follow, and also a leader that will instil a similar sense of purpose in its team. In the end, mastery is infectious. And I think that's probably the most human way to sort of land on that particular topic.

**AV:** Yes, I was just going to ask you, I mean, as leaders of business now, there's just so much to have to deal with, just the sheer pace of change, and how you respond and react to that, and how you manage people who make your business work.

**PK:** There is, there is. It's this concept. I think we may be a little bit too seduced by the idea of chronic unease, by the idea of being a victim, by the idea of being overwhelmed, when in reality, we've never had greater agency, we have never had greater power, and we've never had a faster ability to change. In fact, the collective love for technology is one of the greatest levers for change in society. And this, I think, we often overlook. So, at the end of the day, I think this is a time for less is more, less bureaucracy, less process, less doubt to sort of go from what a friend of mine-- it's called shifting from foolproof to fail-safe. Because foolproof is sort of an approach that kind of takes agency and trust away from people, whereas fail-safe is recognising that we are independent and largely competent human beings. That's usually why we're hired to do things. But at the same time, it also recognises that things may fail and that none of us is perfect. And so, it designs for failsafeness instead of designing for foolproofness.

**AV:** Interesting concept, yeah. Well, this is fascinating stuff. I feel exhausted just talking to you and thinking about this ...

**PK:** Oh no! But we've only just started really. Let's hope you're inspired just a little. Hopefully, this was insightful.

**AV:** No, I meant the pace of change is ...

**PK:** That is exhausting, isn't it? [laughter]

**AV:** And for you as an individual, Philipp, in the work that you do, advising companies, speaking at events, how is the world of AI changing what you do on a very, very personal level?

**PK:** I think that the practice of not knowing what's going to be your content, your message, your story, pretty much every moment to see it as this ongoing, evolving stream is really helpful. If it doesn't scare you, it can actually be super invigorating. And so, I think it kind of calls for that level of depth and that level of concentration. For everything else, there is AI. For every recurrent, obvious message, there is technology. But for everything that goes deeper than that,

and that sort of really hits the nerve beyond that, and on a human level, that's sort of, I think, where probably the speaking space is carving itself out in the future. That is sort of really the linchpin of it. And it's quite beautiful as such because we are ultimately people, aren't we?

**AV:** Yes. Well, I think you'll be busy talking about this stuff for many years to come! Philipp Kristian, thank you so much for spending a little time with me at the Fullerton here in Singapore. Lovely to see you.

**PK:** Lovely to see you, Andrew.

**AV:** Thank you very much indeed.

Philipp Kristian is an advisor and business strategist based in Singapore who is a leading authority on Trust. He is the author of two books -- "The Trust Economy" and "Reset" and is a sought-after speaker focusing on trust and our evolving relationship with technology.

To learn more about Philipp Kristian, please visit:  
[www.insightbureau.com/PhilippKristianDiekhoner.html](http://www.insightbureau.com/PhilippKristianDiekhoner.html)

To listen to other conversations in the series of *Café Insights* please visit:  
[Café Insights - YouTube](#)

To hire Philipp as a speaker or moderator for a conference or a corporate leadership event, please email  
[andrewvine@insightbureau.com](mailto:andrewvine@insightbureau.com)