The Survival of the planet depends on our ability to analyse and change our demographic, economic and technological models

Director of the Institute for Labour Studies and Professor in the Department of Human Resource Management at ESADE, as well as the author of more than ten books, Simon Dolan is an expert in human resources, psychology, occupational stress and future trends. His latest book, Beyond, co-written with fellow ESADE researcher, Mario Raich grapples with all of these issues and more. Here he shares some of the forecasts it contains.

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Director of the Institute for Labour Studies
Where did the idea for Beyond come from?
Basicallly, it was Mario Raich’s idea. He is the lead author of the book and a specialist in studies on the future, he also works with ESADE on a regular basis. Mario had read some research I’d published (such as Managing by Values), and suggested that we should work together. After three years of extremely intensive effort, this book is the outcome and we’re really proud of it.

How did you identify the problems humanity will face in the near future and come up with possible solutions to them?
Mario and I had to decide on a method we could use as we are neither prophets nor visionaries. The first thing we did was to identify some key problems which the world (and particularly businesses) will have to come to terms with in the immediate future. To do that, we worked with leading businesspeople, academics and other experts who are concerned about the world’s future. This meant we could build a virtual group of some fifty people with whom we were able to work to identify the biggest problems we’ll be facing tomorrow, as well as possible solutions to them. In the book we’ve referred to the members of this group as seeds.

The first thing you feel when you start to read the book is fear because of the awful future awaiting us that you portray. Was this intended?
Yes, well, we’re trying to get people to realise that we all have to start thinking about the future. People have to reflect and see the problems we’re going to have if we don’t change our demographic, economic and technological models and so on. I, for example, am a professor, I read a lot and I try to keep up to speed with what’s going on, but I had not been aware of all the problems we’re facing, until now. For instance, this book was written before the global economic crisis and we had already forecast that something like this might happen, as well as other, more devastating, consequences that will come to pass unless we anticipate future paradigms.

Beyond also sets out some solutions that we can start to put in place. Who should lead this revolution?
We can’t leave all the responsibility in the hands of political leaders; ordinary people can start by contacting businesspeople and politicians to offer them solutions. With technology as our weapon, we can connect groups from all around the world, send messages and share solution ideas with everyone. I’m not saying that the politicians shouldn’t accept responsibility, but when in power they are more likely to be worried about solving other, more immediate, problems rather than working on ones that seem more distant. Take Al Gore for instance, while he was Vice-President of the United States he didn’t sign the Kyoto protocol, yet now that he’s no longer in office he’s realised the negative impact current human activities are having on global warming and has become an agent for change.

So everyone needs to lead the change?
Yes. Moreover, this concern also needs to be felt in developing countries such as China and India, because without the help of their enormous populations there’s not much we can do. Resources will be used up unless they too change their consumption mindset. Very few people link demographics with the environment, the economy, technology, immigration and so on, yet it’s all connected. There’s a clear value chain and it’s plain to see if human population increases by 80 million each year, then pretty soon the Earth won’t be able to withstand the pressure, in fact we would need the resources of three planets.
Your book deals with One Child Policies, as used in Iran and China, but don't you think imposing such measures to curb population growth is a limitation of our freedom of choice?
Yes, but when you're faced with the problem of survival there are times when you have to change the paradigm. I hope we can find some other type of solution. We have to start looking at established 'rights' or 'freedoms' differently. Take our economic system for example, communism didn't work but now it seems that capitalism doesn't either.

Finally, what message would you give to ESADE students who read this book?
Even though in general our diagnosis is pretty bleak and catastrophic, the chapter that talks about the seeds of solutions is very positive and highlights that by working with ideas beyond the comfort zone, smart people (and we include ESADE students in this category) will be able to find fresh business opportunities that are valuable not only for their future careers but also for the future of the planet.