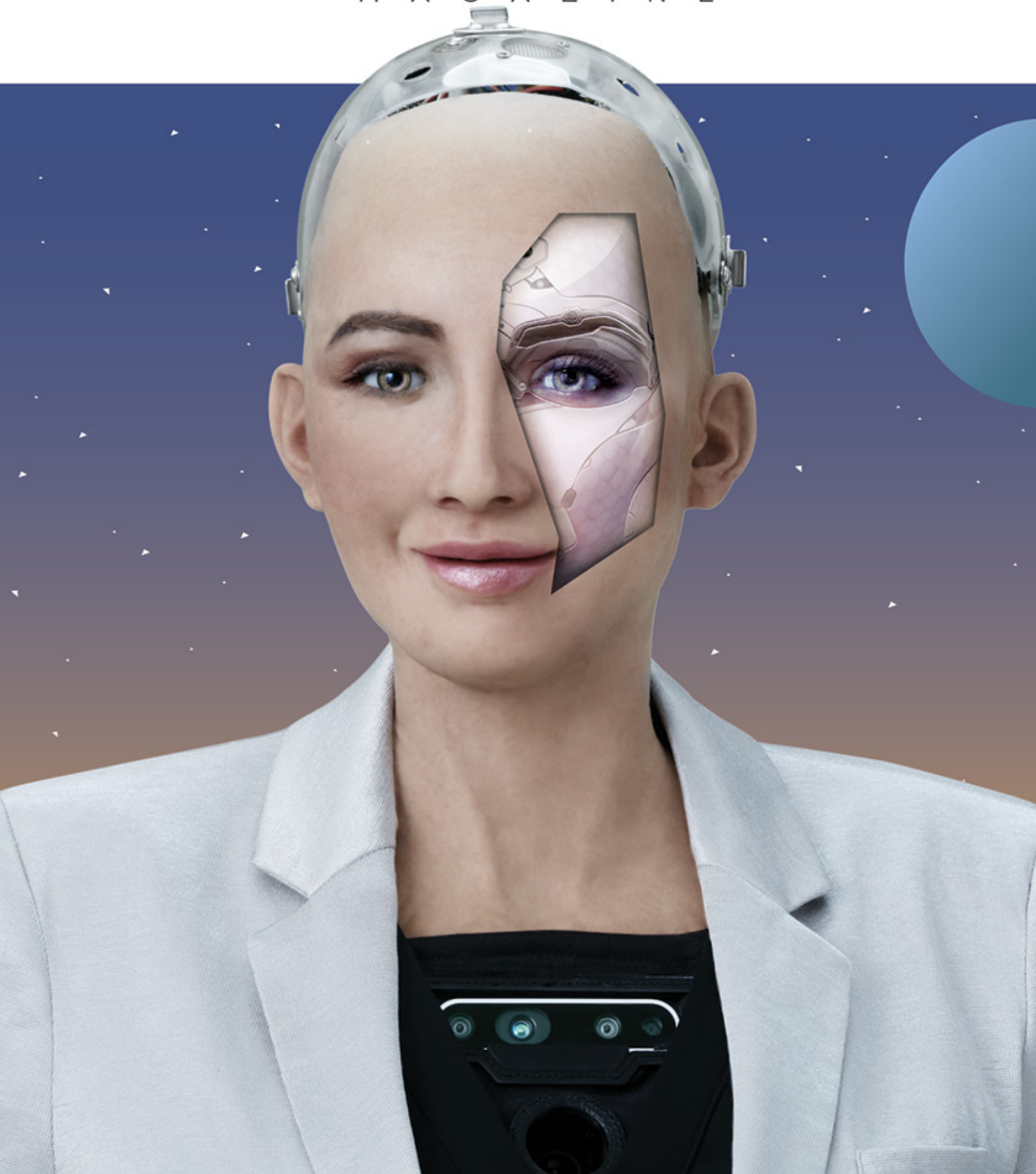


# NEXT

M A G A Z I N E

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# The Musings of a “Futurist”



“It becomes problematic when companies assume the thing that made them most successful will guarantee their success going forward.”



As chief futurist at **Ford Motor Company**, **Sheryl Connelly** has a duty to remind people that no one can predict the future.

Everyone knows you can't predict the future. Yet, people do it every day on a regular basis, in big and small ways.

"When you get married, you assume it's going to be for a lifetime. When you make an investment, you assume it'll pay off in the long run," says Sheryl Connelly, chief futurist at Ford Motor Company. "It becomes problematic when companies assume the thing that made them most successful will guarantee their success going forward."

Connelly knows that a company's long-term success relies on what will happen next week, next month, and in the years to follow. When people can tweeze out the underlying assumptions built into their strategic plans, they're opening the door to anticipate future challenges and opportunities, instead of being blindsided. It's her job to push back on the status quo, engage people to think differently, and challenge the tone or scope of conversations.

"My goal is never to prove anyone wrong. I'm simply asking them to think through the consequences if their plan doesn't turn out," she says.

Connelly's work is functionally agnostic. "I've been lucky to work across the entire enterprise. It helps me connect dots that might not be easily visible."

### **The Unforeseen Career Path**

Futurism isn't a path Connelly would've ever foreseen in college. Nor was a career in the automotive industry, despite being raised in metro Detroit.

Her childhood dream of being an artist gave way to more practical educational pursuits. Connelly earned a Bachelor's Degree in finance from Michigan State University and entered the job market during a recession. So, she did what an unprecedented number of unemployed college graduates were doing at the time: She entered law school.

It didn't take long for Connelly to realize the glut of law students and bolstered her marketability by enrolling in a dual degree program. She worked on her law degree during the day and an MBA at night.

She passed the Michigan Bar exam and practiced law "for about a minute." Armed with a Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, and Juris doctorate, the first job Connelly landed was as a secretary. After a while, she decided to check out what the business world could offer.

She wrote Ford with the hope of being considered for a position in tax compliance. Instead, she was recruited by Marketing, Sales, and Service to answer Ford's toll-free customer service line and later moved on to wholesaling cars to dealers.

About eight years into her time at Ford, Connelly received an unexpected opportunity to join a team she'd never heard of; working on global trends and futuring. That was 16 years ago.

While her journey to becoming chief futurist was random and unplanned, Connelly's education prepared her well for a futurism career.



For the **Looking Further with Ford 2020 Trends Report**, please visit <https://ford.to/38n1fSI>

"The finance degree taught me business fundamentals, the MBA taught me how to apply those principles and turn them into actionable insights, and law school taught me how to do research, which is an essential part of my job," she says.

### **Nurturing Macro Trends**

Connelly spends a lot of time carefully tracking trends, specifically shifts in consumer values, attitudes, and behaviors. She focuses predominantly on slower-moving macro trends, which are global, persistent shifts in phenomenon that can span decades, such as urbanization, automation, and an aging world population.

"The United Nations has said an aging population is one of the greatest social and economic challenges the world will collectively face," Connelly notes. "To fully understand the impact of a trend like this, you need to unravel the demographic and attitudinal shifts behind it."

"People are not just living longer. They're getting married later in life or not getting married at all. They're postponing having children, and they're having fewer children," adds Connelly. "Scientific advances are improving mortality rates and lifespans are getting longer. Some scientists say the first person to live to be 150 has already been born."

Now, overlay an aging population with the trend toward autonomous vehicles. Connelly sees a compelling business case for targeting seniors in self-driving cars. "We could change the quality of life for seniors if they could be allowed to stay mobile longer. It's already harrowing for relatives to take the keys from an unsafe driver hitting 80. How much more harrowing would the fight be if people think they'll live to 90? 105?"

### **Following Micro Trends**

Connelly and her team also keep an eye on emerging micro trends, which generally have a shelf life of two to five years. The team compiles much of its micro trends research in an annual report called Looking Further with Ford. Published at the beginning of each year, the report is available free on the Internet.

Research findings are based on a systematic process of surveys with more than 13,000 consumers in 14 countries across the globe. Connelly starts with a point of view, usually based on an identified micro trend, and fields surveys to gauge consumer values, attitudes, and behaviors by region. For example, the Ford Trends 2019 report shows that people in China and India are significantly more excited about self-driving vehicles than people in the U.S., U.K., or Germany.

The 2020 trends report builds on a recurring theme: consumers' declining trust in institutions and brands. The latest research suggests that mistrust is impacting peer relationships, leading to what the report calls a global loneliness epidemic. Intriguingly, technology seems to be a driver of loneliness as well, with much higher reports of loneliness among younger generations.

For instance, 62 percent of Gen Z'ers globally say they're lonely on a regular basis (at least once a week) compared to 29 percent of Baby Boomers. And 50 percent of Gen Z'ers say they often feel lonely even when they're around other people. Third-party research reveals that 500,000 people under 40 in Japan haven't left their house or interacted with anyone for at least six months.

What's more, Americans 19 to 32 who spend more than 2 hours a day on social media are twice as likely to report feeling lonely than people who use it 30 minutes or less a day, according to a study in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine.

On an upbeat note, the research also found that vehicles bring people together for work, play, and companionship: 52 percent of respondents say some of their best conversations take place on road trips or long car rides, and 46 percent use their commute time to catch up with friends and family.

"The findings feed our belief that cars have evolved into much more than just a way to get from point A to point B. For many consumers, their car is a lifestyle tool on wheels," Connelly says. "This is the type of research that can help reframe conversations at Ford."