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Intel futurist: 'imagination is the undeveloped skill'

[TECHNOLOGY \(/TECHNOLOGY\)](#) / 24 NOVEMBER 14 /

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Brian David Johnson, Intel Corporation *Nate Lanxon*



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Brian David Johnson was the first futurist to work at Intel (/intel). It takes around 10-15 years to design, build and deploy a new chip, he tells the audience at WIRED Retail (/wiredretail14), which is why Intel needs someone who can look 10-15 years into the future and tell them what the world they are designing for will be like.

"The work that I do is very pragmatic," Johnson says. "I am judged on my ability to tell people what is coming." He also, however, has to give them information that will allow them to do something about it.

The pictures of what the future will look like usually offer a streamlined, minimalist and almost sterile vision of life. Of these kind of pictures, Johnson says he finds them "at best intellectually dishonest -- at worst it's insulting".

"Where are things? Where is stuff that makes us comfortable?" We are complex beings with many needs, he points out. "We have different cultures and different beliefs that make us interesting."

"Let's design futures that are designed for real people, and the futures of real people," Johnson says.

In accordance with Moore's Law, as we approach to year 2020, the size of the chip will begin to approach zero. We are already approaching five nanometres, which means theoretically we could turn anything into a computer. This knowledge changes the questions we have to ask ourselves, says Johnson. "I believe this unbinds our businesses and unbinds retail."

In 2024 as meaningful computational power approaches zero, something really interesting will happen to devices: they will disappear. The importance of screens to devices overall will decline, and yet they will remain important to consumers. They will continue to be, he says, "the windows through which we shop, through which we buy through which we communicate." Fellow WIRED Retail speaker Tracy Yaverbaun probably agrees

(<http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2014-11/24/instagram-mobile-shop-window>). But increasingly retail will be based on data interactions between

retailers and customers. Retailers will need to think how they will make these interactions meaningful and what their brands will be like in this data-driven online world.

Ultimately retail and shopping is about people and brands need to keep thinking how it will solve a problem for them, says Johnson. "If we set that as a goal we can do really really interesting things."

"We are living in a really interesting time right now. We are surrounded by computational intelligence." We're at a time right now, he continues, where science and technology have improved to the point where what we build is only contained by the limits of our imaginations. We are being held back, he says, by "our inability to imagine a far more awesome future that we are going to have" and that "our imagination is the one skill that is not developed".

"If we have a vision for the future of retail, how do we change it?" he asks. The answer: "We change the story people tell themselves about the future they live in." If you can change the story, people will make different decisions.



"The relationship you have with your customers and employees is all a narrative. You are experts at telling that story," he reminds the audience. "You have the ability to shape the future of retail." All retailers need to ask themselves is how far they can push themselves to imagine.



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