

The Fourth Industrial Revolution

During the summer of 2015, Professor Schwab proposed that the theme of Annual Meeting 2016 focus on the incredible speed and scale with which technology is disrupting all industries and economies around the world. Reflecting on the wealth of work by a wide range of experts on the impacts of digitisation and emerging technologies, including in depth work by the Forum itself, Schwab realised that these changes were of such a fundamental nature that they constitute nothing less than a new industrial revolution. This led to the World Economic Forum Annual meeting 2016 theme becoming “Mastering the Fourth Industrial Revolution”, to a series of expert consultations in Abu Dhabi in November 2015 and to Professor Schwab writing in under three months [a best-selling book](#) on the dramatic ways in which technology, business and society are co-evolving.

The fourth industrial revolution describes a global transformation characterized by the convergence of digital, physical, and biological technologies. These technologies are influencing societies, economies and individuals in ways that are changing not just the world around us but the very idea of what it means to be human. The resulting transformation is historic in terms of its size, speed, and scope. This transformation is not defined by any particular set of emerging technologies, but rather by a transition to entirely new systems that are being built on the infrastructure of the digital revolution.

As powerful technologies such as artificial intelligence, advanced materials, augmented reality, 3D printing and new computing technologies become increasingly affordable and ultimately ubiquitous, they are altering the way we produce, consume, communicate, move, generate energy, and interact with one another. And given the new powers in genetic engineering and neurotechnologies, they may directly impact who we are and how we think and behave. The fundamental and global nature of this revolution also poses new threats related to the disruptions it may cause—affecting labor markets and the future of work, income inequality, and geopolitical security as well as social value systems and ethical frameworks.

Over the course of 2016, the Forum has deepened and extended its work on technology and society, and in October 2016 announced a new office, to open in San Francisco in February 2017: the World Economic Center for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Center will accelerate global cooperation for effectively and efficiently governing of the fourth industrial revolution, helping corporations, governments, civil society leaders, researchers and other stakeholders to realize the greatest positive societal impact from new technologies and scientific developments.

Unless we govern the fourth industrial revolution properly then its full economic and social potential will not be realised. As Gillian Hadfield, Professor of law and economics at the University of Southern California, argues, this means that rethinking how we make new rules is as important as deciding what rules we need. Governance is a sine qua non of economic and social progress: to be responsive and responsible in the fourth industrial revolution, during the course of 2017 leaders across all sectors need to work together to create agile governance models for an inclusive, prosperous, human-centred future.