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Sam Altman

FOUNDER OF OPENAI

As CEO of OpenAI, Altman has propelled generative tools like ChatGPT into the mainstream. Simultaneously he has pioneered the clean energy industry through ventures such as nuclear fusion startup Helion Energy. His dual focus makes him uniquely positioned to shape a future abundant in both intelligence and sustainable energy.

Sam Altman occupies a rare vantage point at the intersection of artificial intelligence and clean energy – two spheres poised to reshape society dramatically in the years ahead. As CEO of OpenAI, he has accelerated breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, making powerful tools like ChatGPT widely accessible. Concurrently, Altman champions clean energy innovation through strategic investments, including nuclear fusion at Helion Energy, where he serves as executive chairman. He also advanced nuclear fission via another startup, Oklo. These ambitious ventures reflect his belief that abundant, sustainable energy is the essential infrastructure for the AI-driven world that lies ahead.

This dual commitment embodies Altman's clear-eyed optimism. He identifies intelligence and energy as foundational to human advancement, viewing their potential abundance as a gateway to global prosperity and improved quality of life. Altman envisions a near future where medical care, education, and essential resources become radically more affordable, reshaping economic structures in ways not seen for generations. Yet he remains pragmatic about this significant change's ability to make societies even more uneven. With this in mind, he emphasises that embracing abundance demands careful consideration and responsible governance.

Altman, however, doesn't believe a brand new AI-enhanced future will be too confronting for most of us. "I believe deeply in humanity's adaptability", he asserts, but he notes that vigilance must accompany optimism. This thoughtful approach underscores his philosophy: technology is neither inherently good nor bad, but a reflection of our intentions and oversight.

His business leadership approach aligns with these views, grounded in consistent and daily encouragement rather than singular dramatic gestures. Altman describes fostering innovation at OpenAI through steady inspiration, urging teams to take thoughtful risks and think expansively at every opportunity. When Ahead of Time visited the brand's headquarters in San Francisco, we learnt that Altman had republished Arthur C. Clarke's visionary classic *Profiles of the Future* for his team – a book that presciently explores humanity's potential through technological innovation. Like Clarke, Altman perceives human potential as boundless, provided the proper resources and moral compass are in place. Altman, therefore, presents a future horizon worth aiming for: one defined by innovation, informed by vigilance, and ultimately enriched by humanity.

Recently becoming a father has deepened Altman's reflections on the long-term implications of technology. He recognises his child will never experience a world untouched by intelligent machines, making the stakes personal and immediate. Rather than viewing this inevitability with trepidation, Altman remains optimistic. He sees intelligent machines not as threats, but as indispensable tools for a generation more capable and empowered than any that has come before.

What technological advancements are you most excited by?

So, first of all, intelligence and energy are the two fundamental inputs. With good ideas and the ability to move and manipulate matter, we can do everything else. In a sense, the most significant developments currently underway are the increasing abundance of energy and intelligence. Throughout my career, driving towards these abundances has been my two biggest missions. However, I didn't know how directly they would come together. I didn't realise that the price of intelligence would eventually converge with the price of energy. It now appears pretty obvious that this is happening. With these two factors being key to economic growth and improving the quality of human life, nations that are enabled to remove constraints on them are likely to enjoy a massive impact.

Thinking about the next generation. Do you feel that human impulse to create and be freely artistic will continue to linger? Will kids still live impoverished lives as architecture and fashion students in New York, to soak up its creative energy and be inspired, or do you think creativity will be drilled out of us more and more by the algorithm?

I don't think so, because there will always be a place for art at the end of the day, and how we define art will evolve and expand beyond how we've traditionally thought of it from the pedestal or the museum wall. Art will become more potent than AI's work in all of its applied ways. I'm more of an 'and both' believer in AI and humans colliding in exciting ways. The main thing is that AI should never ultimately usurp human creativity; there's still friction within the human brain when you're in the creative process. This friction creates beautiful things and results in some of our most significant works of art and architecture, from the pyramids to Norman Foster's Hearst Tower in New York.

Professionally speaking, how do you define your guiding principles?

Growing up, my dad had this bumper sticker on one of our cars, a tagline for Ben & Jerry's: "If it's not fun, why do it!?" To me, that's huge. When fun and joy start leaving the room, it's time to recalibrate and think about what you're doing and why. That's always been a guiding principle for me.

I also live with a certain ethic, or 'time' ethic; I try not to overwork. It's hard because I think people like me, who have a creative impulse that won't die, go a little overboard sometimes! I have to catch myself when this happens. Quite ironically, I have to tell myself to slow down. It's strange. I founded this company called The Slowdown a year before the pandemic. We found ourselves in a global slowdown, and yet The Slowdown did not slow down in the slowdown.

"We are going to live in a world that is prolific with AI. It's how we use it and when we use it that matters. It should be used to generate incredible creative growth instead of just replacing the human head, hand, and heart."

How have you seen the technology improve and how far can it go?

It has improved night and day – extremely dramatically – with the revolution of convolutional neural networks (also called deep learning). This revolution is still not done, because we're still in the first iteration of convolutional neural networks. We now have transformers, and we're moving to new, more reinforcement-learning-based architectures. But it's all fresh in the broader context of humanity's technological history. It could elevate humanity to a new phase of civilisation; another league, so to speak, in which we may soon be playing. I've been there since the early days: in 1999 at the Institute of Neuroinformatics in Zurich, my colleagues were reverse-engineering the mammalian brain based on cat brains. That was very academic – it was far-fetched work that nobody outside of a few institutes cared about. But gradually, people started recognising the sheer power of these networks, and AlexNet in 2012 was pivotal. Things really took off with Yoshua Bengio's lab in Montreal, Geoffrey Hinton, and of course Yann LeCun. It's been a rocky decade from that perspective, and I'm glad I could play a small part in the history of AI.

"We're still in this mantra of the industrial revolution, where we go to work and then have some leisure time – five days of work, two days of rest. AI will ultimately disrupt that concept and lead us to a new work-life balance that makes more sense."

One area you've been ahead of the curve in is integrating AI into real work – into the kinds of skills humans have been doing for a long time. In terms of shaping the workforce (for example, I work in media and communications and it's amazing how quickly we've adopted these tools), do you think every single industry is going to be impacted in a massive way by AI, in ways we can't even imagine yet? Is it inevitable – because it boosts productivity and profit so much – that eventually no aspect of work will remain untouched by AI?

Absolutely. I'm a true believer in the power of AI to disrupt entire ecosystems. We've seen such disruptions firsthand. In horticulture, in the beginning everything was very labour-oriented, with almost medieval conditions for planting. We introduced neural networks there about ten years ago. It has been flabbergasting to see how eighteen-year-olds with only a secondary-school degree can create an AI model and then let a robot run on plants they've never seen before. AI is already disrupting sectors in ways we're only beginning to grasp and its long-term impact may be even more profound. We're still in this mantra of the industrial revolution, where we go to work and then have some leisure time – five days of work, two days of rest. AI will ultimately disrupt that concept and lead us to a new work-life balance that makes more sense. This shift will likely require rethinking aspects of the nation-state model, particularly how we deliver education, healthcare, and infrastructure in a world of decentralised, AI-driven productivity.

Tina Fordham

Fordham advises CEOs, government leaders, and investors on how global instability will affect the world's economy and power structures. A pioneer in geopolitical foresight, she's helped major institutions prepare for the unpredictable. Her work sits at the intersection of politics, strategy, and ethics – exactly where future decision-making now needs the most clarity.

GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGIST & FOUNDER OF FORDHAM GLOBAL FORESIGHT

For twenty-five years, Tina Fordham has operated at the intersection of geopolitics and business, advising institutional investors, corporate boards, and executives on how global events shape the market environment. An early pioneer in the global foresight space, her career began in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall where she worked on democratic development and political reform initiatives in the former Soviet Union. Today, Fordham briefs influential parties worldwide, helping them navigate a geopolitical landscape that has fundamentally changed, with risks coming not only from emerging markets but also from Washington and Europe.

Fordham coined the concept of a 'geopolitical risk supercycle' to describe today's relentless instability, a trend now backed by data. An unprecedented cascade of crises, from trade wars to pandemics to armed conflicts, is straining the guard rails that once buffered global stability. Diplomacy is faltering and U.S.-led institutions are eroding, leaving leaders to face more frequent shocks with fewer safety nets. Fordham's mission is to instil foresight and agility in its clients, emphasising resilience and adaptation as strategic imperatives in this supercycle of disruption.

While hard power increasingly dominates global headlines, Fordham hasn't lost sight of soft power either. She cautions that cultural influence cannot be mandated and must grow organically, though turmoil often sparks creative renewal. She is also clear-eyed about technology's disruptions. Fordham warns that AI breakthroughs, while promising, could fray society if mismanaged. With automation poised to hit white-collar jobs – and a growing gap between fast-moving tech and slower-moving governance – she urges a pragmatic, ethical approach to innovation.

To start, please tell us a bit about your background and line of work, and where foresight fits into it. It sounds like that's a significant part of what you do.

I've been advising institutional investors, corporate boards, and the C-suite about the intersection of geopolitics and the business environment for twenty-five years, and I was one of the first people ever to do this. I started my career not in finance but working in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union after the Berlin Wall fell. Over time, I developed ways to combine political science and international relations with market analysis. Since I started, the demand for this kind of insight has only increased. Early on, I mainly talked about business opportunities in emerging markets and geopolitical risks abroad. But now we're seeing geopolitical risks coming from Washington and Europe. The whole landscape has changed. I started my firm three years ago, right after Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, because I felt everything had changed – and I think that was the right call.

Not that long ago, social media had a level of social engagement, and when Facebook started, you were actively encouraged to be part of the conversation. Now, Instagram and TikTok don't prioritise true social action. We're being spoon-fed content by an algorithm, and these companies have weirdly stripped the 'social' from 'social' media. Is technology stripping humanity out of the way we live these days?

We are so addicted to these technologies because we – as humans – need to respond to our environment. Everything that moves attracts our attention immediately – that is our survival mechanism, this is who we are – and social media is moving based on videos. So it just takes us – we're absorbed by it. There is some sense of humanism in how we respond to it, why we are so into it and addicted to it, and our need for togetherness, safety, the group, and survival. Where do I fit in? This is a massive question for humans, and social media steps in to answer this question, but not in a fulfilling way. Ultimately, it helps fulfil parts of our needs, but despite making us think we're more connected, it's making us more disconnected.

How would you say your work brings people together around technology?

It's one big process. It's not so much about technology as it is about movement. We make our artwork move so that it becomes something people want to respond to. It can be a rhythm; naturally, the audience will start breathing to the rhythm, and heartbeats align with it.

You can use movement deliberately and tune people to the same wavelength, and being on the same wavelength is important for connecting. That brings connection and understanding and gives everyone the same energy. We naturally seek these moments. This happens at dance parties, during a football match, or when you have a good connection with someone; the chemistry goes back and forth. Because you're on the same wavelength, you completely understand each other. That enlightens and lifts us, especially with a bigger group; it feels great. You're energised. If you have entirely different energies in a room, and nobody tries to align, those energies fight each other, draining everyone.

I learned all this from making our artwork. I wasn't looking for it deliberately, but I was always looking for floating forms of being that I didn't feel in my daily life, because there was too much stress and things going on, but these were the feelings I longed for. When you experience something great, you want someone else you like to also experience it. So, our work came through a need to look at what's happening to other people and myself, and why these artworks feel this way. Now that I know this, I have started to look into the science around it. There are studies about this, and we have begun to use it more deliberately. We use these rhythms and movements and we reprogramme them so that they speak to us, and then it's more like choreography, like a ballet, but then it's more of a story. It depends on what we use in the artwork, and how we can establish the best connection between people and the artwork, and people amongst themselves.

"You can use movement deliberately and tune people to the same wavelength, and being on the same wavelength is important for connecting."

"Thanks to new technologies and the younger generation of talented, visionary watchmakers, innovation is accelerating. And in watchmaking, innovation is almost synonymous with creativity."

How does Ressence fit into this story?

I think Ressence is very important for this industry. This answer is going to be a bit technical. Mechanical watches have the advantage of delivering much stronger torque than quartz movements. Essentially, mechanical movements are much more powerful. This allows for thicker, longer hands and the power to drive complex mechanisms, like perpetual calendars and chronographs. This is the key to expanding the creative capabilities for ambitious new creators like Ressence. Now, recently, improvements in the torque control and escapements have enabled new possibilities for ultra-high-frequency pieces and much more complex timepieces, like the Jacob & Co. Astronomia Tourbillon, for instance. It has also opened a new field for brands like Ressence and Urwerk, which are great examples of the new era of mechanical watches. Thanks to the larger torque of mechanical movements and the wonderful control of the torque from the mainspring, Ressence is doing things that were impossible twenty years ago. It's very scarce but it's wonderful. Ressence has opened up new possibilities for mechanical watches and that's why it's very important.

For you, what's 'the next big thing' in the watch industry? What are you kind of expecting in the next few years that could transform the industry?

My opinion is quite simple. Thanks to advancements in machining technology, watch cases have become much more refined and three-dimensional. Richard Mille, Hublot, and MB&F are all good examples of this in action. But now, combine that with the improvements we're seeing in the uses of the mainspring torque, we are entering a new era where true creative freedom is possible. In other words, apart from cost constraints, they can now create virtually any watch they can think of. As I said, Ressence is a great example – before, it was impossible to move such a heavy dial with magnets; now it's possible.

You said we're entering a new era of creativity. What creative opportunities will these changes present, do you think?

From a design and aesthetic perspective, we'll see even more refined and three-dimensional cases. With new machinery, creators will be able to produce different cases compared to before, and I think three-dimensional cases will become increasingly popular. The pebble-shaped case from Ressence is a good example of this. And then on the watchmaking front, I think we'll see larger mechanisms. That's the future of the watch industry.

Is there still room to elevate and innovate in these categories?

Yes. Again, we view things differently, not only in terms of industrial design, but also in how we interact with our products. We spend a considerable amount of time discussing this with the team every week. And what we have landed on is that we would rather see our products move to a space where, instead of seeing it as a routine where you just put a device on, it could become a ritual. Imagine having a very special tea that you would like to enjoy, with a particular ritual surrounding the act of using your favourite teapot, your beloved teacup, and all the accompanying items. A similar type of ritual can also occur when interacting with audio devices. If we consider how quickly everything has to go today, and you do everything through your device, there's also something soothing and calming about letting things take their time. We would love to expand on this idea further.

And how do you develop that?

As a company, we often discuss sound design and craft, and the craft aspect is traditionally thought of in terms of physical manufacturing. We also draw inspiration from handcraft techniques that we incorporate. We are increasingly thinking about how to craft the digital experience. I see the craft space and craftsmanship transitioning into a phygital realm (a term for the hybridisation of physical and digital), encompassing more immersive sensory experience as well, which is super exciting territory.

So you see, for the future, a more meaningful and deeper way of interacting with technology?

Yes. And there will be brands thinking about it differently. Here, we aim to create experiences that surpass the ordinary or mundane, and the experiential aspect plays a huge part in this. At Bang & Olufsen, we internally refer to our products as having different types of magic. And what we mean by that is that there's something delightful and surprising about them and the experiences we have through them. And of course, this magic that we think about, how can we deepen that magic for the future, with the technologies of the future as well?

Nordic nations are renowned for their considered design, which encourages people to slow down and appreciate elements such as tactility and quality. Do you think people will value products that are more thoughtfully designed in the future?

I think they will. And there's some counterpart needed towards this fast-paced world that we're living in, so to stay grounded we will need means and ways to balance that. And here, the calmness that Scandinavian design can bring is a great support.

"We are increasingly thinking about how to craft the digital experience. I see the craft space and craftsmanship transitioning into a phygital realm, encompassing even more immersive sensory experiences."