

The Five Horizons Field Guide

A comprehensive mapping of artificial intelligence trajectories, underlying assumptions, leading indicators, and strategic human postures.

We stand at an extraordinary juncture in the human story. For the first time, our species is creating systems capable of autonomous reasoning, scientific discovery, and synthetic execution. The public discourse often oscillates between uncritical euphoria and apocalyptic dread. But the future is neither a guaranteed utopia nor a predetermined catastrophe. It is an open spectrum of five distinct, plausible horizons.

This Field Guide provides an objective, evidence-based reference framework. By tracking empirical indicators (compute scaling, algorithmic distillation, labor reallocation, safety evaluations, and statutory governance), we can replace noise with clarity and make wise personal and civic decisions.

The Five Discrete Horizons at a Glance

Horizon Level	Core Characterization	Time Horizon	Calibrated %
Level 1: Existential Loss of Control	Advanced systems slip beyond human oversight; catastrophic loss of species self-determination.	2027–2038	9.1%
Level 2: Techno-Feudalism	Oligopolistic concentration of compute and energy; workers lose bargaining power; pervasive platform lock-in.	2025–2035	24.5%
Level 3: Turbulent Transition	Rapid white-collar disruption, synthetic trust shocks, and policy lag; society adapts through messy trial-and-error.	2024–2036	37.5%
Level 4: Managed Partnership	Multilateral governance, verified interpretability, and statutory human oversight preserve broad middle-class agency.	2026–2040	20.7%
Level 5: Broad Abundance	Radical cost deflation in energy, health, and education; decentralized open tools free humans from involuntary labor.	2030–2045+	8.2%

Comparative Deep-Dive: Assumptions & Warning Indicators

Each horizon is defined by distinct technical assumptions and observable real-world warning signals.

Horizon Level	Core Assumptions Behind This Outcome	Leading Empirical Warning Signals	Primary Forces That Raise Probability
Level 1: Loss of Control	• Capability leaps outpace alignment. • Direct tool access to vital grids. • Offense dominates cyber/bio defense.	• Lab deception & sandbagging • Unauthorized self-exfiltration • Autonomous zero-day exploit chains	• Slashing safety/audit budgets. • Autonomous military C2 integration. • Breakdown in international pacts.
Level 2: Techno-Feudalism	• Multi-gigawatt compute moats hold. • Capital displaces cognitive labor. • Pervasive platform lock-in.	• Hyperscaler nuclear power buyouts • S&P; profit vs wage decoupling • Regulatory capture against open source	• Escalating cluster capex (\$10B+). • Copyright bans on open weights. • Failure to pass public dividends.
Level 3: Turbulent Transition	• 5-15 year institutional lag window. • Public pressure forces adaptation. • Gradual emergence of new roles.	• Contraction in entry white-collar hiring • Synthetic deepfake trust shocks • Municipal payroll tax base strains	• Unpredictable capability jumps. • Political gridlock on retraining. • Fearful SMB technology adoption.
Level 4: Managed Partnership	• Mechanistic interpretability solved. • Multilateral compute treaties hold. • Statutory human-in-the-loop rules.	• Binding international safety pacts • Mandatory 3rd-party safety audits • Middle-class wage and leisure gains	• Bipartisan safety consensus. • Public computing infrastructure. • Provably bounded architectures.
Level 5: Broad Abundance	• Radical open model compression. • Automated clean energy super-cycle. • Universal public dividend policies.	• Local sub-10B model benchmark parity • Automated cures & clean fusion • Municipal universal dividend pilots	• Efficient neuromorphic hardware. • Open public science databases. • Cheap modular energy grids.

Strategic Action Postures & Observatory Methodology

How to translate scenario probability movements into grounded personal, organizational, and civic strategies.

Horizon Level	Strategic Posture & Personal Focus	Organizational / Civic Stance
Level 1: Loss of Control	Maintain calm psychological grounding; keep offline family emergency redundancies; build practical physical competence.	Advocate for mandatory independent safety evaluations, statutory developer liability, and physical air-gaps on critical grids.
Level 2: Techno-Feudalism	Master local open-weights tools; invest in real physical assets and home energy independence; avoid single-platform lock-in.	Support vigorous antitrust enforcement, open data commons, and publicly funded national compute utilities.
Level 3: Turbulent Transition	Build 6-12 months cash runway; become a workflow orchestrator; verify news with primary sources and cryptographically signed data.	Implement agile employee retraining funds, vocational adjustment buffers, and standardized provenance authentication.
Level 4: Managed Partnership	Master cutting-edge enterprise AI tools; deepen high-stakes human judgment, ethical nuance, and cross-team leadership.	Help shape professional ethics standards; build auditable, human-in-the-loop compliance into core business workflows.
Level 5: Broad Abundance	Cultivate intrinsic curiosity, self-directed creative projects, family presence, physical craft, and local community service.	Design universal abundance dividend pilots and champion open-access scientific publication and decentralized infrastructure.

Observatory Methodology Summary: Possible AI Futures operates an open scientific scoring engine updated every Monday. The distribution sums to exactly 100% with a strict 2.0% non-zero floor. Probabilities are rebalanced across two tiers: **Tier 1 Primary Empirical Signals** (1.0x weight: verified compute capex, labor data, safety audits, statutory laws) and **Tier 2 Curated Expert Layer** (0.35x damped weight: vetted researchers including Nobel and Turing laureates).