

Reading Group Guide

Jack W. Plunkett's *The Next Boom* aims to help readers understand and benefit from the coming era of global growth and change. One way to further explore these topics is through discussion with fellow readers (such as friends, classmates, co-workers or business partners). We hope that the following discussion questions will serve to stimulate conversation, encourage readers to share and further develop their ideas and enrich the overall reading experience.

Chapter One

1. Chapter One discusses the large expected growth in the U.S. population in coming decades, as well as the dramatic shifts in demographics that will accompany that growth. How do you think Americans can best prepare themselves for these changes? What sorts of “growing pains” do you think we may face in years ahead?
2. As the American population grows and the demographic make-up of U.S. citizens evolves, what sorts of implications do you foresee for education, especially at the elementary and secondary levels? How will changes in the “average American” create new kinds of students? In what ways might our present educational system be especially taxed by the increase in student numbers and by the influx of new students from different backgrounds?
3. Birth rates tend to decrease as a country becomes more educated, industrialized and prosperous. What is your current image of the “average American family,” and how do you think this prototypical family might change in 20, 50, or 100 years? How do these changes affect our understanding of what a family is, and how might they affect our cultural identity over time?
4. Advances in medicine are enabling people to live longer, and the “senior citizen” percentage of the population will continue to grow. How can countries benefit from their growing senior populations, and how can the nations of the world help to ensure that seniors continue to enjoy quality of life as their life spans increase?

Chapter Two

5. Chapter Two discusses changing consumer habits and the beginning of a “Post-Excessive Consumption Era.” Do you agree that the increases in savings and the decreases in debt will be long-term trends? Have we “learned our lesson” or will consumers continue to struggle with excessive spending and debt when the economic environment improves?
6. In what ways has the Great Recession affected how you think about money? In what ways has it affected how you think about work? Consider some of the concrete effects on your own family, your personal finances or your career. Have there been benefits as well as challenges?
7. In what ways might the recession have an impact on today’s young people? In particular, consider those finishing high school or college in 2009 or 2010 and entering the adult workforce for the first time.
8. Consider some of the challenges and opportunities presented by the emerging LOHAS segment of the consumer population. How can companies respond to this trend in a way that balances concern for environmental and social issues with the practical need to generate profits and keep costs under control?

Chapter Three

9. Consider the rise of firms like Evalueserve and the concepts of Knowledge Process Outsourcing and Business Process Outsourcing. How do you feel about people all over the planet competing for the same jobs? What might some of the benefits of this trend be, and what are some of the downsides? What advice might you give to your children or to a young person in school regarding the future of work in a globalized economy?

10. As the Next Boom gains momentum and the world becomes an even smaller place (more interconnected and more interdependent), how can the needs of the global economy be balanced against the rights of individual people to their individual beliefs? Even if extremism—religious, political or otherwise—can't be eliminated, how might it be mitigated, or its negative consequences reduced? What kinds of solutions and approaches might corporations consider? What kinds of approaches might have to begin with individuals?

11. Which do you use more these days, a mobile phone or a landline phone? If you aren't among those who have already given up their landline phones entirely, can you imagine yourself doing so any time in the near future?

Chapter Four

12. In the global business environment of the Next Boom and beyond, what will be the role of nationalism and the belief in the superiority of one's own country? Will the barriers between nations become less important as everything becomes more connected? What might be the proper balance between competition and cooperation among the world's nations?

13. What does "middle class" mean to you, and how is it different from being poor or rich? Also, how much is it about actual income, and to what degree is it a state of mind? How does a person determine when enough is enough?

14. In discussing the need for improvements to education in the U.S., the author states that the goal should be to produce more graduates with "marketable job skills in tune with the realities of the world economy." To what extent do you believe this requires a four-year college education, and to what extent might some of America's educational shortcomings be addressed through alternate methods such as two-year colleges, vocational schools and a reinvigoration of the apprenticeship model? Also, why do you think so many American students aren't living up to their educational potential? Why do so many young people drop out of high school and college in the U.S., and how might this issue be most effectively addressed?

Chapter Five

15. In reading Chapter Five, were you surprised to learn how much American agriculture involves genetically modified seeds and crops? How comfortable are you with this trend, and why do you think people in different parts of the world react so differently on this topic?

16. Consider the idea of "needs-based innovation," such as that utilized at the Indian telecom firm Bharti Airtel. Has the recession forced you to apply this principle in areas of your own work, or in your personal life? How do you think entrepreneurs, businesspeople, policy-makers and individuals might learn to develop their creative adaptation and problem-solving skills so that they can remain inspired to grow and innovate even in difficult times?

17. One of the themes of this chapter, as well as the book as a whole, is that dedicated entrepreneurship and continued innovation can lead to developments that will make the world a better, healthier and more prosperous place. In a broad sense, the author is choosing to take the stance of an optimist, and warns his readers not to allow present setbacks or fears about the future to discourage them. As you read, do you feel any of your beliefs (about business, the world or life in general) being challenged? Do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with the idea that dedicated innovation can continue to make the world a better place? How optimistic are you at this point?

Chapter Six

18. As technological advances continue to allow us to be more productive and to complete many tasks more efficiently, how might we ensure that such advances also improve the *quality* of our lives? As an example, the development of mobile smart phones that connect us 24/7 to our e-mail and to the Internet can be an amazing boon to productivity, but it also means that our work can now follow us practically everywhere, all the time. How might people safeguard themselves against becoming virtual slaves to the technologies that were supposed to bring greater freedom and progress to their lives?

19. When you read about the goals of MIT's Project Oxygen (including sensors embedded in the walls of your home and office, computers that recognize you when you enter a room, and cloud-networked systems filled with information, what is your reaction? Do you find the idea thrilling, or does it bring to mind images from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with its representation of a society under constant surveillance?

20. Consider Ray Kurzweil's assertion that technological advancement will continue at an exponential rate throughout the next century, resulting in developments that can hardly be comprehended (or even imagined) today. What do you think of this idea? How do you imagine the world a hundred years from now?

Chapter Seven

21. Did this chapter challenge your assumptions about sustainable growth and future energy needs? After reading, do you feel more hopeful about the possibility that continued innovation and new technologies will be able to converge with human ingenuity to provide adequate and affordable power to a growing world population?

22. Chapter Seven discusses the work of George P. Mitchell, whose company carried on with shale gas exploration efforts despite naysayers and incredible engineering obstacles. Despite the persistence of "the human capacity for pessimism," innovators continue to forge ahead and chart new paths toward the future. How might you (or your company) develop a stronger ability to see opportunity where others primarily see problems and difficulties?

23. The blowout of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in 2010 (and the oil spill that followed) brought into sharp focus some of the potential dangers and complications involved in energy exploration and production. Who do you think should be responsible for regulating these efforts? How involved should the federal government be, and in what capacity? How can the demands of safety and caution be suitably weighed against the necessary risks?

Chapter Eight

24. When some health care costs are paid for by the government or through employers, how much right does the government or the employer have to attempt to control an individual's behavior in areas that might affect those costs? Should an employer be able to penalize an employee for tobacco use if the employee is already paying higher insurance premiums because of his choice to smoke? Should the federal government be able to put an overweight person on a diet if some or all of that person's health care costs are being covered through government sources?

Chapter Nine

25. The developing U.S. charter school movement is discussed in this chapter. How far can this model be taken as a solution to America's widespread educational difficulties? What role do you think charter schools might be able to play in overall education reform?

26. Consider the discussion of generations and generational differences. What does your age and generation say about you? How do you differ in outlook from someone 20 years younger or 20 years older? Discuss some of the implications, for businesses and for society, of the evolving mindsets of today's younger generations. What do you think our children will do with the legacies handed on to them?