

fo r e (s i g h t)

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(s i g h t h i n e)

a regular column
on business futures
by **andy hines***

*the simple
facts of
business life*

If you were handed a blank cheque to set up a foresight function within a corporation today, what would you do?

Answering this question is one way to determine futures or foresight deliverables. Another reason for sorting our deliverables derives from the 'delivery difficulties' I talked about in my last column. The first step in selling a programme or in addressing the delivery issue in a company is to know what you are selling and delivering. Hence, my sorting of futures deliverables into the categories of strategic, creative, and educational. Now, this is not just an artificial construct for a magazine article, rather it is the basis for organizing my work at Kellogg Company.

I see at least four useful reasons for making a distinction between strategic, creative and educational.

1. To clarify thinking about what a foresight function should do

There's nothing like trying to sell a programme to make you figure out what you really have to offer. You have to work very closely with your sponsors (as I did), and customize according to the particular situation. Together we deduced that, in a very practical sense, the strategic nature of my work involves bringing fresh thinking and tools to aid decision making in existing projects, while the creative side attempts to sow the seeds for new projects. An education role underlies both. Again, overlap is plentiful – work with me here.

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In practice my role, again based on my particular context, has been more creative than strategic. I suspect this balance will vary depending on the company and the industry. But I think it is very important to 'take the temperature' of the organization and see what's needed, rather than trying to force-feed one's preconceived ideas. Although you want to bring in your own ideas about what is needed, this is best done from an informed point of view.

2. To assist the communication campaign

Little did I know how often I would be wearing a marketing hat. I had heard about the need to sell, sell, sell within the corporate world, but ... Put simply, if you can't effectively communicate your message, it doesn't matter how good it is. This is simply a fact of business life.

And the educational function sets the table for the strategic and creative. While they are intertwined, one can be seduced into neglecting the educational. OK, *mea culpa*. I confess that I fell into this trap myself, and I've learned that one probably shouldn't assume too much futures literacy. Intelligent, well-read people that exist in great abundance in the corporate world may be familiar with ideas that futurists engage, but familiarity is not the same as understanding. A well-known example to all of us engaged in futures work is the issue/opportunity of the aging population. How many of us have talked about this until we are blue in the face, only to see a market that remains very poorly served? Heads nod when this and other similar topics are raised, but on 'Monday morning', still nothing is done.

3. To make better use of consulting futurists

The strategic/creative distinction can also help those within a corporation better use consulting futurists and, vice-versa, help consulting futurists better position their services.¹ The problems come from running a project as if it's one when it's really the other.

The strategic project involves helping the corporate client answer a known question or address a known issue. There is an answer or solution to this project; for instance, we either buy company XYZ or we don't. This would typically be a project with senior management buy-in and resources at its disposal. This is comfortable bailiwick of the big six management consultant firms. Where futurists 'go wrong' here is in the endless generation of alternatives, new questions and new issues. The corporate client is frustrated because futurists never get to a solution.

The creative project involves discovering and raising new issues, or coming up with new options or alternatives. There is no single answer or solution. Really, these projects are about helping the corporation think differently, and it is up to the corporation to decide what to do with this thinking. The trap here is in trying to prescribe solutions. I'm grateful to a former client who once gave us a 'no solutions' directive. This truly freed us up to be more creative – try it some time!

Keep in mind that it is not always going to be crystal clear whether the project at hand is creative or strategic. It may start one way and veer another. In fact, a good futures project will often uncover the 'real' problem that is quite different than the officially stated one. This phenomena suggests 'checking in' throughout a project and making sure the team is still on the same page about the nature of the problem. How often do projects change in the middle, but half the group never makes the transition?

¹ This topic probably merits its own column – so let's leave it to that and touch on just a few issues here.

4. To identify where future opportunities lay

In positioning a futures function in today's corporate world, my sense is to be 'lean and mean'. My hypothesis is that the leaner, more virtual, organization of the future is not going to be kind to internal empire building. You corporate types, of course, know very well how tempting empire building is, how seductive, and with enough rationalization, how logical. I'm saying, splash some water in your face and forget it. I see in-house futurists in the role of building the networks, and being editors or brokers between the futurist community and the corporation. This requires bridge-building skills. The 'added-value' comes from knowing how to interpret what the futurist community has to offer based on an intimate knowledge of what the corporation needs.

Thanks for the feedback

I'm excited about the reader feedback that promises to really sharpen this collective enterprise (see *feedback* in this issue). While I remain exuberant about the prospects for foresight and futurists, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that internal futuristic thinking took a big whack in the 1980s and early 1990s. Strategic planning, technology forecasting, issues management and the like got hammered in the wave of downsizings. So, the more cynically inclined reader could attribute my optimism to nothing more than a restocking of the population from an earlier black plague. *Touché*, readers!

Nonetheless, I ask us to focus on the problems confronting futures work in the business world today² in the context of today's world and issues. Let's use the work done in the past as a means to bring different light on current problems, not as a club to say it's all been done before. For goodness sakes, let's take the useful insights from the past and bring them to light here. But to those who say, 'I told you so ten years ago,' I'll insist, how does this help us now?

² Reader Martin Hanlon, analyst with NSW Environment Protection Authority, asked why the focus of this column is just the corporate world. Well, certainly, it needn't be, and in practice it won't be. There are two reasons for a corporate focus here: first, that most journals/magazines tend to neglect corporate issues vis-à-vis futures in general, or educational, environmental, or governmental futures. Also, my primary experience now is with the corporate world, and I think it's always better to write based on experiences.