

fo r e (s i g h t)

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si g h i n e ht:

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

where do your trends come from?

Like many futurists, I use trends as a fundamental building block in my corporate foresight activities. Everybody, more or less, understands trends, even the time-pressed, attention-span-deprived corporate audience. But I am often asked: where do your trends come from, where are your data, or how did you arrive at this vision of the future?; as if there is some kind of trends superstore at which we go shopping. You have probably heard or even asked questions like these many times yourself. I have never found them easy to answer, and I have always felt guilty about that. As professional futurists, shouldn't we be able to answer these kinds of questions in our sleep?

I have been thinking more deeply about the answer to this question. I even have set up a web page on our internal trends website at Dow entitled, 'Where the trends come from'. While this has lessened my discomfort, I am still not satisfied. And my many discussions with practitioners on this topic assure me I am not alone. Most of us use the term 'environmental scanning' for our trend scanning activities. In recent years, I feel as if my environmental scanning has become a bit stale. It does not seem to be producing enough gems or kernels of insight that separate futurists from the average well-read professional.

I have identified three primary sources of our scanning angst. First is the feeling that we are not looking in the right places. This is not to say that there isn't useful work going on in this area or good sources of information. There is. Michael Marien's *Future Survey*, for instance, continues to be required reading for any

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foresight practitioner. The scope of Michael's work, however, is to monitor the 'low hanging fruit' sources. How do we find the exotic fruit? Another concern is more geographic – we worry about whether we are being global enough. This is particularly worrisome to my North American colleagues, as we are sensitive to the charge of being US-centric, and are always looking for good non-US sources.

Second is the struggle to involve more people within an organization in the scanning process. I am sure that most corporate futurists have tried setting up teams to do scanning. This meets with varying degrees of success. It does provide more eyes and ears. It does get some people involved. Unfortunately, however, in my experience it does not seem to generate much more insight. Another approach is to hire outside consultants to do it. This is generally more fruitful but not completely satisfactory. I once contracted out such a project with a charge of finding the 'weak signals'. But defining 'weak signals' is real tricky stuff: it needs to be relevant, but if it's too relevant, then it's not a weak signal. It is a delicate and difficult balancing act.

Many futurists feel that environmental scanning is a personal art form. This may be hubris, but I suspect that most of us have oodles of scanning info swimming around in our heads, often in our subconscious, and we get our flashes of insight from engaging the material and making those connections ourselves. Individuals have an intuitive sense of which leads to follow, which trails to blaze, that consultants or scanning teams can only help us begin with. No one can do it for us. (I can hear the text-mining folks screaming for attention. I will concede that text mining and other bibliometric tools have improved vastly. But, for me, they are not quite there yet. They are still better at dealing with quantity rather than quality, and one thing we are not short of is the quantity of material. I am optimistic that these tools will continue to improve and perhaps they will become indispensable tools at some point in the future. In the meantime...)

Third, and my sense of the biggest issue, is a conceptual one. This gets to the larger issue of what the scanning is for. To clarify one potential confusion, I do not believe that the value of environmental scanning is in finding the hidden pot of gold that no one else sees. You can pretty much assume that everyone has (or at least has access to) the same information. The trophy goes to the organization that is most adept at understanding and acting on the implications of the trends and supporting data uncovered by the scanning process. It is much more to do with my second point above about the personal, intuitive nature of scanning and foresight. We need to ensure that our own thinking about the future is conceptually sound, well rounded, and well informed.

And here there is great news. The October 1999 issue of *foresight* has a truly outstanding article by Rick Slaughter called 'A new framework for environmental scanning'. I recently re-read it and it is breathing a whole new life into my scanning. What I really like about it is the way in which it puts some deeper meaning not only behind environmental scanning, but also what we do in foresight. Here Rick lays a brilliant foundation. He suggests we've become overly enamoured with just one or two pieces of what is really a four-piece puzzle – essentially emphasizing the rational and empirical at the expense of the intuitive. By tapping into the forgotten quadrants, we may find that we can rediscover ways to generate useful insights.

I think many of us would like to discuss environmental scanning issues much more than we do. Although some people are enthusiastic about the potential for chat rooms and listservs, most people find they rarely have time to participate. It seems that an occasional email conversation of four or five rounds is about the maximum. Suggestions?

In this column I have not touched upon the issue of how to store and manage this information. I remember the days of clipping newspaper and magazine articles and dutifully placing them in folders, and placing the folders in file folders, and putting them in file cabinets. Anyone who has participated in one of these kinds of ventures knows how difficult it is to categorize information consistently. It is almost impossible not to end up with apples and oranges, no matter how hard you try to be consistent. But let's save that for another issue, assuming I've piqued your interest in where the trends come from.