

Camford

foresight/ vol.03, no.03, jun.01  
the journal of futures studies, strategic thinking and policy

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# h i n e s i g h t

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

## the art of external combustion

***As a futurist, you can never have too many networks – facilitating and cross-fertilizing are what it's all about. Not only are they the way for futurists to influence decisions; they're also the way to institutionalize foresight within organizations – be they public or private.***

It's one of our jobs as futurists to try and 'institutionalize' foresight within organizations. This is no simple task – indeed, it's a central challenge of foresight for the next generation. But the fact that the UK government has now invited suggestions for more effective ways to organize foresight activity is significant, and should sensitize us to the challenge ahead.

In the last *hinesight* (on the cult of personality), I diagnosed how the field's necessary early reliance on the power of personality had become self-perpetuating and hampered institutionalization. In effect, futurists have been asking organizations to 'trust me' more often than trust the discipline. This time, I want to focus more sharply on the state of futures within organizations today, and build the case a little more deeply for how futures/foresight can be embedded within them.

Many look to the corporate sector for lessons, but personally I doubt governments have much to learn from them. Shell's scenario work is often held up as a success story, but after that...hmmm. The current generation of futurists are largely working on the periphery of government or trying to inspire change from the bottom up.

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The decline of strategic planning and issues management in the 1980s and 1990s robbed many futurists of an institutional foothold. We may have regrouped and finally made a comeback, but it's largely been through the side door rather than the front.

Now, the good news. Consulting futurist groups, such as the Global Business Network, Coates and Jarratt, the Institute for the Future and others have been running multi-client programmes and studies for several years. Pooling their resources with corporate clients, government groups enjoy access to the resources of the consulting company, as well as a valuable opportunity to network. These programmes have produced hundreds of converts. Some have evolved into futurists in their own right, others are 'savvy consumers' – but all are to some degree enlightened. Add to this a cadre of trained professionals emerging from university courses and the ranks of consulting firms, and we have reason to be hopeful.

There are already signs of these formerly disparate futurists achieving a collective power. First, we are increasingly mixing at consulting consortiums and other foresight-related conferences and meetings. Indeed, something of a regular circuit is forming, so you seldom go to a meeting and don't know a few people. We are recognizing this potential. I recently participated in a two-day meeting of the so-called International Futures groups. This meeting came up from the grass roots; from people running into one another and asking, why don't we get together and talk about issues particular to us? Thanks to the initiative of the folks at Pitney-Bowes and Ericsson, plans were hatched and a meeting launched. As well as the sponsors, representatives attended from:

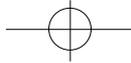
- The Coca-Cola Company
- British Telecom
- Consignia (British Postal Service)
- Posten AB (Swedish Postal Service)
- Dow Chemical
- Nokia
- Siemens AG
- IBM
- Sonera
- EADS Duetschland GmbH
- University of Houston-Clear Lake (home of the Future Studies Program)
- Global Business Network

Most of the organizations represented had 3-5 person foresight teams. Others were one-person shows. Here we saw living, breathing evidence of a new alliance of savvy consumers and trained professionals; the enlightened mingling with the 'evolved'.

Second, what we are learning from our conversations on the circuit is that our various types of members are finding one another inside organizations and uniting in networks. These alliances can be remarkably strong. For example, a savvy consumer can sometimes provide the political connections and know-how to facilitate concepts and tools conceived by a professional. And the savvy consumers, 'evolveds' and 'enlighteneds' are beginning to see the advantage of bringing trained professionals inside the organization.

Making the case for a trained professional can be very difficult for the average organization person. But having someone on the inside who can vouch for his or her value can help carry the day. Take my own case. I came to my present position at Dow Chemical through a hallway conversation at a futures consortium meeting. A strong savvy consumer, whom I had worked with in my consulting days, effectively recruited me and made my hiring practically a formality. He had a sense of the value someone like me could bring – and was able to persuade the company.

Third is the awakening of trained professionals to their growing ranks and influence. I've just come back from an alumni retreat of graduates from the



University of Houston-Clear Lake Graduate Program in Studies of the Future. Roughly 25 alumni from across the country and Mexico descended on the university to discuss and plan ways to help the course and come together more effectively as a network. The important point here is that even we were surprised at what seems to be a critical mass of us working inside organizations, such that it is of real professional benefit for us to come together. A particularly dynamic conversation at the retreat discussed the lack of an organization dedicated to the needs of the professional futurist – and hence the need to form one.

Lastly is the great potential for mixing internal and external networks. Most of us have our internal networks supporting the case for foresight and change. And we have the external networks we've been discussing. Why not mix the two? I helped do so recently, when Dow's internal 'Explorers Network' met up with members of the external 'Michigan Futurists' network to share insights, experiences, and views about the future. The internal Explorers are mostly of the 'enlightened' ilk, while the Michigan Futurists are a mix of savvy consumers, evolved and trained professionals from eight Michigan companies. The insiders were happy to have an external perspective, and the outsiders were interested in getting a glimpse of how one approach was working on the inside.

All this points to the need for networking. Once you've identified the various levels of 'foresight literacy' within your organization, learn to cultivate them. And don't limit your network to internal folks – get on the circuit. As long as you bring something to the network, you'll get lots to bring back. Empire building is out. A strong network is the route to foresight in the emerging organizational world.

