

## **Can I get a job as a Futurist?**

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It is the most frequently asked question I get in speaking with prospective foresight students. It is quite often a “make-or-break” question on whether they will enroll or not. I have spent many hours strategizing on how best to answer, because quite frankly, it is difficult to answer. I will make a case in this essay that the lack of jobs and a career path in foresight is harming our long-term prospects as a field, and suggest a few things we can do about.

Few readers of this journal are likely to doubt that the world would benefit from the greater use of foresight. We might differ on the best way to achieve that. The formal study of the future is more than sixty years old, if we take post-WW2 as its beginning. Taking stock of the current situation, we can find both encouraging and discouraging signs.

In this essay, I am going to argue that regardless of how you interpret the signs, we are having far less influence on the future than we could. And I am going to argue that we need to confront the jobs challenge head-on if we are going to expand that influence. To do that, it’s time for us to get serious about building a foresight profession, developing a career path, and promoting the good work that we are doing and can do more of.

### **Why jobs are important**

The following are key reasons why jobs are important:

- Jobs are a way for us to influence organizations and the future

- Jobs are a key consideration on the mind of those seeking to enter the field
- Jobs are a way to attract talent into the field

### Jobs are a way for us to influence organizations and the future

In today's world, much influence is wielded via the workplace, whether it's corporate, government, non-profit, education, NGOs, entrepreneurs, associations, activist groups, etc. While the future role of jobs in our economy is open for discussion and reconsideration,<sup>1</sup> this essay assumes that jobs remain central for at least the next decade. Of course, as futurists we will continue to monitor the evolution of jobs and the job market and adapt accordingly.

Futurists have been somewhat ambivalent about whether futurist is an appropriate full-time job. Most early futurists were what we might call "hobbyists," in that exploring the future was a labor of love that was done on the side. Relatively few were employed as full-time futurists. The early growth of the field was perhaps epitomized by the World Future Society, a clearinghouse for information and ideas about the future. Started in the kitchen of founder and long-time President Ed Cornish, it blossomed alongside the popular *Futurist* magazine. From these humble beginnings, it propelled to a high point of over 30,000 members in the 1980s. Yet it might be fair to suggest that the hobbyist model has run its course. WFS membership has been on a long and steady decline. It is at 5,800 members today.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside the hobbyists were a small numbers of academics in tenured positions who were often able to pursue futures work, even though it wasn't their primary job. A very small number of these were in the handful of academic programs dedicated to the future.<sup>3</sup> There were also a small number of organizational futurists, mostly in planning departments, but their ranks were severely decimated by the downsizing movements in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>4</sup> On the consulting side, the most prominent approach could be called the "star model," which featured a talented and compelling personality, either as a solo act or as part of small, boutique consulting firm. Dozens, if not hundreds, of these firms have come and

gone over the years. There have also been opportunities to volunteer in organizations, such as the Millennium Project's vast global network of nodes in dozens of countries around the world.

In the many conferences, conversations, writings, and listserv discussion about the field, there has been a school of thought that eschewed a shift to professionalism. Futurists who used the tools of the field for profit were often looked down upon. This view suggests that futurists should be above commercial considerations, such as helping organizations to sell more products (that we don't really need). Futures work, in this view, ought to be focused on the big civilizational questions regarding the future. This anti-commercial bias was not universally held, but more of an influential undercurrent in discussions about what the field should be as it grows up.

I think it is important that we futurists address the role of jobs more openly and strategically. The hobbyist model is fading and the boutique model is stagnant. Our baseline future (present trends continued) of a mix of hobbyists, big thinkers, and a small cadre of working futurists, is likely to produce some nice work here and there, but have relatively little influence on the mainstream. A simple categorization is consulting, organizational, and academic jobs. Consulting futurists address the demand for buying futurist skills and expertise, organizational futurists are employed by a single organization, and academic futurists explore the future inside academia. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not specifically track the employment of futurists, nor to my knowledge do other national agencies. BLS, in a 2009 profile of my former colleague at Social Technologies, Christopher Kent, suggested there might be between 500 and 1,000 professional futurists working in the United States – based on anecdotal information, i.e., someone provided a guess.<sup>5</sup>

#### Jobs are a key consideration on the mind of those seeking to enter the field

Several years ago the Houston Foresight program adopted the tag line “preparing professional futurists.” The program is designed as a training ground for professional futurists and “futurizers” (those

already working inside organizations who are seeking to bring more foresight to their work). In that capacity, I speak to dozens of prospective students each year, and as mentioned in the opening, their number one concern is whether they will be able to get a job as a futurists someday.

In 2001, I made a case for developing “lunch-pail futurists” with a quote from this journal’s editor Jim Dator: “in my experience, futures work is still too closely dependent on personalities and not sufficiently tied into structures, whether in government or business.”<sup>6</sup> This quote highlights the challenge of the “star model” -- it requires a steady supply of stars, but by definition they are in a limited supply. The early days included stars such as Kahn, de Jouvenel, Toffler among many others, a second wave of Gordon, Harman, Dator, Henderson, Coates, Schwartz et al., and a third wave of stars today are out there today. They are often such talented people that they would have done well in any career they chose by the sheer fact of their personality. It is good to have stars. In sports and movies, stars sell the tickets. But it is not a way to provide a large number of jobs.

Back then, I was quite optimistic that we were building this cadre of trained futurists alongside the stars. I think we have made some progress, but 14 years later, I’m not sure we’re moving quite fast enough. Students are not the only source of future futurists, of course, but certainly those willing to invest the time in education and training ought to be central to our thinking.

#### Jobs are a way to attract talent

Futurist is not yet a recognized profession in the US, and most that have searched for a job as a futurist can attest to the difficulty of finding them.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, it is also challenging for prospective employers of futurists to find the talent they need. In previous roles where I have had to recruit talent, it has been challenging to find, and in my current role where I often play matchmaker between students, alums, and employers, it is not easy to find a fit. Most jobs require a specific skill set, level of experience, and often a geographic relocation. Put simply, the supply and demand is so low, that it is rare that an employer in

a given geography will have access to locally available futurist talent. Put simply, if we are going to build our field, we're going to need more and more talented people do the work. Indeed, employers of aspiring futurists have reported back that many times hopeful interns do not always have the appropriate skills, such as writing and analyzing. And to attract talented people, particularly to the profession, we are going to need more jobs.

### **The job market for futurists**

The job market for most people is challenging. Futurists have the added burden of not being recognized as an occupation, and having to explain to prospective employers what a futurist is. Recognition of futurists, while improving, is still relatively low. A December 2015 search on futurist returned 5,820,000 hits including, 3,220 for "consulting futurist, 4,460 for "academic futurist" and 822 for "organizational futurist." A search for "foresight professional" returned 2,580 hits. A search of Linked In profiles at the same time returned just under 6,000 hits. While this proves nothing, it suggests that growing use of the term and that if even a small percentage of folks using the title have jobs as futurists, there are a growing number of jobs. Further research is need to sort this out. Along those lines, the Houston Foresight program recently began a research project tracking mentions of futurists in the media that should provide help on this issue.<sup>8</sup> But a November 2015 search of the massive online job site Monster.com

#### **Alums and Jobs: Some Promise, but on a Small Scale**

A segmentation analysis of Houston Foresight Master's students found that roughly two-thirds are established professionals, and one-third aspiring professionals. The "established" are typically either looking to futurize their current position, or to branch out into something new involving foresight. The "aspiring" are typically looking to establish careers as futurists. Our average number of students each semester is around 30.

A Spring 2015 alumni survey found that 32% of respondents "got employed because of their foresight degree" and 60% reported "using their foresight knowledge frequently or all the time" at their job. These percentages suggest that one-third of alum get their jobs because of the degree, another third apply the degree, and one third do neither. Given that many do not graduate, and that our program has been on average graduating about a half-dozen students per year, one gets a sense of the tiny scale that we are operating at.

*Source:* Fatema Tuz Zohra included 46 participants. "Alum Survey: 95% Report that "Foresight Program Changed my Thinking" Edit," *The Houston Foresight Blog*, August 10, <http://www.houstonforesight.org/?p=4376>.

turned up one listing for a futurist (and I must confess that I was surprised to find one!).

The relatively small numbers of jobs specifically looking for futurists are typically communicated through personal networks or via listservs of foresight organizations. And many of those jobs end up going to insiders with an interest in developing a new career track. There is literally no bar or standard to fill a futurist job, and our tool kit can be perceived as simple enough that a smart and capable newbie can at least appear to do a passable job. It is likely that there are far more futures-related jobs that could be filled by futurists that never reach the futurist community.

The APF Professional Task Force, which in November 2013 was tasked by the Board to “Explore potential roles for APF in the professionalization of foresight,” has analyzed three dozen job descriptions gathered from various members. There are indeed some futurist jobs out there, but perhaps far more in slightly camouflaged language, that is, not specifically using “futurist” in the job description.

The Professionalization Task Force is using a simple categorization of consulting, organizational, and academic types of jobs. Let’s review the current status of each.

### Consulting

The Great Recession of 2008 dealt a blow to consulting futurists. Speaking specifically about the US market, my former firm, Social Technologies, was hit hard, ended up being bought and gradually squeezed out of existence. Notably, this firm once provided a fairly robust source of jobs. Its high point was 40 employees, mostly futurists, and it was a great source for the scarce entry-level jobs. Our Houston academic program was regularly able to place at least a few recent graduates into entry-level positions each year. The Global Business Network also ultimately disappeared. While it was not a large employer of futurists, it was a recognized and credible foresight company that is gone. Neither of these firms has been “replaced” so to speak. That is, there are not a lot of well-recognized branded futurist firms nor is there a ready source of entry-level jobs. In the US, The Institute for the Future, the Institute

for Alternative Futures, The Futures Company and The Foresight Alliance are out there, but they are relatively small.

A network model has emerged -- or rather gained more prominence -- that is typically led by a “star” futurist with some brand recognition who works with a network of partners on a project-to-project basis with perhaps a staffer or two. The Futures Lab, the former Andspace, and Fast Future are examples of this approach. They provide some project-based jobs, but not enough for futurists to earn the equivalent of a full-time living, and the whole point of the network model is to avoid building a staff.

An apparently growing new source of jobs is coming from the integration of foresight with design firms. Arup Foresight, Very Nice Design and Idea Couture are examples here. It is not clear, however, if this represents an “incursion” of design into a space where foresight used to play, or whether it is an expansion of foresight into new territory.

### Organizational

A review of the Association of Professional Futurist (APF) membership lists found that the percentage of non-student members who fit the organizational futurist category was:<sup>9</sup>

- 21% of 28 members (no student members) in 2002
- 17% of 201 non-student members in 2007
- 18% of 197 non-student members in 2010
- 15% of 264 non-student members in 2015\*

There appears to be a small growth in dedicated internal foresight functions. The United Arab Emirates Prime Minister’s Office is setting up a foresight function and recently released four jobs descriptions aimed principally at futurists. Shell continues to produce its scenarios, Google brought Futurist Ray

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\* Based on members with posted profiles and not including academic futurists

Kurzweil on board, Ford touts its futurist Sheryl Connelly, and Intel has Brian David Johnson. And there are more small foresight functions with a lesser public profile, some who are part of a Corporate Foresight Practitioners Network based on Linked In.

The situation appears to be similar in the US government sector with small numbers of foresight functions dispersed throughout various agencies. In the US, both the Federal Foresight Community of Interest and the Public Sector Foresight Network have more than 100 members in their communities of practice.<sup>10</sup>

Though more difficult to track, there are a small number of entrepreneurs creating their own organizations or movements applying foresight to their building the future. For instance, Houston Foresight alum Sean Daken founded [Refactor U](#) that offers boot camps to teach coding.

All told, the numbers are pretty small.

### Academic

The number of graduate programs dedicated to foresight is somewhere between one and two dozen in the entire world.<sup>11</sup> One could visit the Foresight and Research Network's (see <http://www.globalforesight.org/foresight-graduate-programs>) website on the growth of programs and courses globally and see a positive story. For instance, the development of an "Introduction to Foresight" class at the University of Notre Dame's business school is a positive. Or one could look at these same facts and see a nascent discipline on teetering on the brink of disaster. The Houston Foresight program had a near death experience in the mid-2000s that necessitated a move from a satellite to the main campus. Master's programs at Leeds Metropolitan University and Regent University were discontinued. As higher education is under fire from multiple fronts and for a variety of reasons, small graduate programs face a precarious existence as increasingly bottom-line focus has the budget-



cutters eyeing small programs to make way for the big money-makers. There are few PhD options in foresight.

This assessment suggests that the resulting job prospects for a career as an academic futurist are limited.

Indeed, the employment prospects in all three sectors depend primarily on whether one tends to view the glass as half-empty or half-full. In either case, there is a challenging future ahead regarding jobs.

### **What can we do: Strategies around Jobs**

This essay takes the position that more futurist jobs are essential for the health of the field going forward. At the same time, it acknowledges that there are other views. Indeed, I am sympathetic to a views expressed by the alumni survey featured above in which respondents that suggested “as futurists it should be obvious going to school to get a job is so yesterday” and that “your employment (or self-employment) prospects are not based on this degree- they are based on who you are as a person.” This piece is aimed at the next decade and acknowledges that the role of jobs in our society is being redefined, and that one’s “personal brand<sup>12</sup>” is a vital aspect of landing a job.

Five suggestions are offered to address the issue of futurists and jobs:

- Engage the jobs issue as a field
- Build a profession
- Develop a career ladder
- Strengthen the academic base
- Promote the field

### Engage the jobs issue as a field

As mentioned earlier, the field has been ambivalent about the role of jobs. Perhaps it is time to devote conferences, journal issues, and foresight organizations, in an ongoing dialogue on the issue. Let's talk about it! There have been a few scattered efforts on the topic. For example, La Futurist sponsored an event in Amsterdam called "NOW NEW NEXT: Building the future industry" that aimed to create a framework for "this new industry." Also, the APF has designed and is planning to launch a quantitative survey of the market for foresight. Upon its founding, APF did a "Futures of Futures" project.<sup>13</sup> It may be time for not only APF, but any foresight organization to launch a similar initiative exploring the future of our field, with jobs being an important part of that consideration.

### Build a profession

One way to help create jobs for futurists is to build a profession. As a small step in that direction, I have been leading the previously-mentioned Professionalization Task Force for the last couple of years. The guiding ethos of this effort is not to build walls around an exclusive futurist club, but rather to define a foresight ecosystem of related fields and colleagues. In particular, it is trying to put some definition around what the core of foresight is, to enable us to more coherently describe what we do as futurists. Creating jobs is not a focus of the Task Force, but it is part of my personal interest in participating. My view is that the better we describe what we do to potential employers and clients, the better are the prospects for landing a job. Being a part of a profession may also help improve the credibility and recognition of the work that futurists do. It is hoped that this will help make it easier for potential employers to justify hiring a futurist. Currently, clients and potential employers are faced with several different names for what we do, different names for what professionals are called, and a wide variety of descriptions about the work itself. It is unlikely that we will achieve complete unity around

these, but it would be helpful to at least reduce the variations. This involves some basic branding principles around building a consistent story.

And in attempting to build a profession, we are not suggesting that we have no use for hobbyists. On the contrary, we simply see that for professionals, the future is of primary interest, and for non-professionals it is simply less so, but we absolutely, positively encourage as much interest in the future as we can.

### Build a Career Ladder

The APF Professionalization Task Force has this as an agenda item for the upcoming Phase Two. From my vantage point, the major gap in the existing career ladder (such as it is) is at the entry level. The foresight community has been generous in providing internships. But most job descriptions are looking for those with significant work experience. There is a gap for those with an education and internship experience and the significant experience required to land the jobs that are available, and the structure of the consulting industry is perpetuating that gap.

### Strengthen the Academic Base

As mentioned above, there is in practice no standard for becoming a professional futurist. If we are going to build a field developing credible, high-quality foresight, we are going to need to develop standards. A healthy academic base – healthy in the sense of being larger than just the handful of academic programs devoted to studying the future that currently exist globally<sup>14</sup> -- could help emerging professionals acquire the intellectual, theoretical, philosophical, and ethical grounding required to become a professional futurist – it cannot appear that one can simply “make it up.”

### Promote the field

Tell the world. While we should always communicate the work we are doing, what is suggested here is a public relations campaign that specifically promotes the field as a whole. And to do this properly, it would be helpful to “to get our own house in order” or “get our story straight” in order to develop a more coherent and compelling story. My observation is that most of us talk about our particular niche in the foresight ecosystem, rather than the field as a whole. We describe our organizations and our take on matters regarding the field, and don’t speak much about the field itself. Given the rather fragmented nature of the field, this makes sense. Thus, our challenge is to do what we can to put the pieces together and develop a field worthy of promotion. And then promote it. A project tracking mentions of futurists in the media during the first quarter of 2015 captured 800 mentioned filtered to 332 related to our work, or 3.6 mentions per day. Little mention is made of professional futurists work. For instance, over the entire quarter, only one APF member appeared in those mentions.<sup>15</sup> There is lots of work to do!

## **Conclusion**

The time is ripe for thinking about our own future as field. We have been generous in helping others, but neglectful of our own prospects. The motivation is to achieve our common purpose of spreading foresight and doing our part to help make the world a better place. Preparing for our future is not a hobby, or a part-time job, but arguably the most important job that is drastically under-fulfilled. We need not make everyone a futurist, and we need not build an empire of futurists. We have potential partners and allies that we can rally to our cause, but we first need to get our house in order. I look forward to the day when I eagerly welcome the question of “can I get a job,” being armed with an array of enticing opportunities. Or better yet, a day when that question need not be asked.

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