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a regular column
on business futures
by **andy hines**
*what does
business need from
futurists?*

The great news is that business is looking to futurists more than ever before. Consulting futurists are prospering, and inroads are being made on the 'inside' [of the corporation]. Futurist is no longer an 'f' word (that is, a word to be avoided) within the corporation. To the contrary, futurists are now gaining some cachet – it is becoming increasingly 'cool' in the business world to have your own futurist or two.

The catch is that business doesn't appear to be quite sure about what futurists can do for them, what they really want from futurists, or what to do with what they get. And futurists are equally in the dark on these questions. Herein lies the focus of this column.

There is little argument that business is more serious about the idea of looking to the future, being more innovative, being more creative, thinking out of the box, etc – things that futurists are ideally suited to deliver. But what, within these buzzwords and concepts, is it that futurists can deliver that mainstream management consulting cannot? Put differently, how do consulting futurists package their futures wisdom in a way that business can most effectively use?¹

I bring several kinds of experience to these questions. I earned a Master's Degree in Studies of the Future from the University of Houston–Clear Lake, spent six years as a consulting futurist with Coates & Jarratt, Inc, and have spent the past year-and-a-half as a corporate futurist at Kellogg Company. Along the way, I've had hundreds of conversations with both practitioners and consumers of futurists' work on this topic of how to best deliver futures work to business.

The academic slant from the UHCL programme discussed 'client-centred' futures in which the futurist is to deliver 'objective' futures results to the client based on answering their questions as impartially as possible and advising the client when his or her own ideology might be intruding. A sound place to start, but it begs our question in assuming that clients know exactly what they want and it's a simple matter of the futurists providing it.

As a consulting futurist with Coates & Jarratt, my colleagues and I were continually searching for better ways to deliver our material. We cited internal delivery of our work

This regular column will reflect on issues concerning the use of futures thinking in the business sector. It signals a particular concern of foresight to raise awareness of the benefits of futures research to business as well as the difficulties in doing it well. In addition to this column, Andy Hines has a specific brief to stimulate contributions to the journal from the business community.

as our number one business challenge. And let's make a distinction between the fairly straightforward task of complying with a contract and that of having a measurable impact on an organization. Clients told us again and again that they loved our material, but struggled with how to best transmit it within their organization.

As part of the corporate world, I'm now experiencing the challenge of getting the right information to the right decision makers. This challenge is faced not just by futurists, but the future is at the mercy of the next quarter, an unexpected earnings dip, a change in jobs, a restructuring, etc. So, even when a client is pretty clear on what they want from a futures study at the outset, there are many circumstances beyond their control that may affect the outcome.

In the best-case scenario, a study is commissioned by the CEO or 'senior management' and has the buy-in of the troops. And most consulting futurists – any consultant for that matter – typically insist on this access as a condition of success. But in how many cases do futurists have this access, and access to a top that knows precisely what they want, and has effectively got organization-wide buy-in? Safe to say, not the majority, but many contracts are carried out as if this were the case.

I think the essence of what futurists best deliver to business today either assists the strategic or the creative. The strategic entails bringing a greater understanding of the future to bear on current decisions. Herein lies strategic planning, scenarios, forecasting, technology assessment and the like. The creative entails bringing fresh thinking to businesses stuck in their self-constructed 'boxes', and generating new ideas and business opportunities. For this, we have environmental scanning, trend analysis, cross-impact matrixes and a host of creative thinking tools. A general educational role regarding the future, for those within the organization at large, could be broken out separately, but really is a means for improving either the strategic or creative.

A first step in addressing the issue of how futurists can better deliver their insights to business is to frame the client's request appropriately. While there is, and ought to be, overlap between the strategic and creative, unintentionally mixing them, or delivering on one when the other is really what was asked for, is one of the problems behind our delivery difficulties. But more on that next time.

This column will spend a lot of its lifetime trying to better answer the questions above. The internal delivery question so bothered me that I had to see for myself. So I left the cozy environment of the consulting firm to work on the inside of a major corporation. Surely, I reasoned, being a professional futurist myself, I would have an inside track on getting the future properly attended to within the organization?

I'm a historian by degree (as well as a political scientists and futurist), so it would be remiss and self-aggrandizing of me to imply that significant progress hasn't already been made toward answering these questions. Certainly, the Kahn's, Toffler's, Naisbitt's, Amara's, Gordon's, Henderson's, Cetron's, Coates's, Schwartz's *et al* have done tremendous work in advancing the field and making future studies more relevant to business. But if we are to meet the expanded demand ahead, particularly from the business community, then we must advance the work they've begun.

Let's make a deal, right here: I'll use this space to share our collective thoughts on how futurists can better serve business. Please share your thoughts, stories, case studies, and opinions, and we'll make this a truly interactive enterprise.² Let the conversation begin!

Next: more on the 'strategic' and the 'creative' deliverables of futurists.

¹ An issue for a future column is that it's not clear that small, 'fast,' start-up companies, the engines of business growth, are looking to futurists at all.

² Feedback to this column should be sent to Andy.Hines@kellogg.com and will be posted on our website (<http://www.camfordpublishing.com>).