

Evolving Role of the Futurist

Darrell L. Smith
Colorado Technical University

The evolving role of the futurist within organizations may better predict an organization's desired future based on deliberate techniques. Today's fast paced society and globalization requires broad and creative techniques that can motivate and anticipate an organization's future knowledge. By following historical trends and expert in the field, the growth of futuring will continue as its utility proves to enhance market effectiveness and competitiveness in both government and commercial application.

INTRODUCTION

Do you know where your organization is today and where they want to be in the future? The evolving role of the futurist within organizations may better predict an organization's desired future based on deliberate techniques. The key determinant is the organization's *desired* future supported by group action and collaboration. If so, according to Ed Cornish's 2004 seminal work *Futuring: The Exploration of the Future* and other researchers on the subject, these techniques may connect the *where your organization is today* to the *how your organization gets there* phase (Sagi, 2007). The following paper will discuss the history of futurists within the organization, the role of the futurist as being more important today than 20 years ago, and how organizations might use a futurist today.

In order to begin a review into the role of a futurist, a common understanding of what futuring means is necessary. Lawler & Worley (2013) defined futuring as a process that prepares an organization for uncertainties in the world. Two distinct points about the word futuring should be made clear. First, from its root, futuring focuses on the tomorrow and the beyond. It is not concerned about the present with the exception to establish a baseline and point of departure. Futuring implies strategic planning. It also puts action into the word *future*. Futuring does not represent a static process and should instead be thought of as predicting. Acting managers and leaders will think of the term as strategizing plans for the future. Its importance lies in the process allowing managers and leaders to recognize blind spots, create options, generate awareness, and articulate conversations (Lawler & Worley, 2013) that help an organization prepare for its uncertain future.

ROOTS OF FUTURING

The roots of futuring were derived from strategic planning formalized early in the twentieth century and put into practice during the first world war in the 1920s (Fetsch, 1990). Although not exactly identical, many of the tenants and practices between strategic planning and futuring are the same such as brainstorming. Sagi (2007) recognized a connection to the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) model used by organizational strategic planners almost by accident. The desired

outcome similarities between SWOT and futuring indicate a utility in strategic planning methods fused with those of other predictive models.

Whether the origin of futuring was intentional or not, the desire for it has grown out of necessity the same as its strategic planning uncle. Research indicates, the need for futuring increased significantly more today than just twenty years ago. In 2004, Cornish's book highlighted futuring as formative predictive tool and debunked naysayers who explained it away as an intuitive practice by a few businessmen and academics with questionable success. Back then, futuring continued to be viewed as an emerging business model for companies and think tanks with coherent and amalgamated techniques (Cornish, 2004). Only a year later, an initiative by a chemical council in Europe developed futuring scenarios, strategic vision statements, and new networks to aid the European chemical industry (Heinzelbecker, 2005). More recently at a futuring forum in Washington D.C., the annual Millennium Project ongoing for nearly two decades, unveiled a Global Futures Intelligence System (J., 2013) for their efforts.

Another example reveals the diversity of futuring practices. In Florida, more than 100 hospices gathered for a futuring conference to brainstorm how to improve hospice services (J., 2013). A futurist Clem Bezold, chairman and founder of the Institute for Alternative Futures in Virginia, called on the active participation among hospice administrators (J., 2013). Frey (2014), listed by Google as the top futurist speaker, wrote that futuring growth areas had emerged in all aspects of society.

METHODOLOGIES

Several methodologies may be used to predict the future. Lawler & Worley (2013) distinguished these by short-term, mid-term, and long-term methods. Short term methods include scanning tools, prediction markets, and extreme strategizing. One specific scanning tool, mentioned earlier, implements the SWOT analysis to identify and predict key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within an organization. Second, while it may appear unreliable at first, online and publicly available prediction markets have proven themselves to be more reliable than the experts, according Lawler & Worley's (2013) research. Therefore, this method may be one of the most accurate. Lastly, for short term methods, the idea of extreme strategizing integrates a rapid process of data and dialogue. It summarizes the thoughts of the organization and its stakeholders to make quality assessments and adjustments as necessary for the best of everyone involved.

Predictive markets methods appears to be one of the best tools discussed in the literature. When examining the best tool, predictive analysis (Siegle, 2013) methods maximize the inputs in the quickest and most efficient ways and should receive greater attention. By incorporating real-time inputs from participatory stakeholders, prediction markets do just that. They use many, if not all, readily available and updated resources to make informed decisions in a collaborative manner. Siegle (2013) analyzed a *multiplicative* effect which encourages the development of these predictive analytic models. Large data mining tools comb the internet for troves of economic and social information around the globe which can be used in big data analytic projects (Frenkel 2015; Byron, 2013). While some of the data mining software used to filter internet information are not free as are some online prediction applications, they provide an excellent baseline of data to conduct predictive analysis with a greater sense of certainty outperforming human expert guessing, experience, and speculation.

In the past, many techniques have been implemented by organizations to gain a noticeable competitive edge and improve their market share. Many are commonplace and intertwined into routine businesses modeling practices by strategic planners. Sagi (2007) found strategic planning a form of applied futuring. Fetsch (1990) and Sagi (2007) identified dozens of strategic planning ingredients that can also be used by futurists. A few key techniques include environmental scanning, scenario building, identification of stakeholders and futuring facilitators, anticipatory planning teams, opinion polling, brainstorming, trend analysis that may be combined into a deliberate orchestration of events, negotiation, progress updates, and annual reviews. Although Sagi (2007) differentiates strategic planning from futuring by acknowledging strategic planning as more quantifiable, the benefits of futuring as a planning model are evident.

GAP IN LITERATURE

Frey (2014) identified the need for more futuring because of society's growth and diversity. Also, Sagi (2007) recommended futurists and strategic planners collaborate but to what end? They both employ special techniques with common objectives and potentially similar results. They may complement each other through the rational, left brain methods of strategic planning and the creative, right brain approaches of futuring (Bahavar, 2008). However, empirical evidence fails to clearly demonstrate how the two could provide better results together beyond this speculation. Furthermore, corroborative research has yet how to demonstrate how strategic planning concepts such as SWOT may be incorporated into the futuring model explained by Sagi (2007). As futuring matures and becomes a mainstay in an organization's toolkit, additional research is required to institutionalize the practice with clearer data and perhaps then, transform organizations that use modern strategic planning models.

CONCLUSION

Today's fast paced society and globalization requires broad and creative techniques that can motivate and anticipate an organization's knowledge of the future. By following historical trends and expert in the field, the growth and utility of futuring will continue to enhance market effectiveness and competitiveness for both government and commercial application. Bahavar (2008) summarized a preferred futurist planning model based on 30-plus years of successful practice and grounded theory. Sagi's (2007) model falls into three phases: 1) define the status quo, 2) define the preferred state, and 3) commit logical and predictable action to the plan with a focus on connecting the plan to the action. In other words, know where you are, where you want to be, and how to get there. This sentiment has been echoed by many futurists, noted by Sagi (2007, p.39) who quoted U.S. President Lincoln's insightfulness, "If we know where we are and something about how we got there, we might see where we are trending-and if the outcomes which lie naturally in our course are unacceptable, to make timely change."

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