



# Strategic foresight and organizational learning: A survey and critical analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Learning phenomena are a growing concern for strategic foresight, especially with respect to the question of integration of reflection and action. Although an agreement seems to emerge between practitioners and theorists about strong ties linking strategic foresight and learning (in particular organizational learning), the true nature of this link remains ambiguous. This article seeks to shed light on this link and to analyze the cognitive dimensions of foresight through a critical survey. The investigation follows the original ambivalence between foresight attitude and activity thus underscoring not only the virtues of foresight in learning phenomena, but also the limits of the usual literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Learning phenomena are a growing concern for strategic foresight<sup>1</sup>, especially with respect to the integration of reflection and action [1,2]. An agreement seems to emerge between practitioners and theorists about the strong ties linking strategic foresight and learning processes (especially organizational learning), but the true nature of this link remains vague. The works that feed into the usual literature are indeed marked by a strong diversity about practices (use of tools or not, strategic impact of reflection, and mobilization size,) and analysis unity (some works focus on isolated individual, some on decision-makers, and others on all actors of the organization). The aim of this article is to explore the link and to analyze the cognitive dimensions of foresight through a critical survey.

Our investigation follows the original ambivalence between foresight 'attitude' and 'activity'. Attitude focuses on how to enlighten decision-makers' choices, in particular by widening their frame of analysis. Foresight 'attitude' thus refers to the cognitive dimensions of anticipation and to individual learning (§.1). Foresight 'activity' concerns collective processes mobilizing several actors and involves more interactive learning forms (§.2). This survey underscores not only the virtues of foresight studies in learning, but also the limits of specialized literature. These limits are emphasized in a discussion (§.3) by using the appropriate concepts and works from the organizational learning field.

## 2. Cognitive dimensions of foresight attitude

### 2.1. Cognitive dimensions of foresight attitude and anticipation

Foresight attitude [3] consists in modifying individual representations by building new frames of analysis. It allows the individual "to see far and wide" to improve the way he prepares his decisions [4]. Consequently, from its original formulation, foresight attitude

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<sup>1</sup> In this text, the term foresight is used as it now has been widely adopted in the English-speaking world, and as Michel Godet et al. [15] emphasize, it is the best possible translation of *La prospective*. Our analysis focuses exclusively on foresight used by companies. Technological or institutional foresight remains beyond the scope of this article.

focuses on cognitive dimensions of anticipation. It refers more to an art [5], a philosophy and a state of mind than to scientific methods. De Jouvenel [6] thus considers foresight not as a discipline but rather as a philosophy requiring a way of being, a culture rather than a technique or form of know-how. Within this context, foresight is a *tool for self-education* [7] and induces a *reform of thought* [8]. From their part, cognitive science specialists [9,10] consider anticipation as a major cognitive process consisting of the *act of self of a mental creation in the future*. It adjusts our perceptions and interpretations and so enables the creation of new possibilities of action. Gabilliet [11] resumes and improves all these works stemming from cognitive specialists. To the psychological dimensions of anticipation, he adds social aspects which seem inseparable to him. He considers that psychosocial elements mixing beliefs and mental models are a requisite for the individual to think, manage, optimize and/or waste his time in the future. The individual therefore builds a *mental model of the future* that will condition his ability to build more or less adapted anticipations. This analysis is useful but still remains far from strategic or manager concerns<sup>2</sup>. This gap is partially filled in by Baumard [12].

## 2.2. The foresight attitude of a manager

Baumard's analysis focuses on the cognitive mechanisms a manager uses when he deals with an anticipation situation. According to Baumard, the quality of a manager's anticipation is directly related to his/her ability to interpret with as few cognitive biases as possible. Interpretation, as a process that consists in 'giving meaning' to stimuli, is indeed subjected to numerous cognitive biases; in other words, systematic application of familiar patterns regardless of reality or balancing the importance accorded to stimuli according to social standards.

However, Baumard goes further to highlight the cognitive virtues of foresight attitude, which urges decision-makers to wonder about their knowledge and to question their own frames of reference, thus helping to release them from paradigms in which they are too often trapped. This call for paradigm mobility is extended by Bindé [8], who denounces the *tyranny of emergency* and the *just in time* (JIT) approach that forces us to make decisions without enough preliminary reflection. To the emergency dictate, he opposes anticipation which, by rehabilitating the long time spent in reflection, contributes to giving meaning to our actions. Godet [13] denounces the tyranny of dominant ideas and calls upon each participant to distrust apparent certainties or conventional thinking. The hunt for preconceived ideas is thus his favorite sport.

Analysis of the foresight attitude highlights the cognitive virtues of anticipation (paradigmatic mobility, questioning and enrichment of representations) but remains by definition focused on the individual (futurist, manager, and strategist). Yet understanding the collective dimensions of these phenomena means we must explore foresight activity.

## 3. Foresight activity and learning processes: from educational tool for decision-makers to collective mobilization

Foresight activity promotes collective forms of learning which rely heavily on the cognitive virtues of the foresight attitude, in particular through the questioning of the individual perceptions that it provokes. However, what forms can this individual ability take once placed in a collective reflection? It seems there are two different approaches that structure foresight activity. On the one hand, there are approaches focusing on strategic planning practices that consider the learning phenomenon essentially as an educational process for decision-makers (scenario planning at Shell, for instance). On the other hand, there are approaches focusing on more participative processes. These are used as tools of collective mobilization, like Gödel's "strategic foresight" [13,15,16].

### 3.1. Scenario planning as an educational tool for decision-makers

#### 3.1.1. The educational role of scenarios

An analysis of how the literature deals with the link between foresight and learning reveals that the most prolific works concern strategic planning essentially led by former members of the Shell Group's Planning Department (A. de Geus, K. van der Heijden, P. Schwartz, and P. Wack). A consensus appears which emphasizes the educational role scenarios play in decision-making. Indeed scenarios are used not to describe the future but to build an image in front of which the decision-makers react by elaborating action plans and making decisions. These images must be provocative enough [17] to affect people's mental maps, by forcing them to ask themselves difficult questions about the fact that the future could be different from the recent past [18]. Scenarios are therefore good instruments of communication. They "take complex elements and weave them into a story which is coherent, systematic, comprehensive, and plausible" [19]. As they describe stories, they talk about 'sense' and have a significant psychological impact, by stimulating the decision-makers' intuition and by helping to develop their understanding of the world [18]. The scenarios thus transform "one-track" way into "multiways" of thinking within an organization [13].

In this respect, the 'futurist' as an *image of the future's manufacturer* [20] or as an *intellectual in action* [21] does not just describe uncertainties. With these scenarios, the futurist tries to achieve real educational work, as he/she offers decision-makers new grids of analysis of the future that differ from their usual mental models, for example, by stressing the main risks and opportunities they will face. As a result, the foresight exercise will 1) show them what may not be in continuity with the present world (as they represent it themselves); 2) make them anticipate more or less radical breaks induced by small facts, and 3) make them discover new links of causality [22].

<sup>2</sup> In more recent works, Gabilliet [14] treats the link between anticipation and management but without making it the main point of his analysis.

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