



The future of foresight—A US perspective

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ABSTRACT

The growing interest in business, government, and other organizations and users of futures research in the next ten to thirty years implies that the interest is largely to promote better strategic thinking and planning. Popular in the current futures lexicon is 'strategic foresight'. This article characterizes, as best the author can, the key characteristics of strategic foresight, under whatever name it occurs, by American futurists. The most central characteristic of American futurists and their approach as practiced around the world is eclectic flexibility in methods and techniques. The American approach is illustrated by the author's own decades of work for organizational clients.

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1. Introduction

This essay deals with how we achieve strategic foresight in my consultancy, which I believe is representative, in whole or in part, of the practice of other American futurists.

1.1. Nomenclature

Let us get some nomenclature straight, because the words intended to define some future state or condition change over time and acquire different uses. For example, the term 'futurology' is outdated; American futurists generally use it only in a humorous sense or as an insult.

An important distinction exists between *forecasting* and *prediction*. *Forecasting* covers many areas with different goals—stock market forecasting, scientific forecasting, weather forecasting, with different baggage connected to each. Futurists' forecasting in any long-term sense tends to get confused with prediction. The characteristics of prediction are two: first, it is quantitative and involves specific descriptive numbers, and second, it is limited to a specific future date or interval. Consider, on a grand scale, prospects for climate change. Any change depends on specific numerically measurable changes in global temperature.

If one is looking out at the long-term future, as in forecasting or in foresight as described below, it is unlikely that any prediction will be made outside the areas of demography and public health. However, the job futurists do is often confused with prediction, so it is best to avoid the term altogether, unless one is actually making predictions.

Other terms that have come into play and are used to varying extent are *futures studies*, the *study of the future*, and as a pseudo-verb for one's personal activity, *futuring*.

Let us consider, now, the term *foresight*, which is frequently misused by futurists. Some futurists unthinkingly say it is a tool; others say that it is a procedure or a process. An equivocal vocabulary just adds to the confusion for clients. Foresight, as I see it, is an image, an insight, a picture, a concept about some future state or condition. It is an end state; it is not a process for getting to that end state, and it is not a particular instrument or tool for getting there. This essay focuses on a specific form of foresight, namely,

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strategic foresight, which deals with the future five or more years beyond the present. That distinction radically shrinks the population of people viewing the future for strategic foresight. In contrast, the large number of people employed in all advanced societies looking to the future is dominated by people who are involved in short-term futures—people in the stock market, people in business forecasting, people in product forecasting, people in government agencies concerned with agricultural and industrial production and international commerce and production. For those businesses, and government agencies regulating or studying short-term futures, five years is a convenient break point between strategic and operational planning. Using an older and more general jargon, those people are primarily *forecasting*, but in the current jargon, *prediction* is a clearer term for what they do.

There are always special cases, though. Some organizations combine their short- and long-term forecasting. The short term may be on a one-, two-, three-, or five-year time horizon. Those intervals generally have little or nothing to do with strategic foresight. The foresight that goes on in the short range is largely a result of the adoption of Henri Fayol's conceptualization of management and administration, early in the twentieth century.

2. Absence of strategic foresight

To illustrate the absence of strategic foresight in many, if not most, organizations, I have an anecdote. My staff and I were eating lunch when the phone rang. I answered it, and the caller introduced himself as the vice president for planning at a Fortune 100 company. We exchanged greetings, and then he got to the point. He said, "We are in the midst of our strategic planning, and we forgot about the future." After we each laughed a bit, the rest of our conversation was a discussion of what we could do to bring them up to speed, how long it would take, what it would cost, and whether there were any boundary constraints. It turns out that the project worked out well and had virtually nothing to do with their strategic planning, which, as it is in most companies, was a look at whether the short-term plans of yesteryear had been realized, and whether there was anything coming to cause goals to change.

One of our clients in the automobile industry told us to forget about the next five years: "They are cast in concrete and could not be changed short of a national disaster." That was useful news and became a point to explore with all our clients, namely, their short-term and strategic-planning time horizons.

3. General approaches to strategic foresight

There are two broadly different ways of going about acquiring strategic foresight. First is the French concept of *la prospective*. This was the creation of a French futurist, Gaston Berger, and has been widely adopted, particularly under the urging and practice of Michel Godet. The process is one that embraces not only looking to the future, but also incorporates action consequences for the client to help create that future, or if they want, to suppress a future that is undesirable. It can involve a year or more of monthly or bi-monthly two-day meetings with the clients. To some extent, the work relies heavily on extracting information, concepts, and beliefs from the client in a tutorial process, working them over to create strategic foresight and to define appropriate actions to realize that foresight. Several of the articles in this topical issue of *Technological Foresight and Social Change* discuss the French practice in useful detail.

The closest thing to the use of the French practice of *prospective* in the United States is the work of a California group, which derives from the work of Shell Corporation, which in turn derives from the work of Berger. The central point to that, as practiced in the United States, is the necessity for futurists to work closely with their clients to draw out of the clients more and more information, beliefs, concerns, and knowledge. All this operates on the implicit assumption that the client potentially has a great amount of the information that is needed to create a foresight vision that is sound.

Since the French *prospective* is the only comprehensive integrated and specifically named process for doing strategic foresight, it is a convenient concept for comparison with other approaches. The big difference with the US strategy, as illustrated below, is that it assumes that the client has to be presented with a large body of new information to complement what they already know. What comes out of that necessary mix of old and new knowledge and concepts is new and useful foresight. Practitioners of *prospective* work intensely with their clients in frequent meetings.

As I see it, the expansion or contraction of strategic foresight depends on several considerations that will unfold over the next decade. First, the usefulness of strategic foresight can be determined only by the actions clients take in response to it. Second, the client base is almost sure to expand and include more of the largest corporations and be used more often by trade associations, public interest groups, foundations, and other large organizations as word gets out as to how useful strategic foresight is.

There are factors working against strategic foresight. First, there are organizations that may have used the concept and were damaged, even put out of business. This outcome is unlikely but could come about through letting the processes for creating strategic foresight fall into the hands of amateurs. Second, training in strategic foresight is primary to expanding the competence and use of futurists. The extent to which this training is now underway in several graduate school programs, in the United States and elsewhere, remains unclear. As far as I know, no one has yet looked at the curricula of these programs to see what is taught and what is not. Business schools in the United States turn out primarily MBAs (Masters of Business Administration). These schools have a near zero record of seriously training students how to think about the long-term future, a requirement for dealing with strategic foresight. However, there are always new fields coming along to which the search for strategic foresight will be appropriate. Many of these will be scientific or technological, with additional fields coming out of global affairs and politics, and social goals and objectives.

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