Practical Foresight Guide

Chapter 7 – Networking

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7. Networking

Quote
> *"Every decision maker in the foresight system is the foresight system."*
> *Dave Brown, Head of Futuring, British Telecom*

Foresight projects are almost always collaborative. Maximizing the breadth and depth of inputs to a project or program and communicating the outcomes successfully to all stakeholders is an essential ingredient for success.

7.1 Stakeholder engagement

Active, widespread, and highly valued involvement of the various stakeholders throughout the project or program will bring enormous learning and heighten the possibility for a hugely successful outcome.

High and continuous participation is a determining factor in the final outcome.

The more stakeholders are engaged in steering the project or program from the agreement of objectives, through the planning of activities, to the determining of methodologies to be adopted, the management of operations and the dissemination of results, the better. This enhances the results of foresight projects and programs because it gives stakeholders a sense of ownership. The more actively they engage with the process the more likely they will use the analysis and results to choose the most appropriate actions to prepare for the future.

Organization-wide consultation during certain phases of the process, where instruments, such as panels, forums, questionnaires, workshops, and public meetings, are used is important to:

- ❑ get "out of the box" thinking
- ❑ enhance the visibility of the exercise
- ❑ avoid domination by any one particular group
- ❑ confer wider ownership over the outputs of the exercise

One highly effective way to inspire and engage stakeholders is through asking two simple, and open-ended, questions (Competing for the Future, Prahalad & Hamal 1994):

- ❑ How will the future be different?
- ❑ What should we be doing about it?

Making this anonymous and continuous, and encouraging every stakeholder from the cleaner to the executive and your suppliers to your shareholders, will reveal many previously hidden signals of change, cheaply and efficiently. And, other benefits can be achieved such as:

- ❑ knowing people's fears and doubts ahead of communicating strategy.
- ❑ conducting further prioritization rounds of questioning using the Delphi survey techniques.
- ❑ demonstrating to your Board the wide consultation that has taken place.

7.2 Internal networking

'This process is essentially an internal scan of your organization, and complements what you already know about organizational processes and culture. The analysis of this data is critical, and requires someone who can synthesize a large amount of qualitative data and prepare a report that identifies common patterns, themes, and issues of concern to staff.

Never underestimate the power of the online survey as a scanning tool, and never underestimate your staff – the quality of responses is usually high and provides some clear indications of what matters to staff. This provides you with signals about what you need to pay attention to in your strategy development process, to help ensure its successful implementation. Of course what matters to staff may not necessarily be a critical issue for your strategy exercise but explore and address these concerns before dismissing them.'

Source: "Environmental Scanning: What It Is and How To Do It," Maree Conway, 2009

To promote the project or program it is now essential to have a continuously updated public website. Sites like The Institute for Leadership in Medicine (*Figure 60*) combine their own content with off-the-shelf and free virtual think tank solutions.

Figure 60: Foresight website courtesy of The Institute for Leadership in Medicine

The Institute is creating an expert panel of Foresight Fellows to act as scouts, researchers, expert panelists across all health disciplines for the benefit of the global medical profession.

This type of platform is likely to become increasingly prevalent across many other PESTLE subjects.

7.3 External networking

It's also important to create a social network where stakeholders can gather in open or private space to discuss their project or program.

Social media

There are plenty of free sites available to create such a network e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, OpenBC and MySpace. The example in *Figure 56* is a free NING site and offers the ability to set up private (internal) and open (external) groups and forums.

Figure 61: Foresight Network courtesy of Shaping Tomorrow
(www.shapingtomorrowmain.ning.com)

There are also many other free networks on these social media sites such as the World Futures Society and some subscription sites like the Association of Professional Futurists.

All of these networks offer the benefit of finding other people with a contribution to make to your program and for you to make to theirs. The foresight community is perhaps one of the freest sharing networks in the world though of course you will have to pay for more extensive consulting efforts. Do remember that you get out what you put in. Someone who only takes from the network will quickly find themselves disregarded while those who give freely will be rewarded with many unforeseen gifts of fresh foresight and friendships.

7.4 Shared knowledge management

The world does not stay static and circumstances can change, often suddenly and violently. So smart organizations build enterprise-wide future knowledge management systems to stay on top of, and manage change.

These knowledge management systems can be home-grown but with the advent of Web 2.0 social media technologies and cloud computing these are best bought off-the-shelf at costs far lower than creating a bespoke solution. The benefit of such systems means that the organizations information is held in one virtual repository and available to all who have access.

In the last month or two adventuring competitors and co-creators (commercial organizations, education establishments and not-for-profits) have begun aggregating their knowledge through futures portals hosted in 'cloud computing platforms' (*Figure 62*). The benefits of this to participants are lower costs, use of proven operating processes and foresight methods plus better knowledge of emerging change through sharing ideas and discoveries.

Figure 62: Strategic Foresight using common cloud computing platforms. Courtesy of Shaping Tomorrow

These cloud computing platforms are likely to grow in strength as costs of creating in-house, non-integrative systems become very costly to build and maintain. Software is becoming completely commoditized and security issues being overcome, As a result organizations will increasingly look to reduce costs of market and futures research in favor of outsourced and total knowledge management solutions. This transformation will make it possible for even the smallest organization to participate in and create and manage its own strategy in the cloud and for larger organizations to concentrate on futures analysis rather than the drudge of content finding. We have not yet reached the point where content finding and uploading too will be mostly automated but the day is not far off. Foresight cloud computing platforms are already experimenting with leading-edge software products.

Analytic tools of this nature are a rapidly advancing area of management science. Gradually we are seeing strategy foresight work morph from local, face-to-face consultants to global delivery and remote human sensing. Global systems of the future will generate Insights and Trends, predict results, simulate benefits, optimize performance and engage with experts and stakeholder, all in real-time.

Further reference

- [Social Network](), Wikipedia
- [Foresight Network]()
- [Association of Professional Futurists]()