

Vector



from SAMI Consulting

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In a time of credit crunch, global warming, general uncertainty and ambiguity about the future, it is hard to look forward and not feel anxiety. But the fear makes it harder to come up with any reasonable ideas for how to meet it because it closes down and limits your thinking.

Fear makes us cautious, more fearful and risk-averse. Our fear or anxiety is natural, but it comes at a time when we need innovation more than ever. When “we can’t solve a problem with the same thinking that created it,” we need to take the lid off the way we are currently thinking and come up with new ideas and ways of looking at money, society and how we are doing business:



Patricia Lustig

Innovation: creativity vs fear

- How do we find ways to work through the fears we are facing?
- How can we make this a time of opportunity and possibility, not of fear?
- What kind of questions will open your thinking out?
- Where might you uncover possibilities?

Innovation includes play

There are many models of the creative and innovation process, from Disney to De Bono. Though they are all different, most are based on a few basic steps:

1. *Generating ideas*, usually in a manner best described as ‘play’. People let ideas arise in a flowing, non-judgmental way, via ‘out of the box’ thinking, and play around with them to see what they could lead to. This is encouraged by an open environment where there are no

‘wrong’ ideas and every idea has value. This playful, non-judgmental stage is at the heart of the creative process.

2. *Harvesting ideas*: Now critical judgment is brought in to set priorities; the ideas are reviewed, and the best are selected.
3. *Ideas are tested* against various criteria to see how they hold up, and built into plans and strategies.

SAMI and scenarios

SAMI Consulting is probably best known for the formative work we have done in scenarios over the years. But futures encompass more than scenarios – which are, after all, just a tool. More than anything, futures work encompasses innovation.

Innovation is about creating something new. Scenarios, and the tools we use to explore them, help open us up to seeing possibilities and opportunities we haven’t imagined before.

Scenarios as places to play

However seriously we take scenarios, knowing they are based on intense research of future trends, they only become useful when we step inside them, play around with ideas in them, and explore within them what living in that particular world might be like. It is good to remember that they are in the end still stories of how things might be – they are imaginations, not facts. We need to experience them not as abstract pictures, but as places where we can really get to grips with how things are and how things get done in the possible worlds they describe.

Here, approaches like story, metaphor and visualisation come into play. We have a unique competence in the use of story in futures work and in a range of other creative thinking tools which can be used for innovation and co-creation of a new future. Scenarios are only the beginning...

If you are interested in finding out more about getting innovation into your organisation, please contact us.

Patricia Lustig
(patricia.lustig@samiconsulting.co.uk)

Charlene Collison
(charlene.collison@samiconsulting.co.uk)



Charlene Collison

The evolving use of futures tools in government foresight projects

Three initiatives amplified UK Government's use of foresight and futures research methods over the past decade:

1. The foundation of the UK Foresight Programme in 1994 and, perhaps more importantly, its subsequent methodological re-vamping in 2002;
2. The formation of the Strategic Futures team (originally the Strategic Challenges team) in August 1999 as a result of recommendations by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (then the Performance and Innovation Unit); and
3. The formation of the Horizon Scanning Centre in December 2004 at the recommendation of a Treasury white paper concerned with science and innovation investment.

While many separate departments and agencies throughout UK national and local government may have foresight activities, these three initiatives provided a strong impetus for the organised and coherent use of foresight methods in policy research in UK government agencies.

But how government 'consumers' of foresight learned about foresight and futures research has constrained the variety of futures tools used in the UK Government. As an example, when Claire Craig and Andrew Jackson set out to re-vamp the Foresight Programme's approach and activities in 2002, they took both a figurative Grand Tour through the scenario planning literature and a literal one, visiting a variety of foresight research organisations across Europe and the US. Unfortunately, much of this tour was focused on publications and organisations engaged in business foresight. The popular scenario methodology of the day was the 'double axes of uncertainty' approach popularised by Schwartz and widely used and mis-used. It does have many compelling features, and so became essentially the default approach. Given the time pressures under which most Foresight project leaders and teams work, exploring the wider futures literature for new approaches – or even for method and process design tips – is an unknown luxury.

While 'training days' are held for Foresight teams, they are generally run by the same foresight consultants most likely to re-inscribe particular methods into the policy arena.

But this may be changing. We can now expect to see increased interest by Government in new futures methods.

Two recent research papers on the use of foresight and futures methods encourage both attention to state of the art methods and to more integrated design of foresight projects. The first, 'The use of strategic futures analysis in policy development in government' (Wahid Bhimji and Averil Horton, Horizon Scanning Centre, April 2009), organises its exploration of futures methods around six potential benefits futures can offer policy:

1. Expanding horizons
2. Making sense
3. Appreciating uncertainty
4. Communicating complexity
5. Safely exploring, and
6. Structuring the process.

One of their recommendations to enhance those benefits is to 'expand the approaches taken to scenarios and closely tailor (their use) to audience and purpose'.

As a road sign to exploring more scenario approaches, Bhimji and Horton reference the 2007 article by Bishop, Hines, and Collins (*Foresight*, 9, 1, 5-25), 'The current state of scenario development: an overview of techniques'. They highlight two approaches mentioned in this article: causal layered analysis (CLA) and scenario archetypes. They suggest CLA in order to add greater depth to scenarios, explore cultural perspectives and challenge participant mindsets. Scenario archetypes, on the other hand, they consider a useful consistency check on the pool of scenarios created across government foresight activities. The paper also recommends the use of techniques such as the 'Three Horizons' approach (Curry and Hodgson, 'Seeing in Multiple Horizons: Connecting

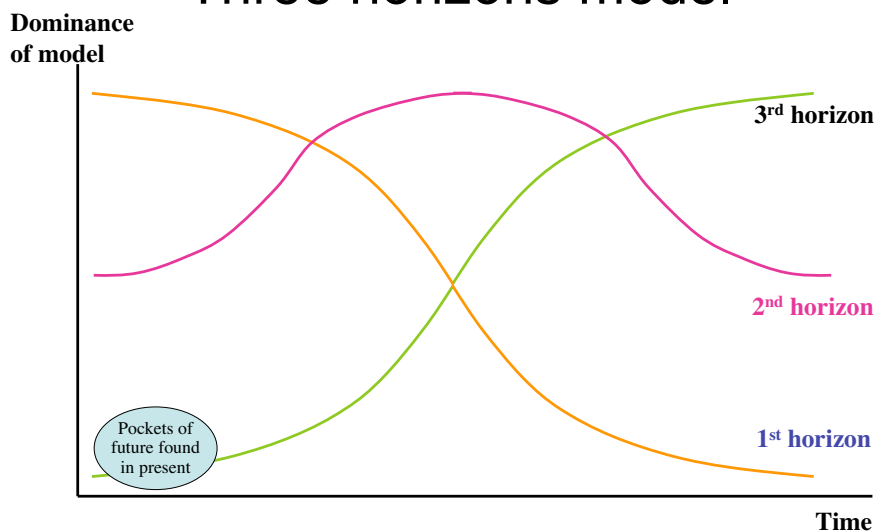
Futures to Strategy', *Journal of Futures Studies*, 13, 1, 1-20; available on-line at <http://www.jfs.tku.edu.tw/13-1/A01.pdf>). 'Three Horizons' emphasises multiple contingent time lines and overlapping waves of change across time horizons, and thus avoids the 'single path to the future' mindset.

The second recent paper, a Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology 'postnote' entitled 'Futures and Foresight' (Abbi Hobbs, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, April 2009) provides a brief overview of futures studies and foresight, especially as used in parliaments. It focuses on issues of engagement and the possibility of MPs engaging public debate using futures tools and output. Since dialogue (whether the art of strategic or visionary conversation) lies at the heart of successful futures outcomes, this development is particularly welcome.

These two papers amplify a trend already in evidence among government consumers of foresight products and services: a growing sophistication with regard to the range of methods available, how they can be appropriately applied, and how they can be layered and interlocked to create a greater depth of output. Proof of this is perhaps best demonstrated by the 2008 revision of the Horizon Scanning Centre's Toolkit (consultants: Tribal Consulting and Thoughtengine), and the 2009 creation by Defra (consultant Sparknow) of a Horizon Scanning and Futures Toolkit to aid prospective project designers, participants, steering group members or just policy researchers curious about futures.

Patrick Harris's (Thoughtengine) revision of the HSC Toolkit explored a bit further afield methodologically than the original. As a result, while the scenarios section still limits itself, alas, to the 'double axes of uncertainty' approach, the toolkit now includes causal layered analysis. Given the recommendation of CLA by Bhimji and Horton, this technique may gain in popularity here in the UK – it is already widely used in Australia.

Three horizons model



Defra reviewed a half decade's horizon scanning and foresight work, and shared the results in 'Looking back at looking forwards' (http://horizonscanning.defra.gov.uk/ViewDocument_Image.aspx?Doc_ID=192). This presents a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of what futures are – a strategic beginning point for policy research – and how best to fit it into an evidence-based policy environment (it offers examples). As practitioners, we should particularly note the authors' criteria for good foresight consulting: "A good futurist will be able to respond to a question or issue with a range of possible approaches and explain the merits of each" (page 3). Consider your own inventory of techniques: how many approaches can you offer? Coming out of this 'lessons learned' review, Defra and Sparknow are creating an on-line design guide, the 'Horizon Scanning and Futures (HSF) Toolkit' (not yet available; in beta) that offers activities, tips, and references for policy and agency staff engaging in futures processes for the first time.

Our prospective clients in government are becoming more sophisticated in their demands on foresight techniques. In response, we should engage in ongoing professional development: educate ourselves about the growing variety of futures tools and methods available – get out of our method comfort zone, and explore how we might use a new scenario approach, or visioning process, for specific topics or within specific organisational cultures. Or explore how different methods might produce different outcomes, both in the feel of the 'strategic conversation' and in its output.

One example of such an exploration, 'Roads Less Travelled: Different Methods, Different Futures' (Curry and Schultz) will be available online in the May 2009 Journal of Futures Studies (<http://www.jfs.tku.edu.tw/articles.html>). This essay takes a single foresight 'feedstock' comprising topic (future of civil society), prioritised drivers and interview transcripts, and runs it through four different scenario processes to see if

different methods produce different stories. The quick answer? They do – and they produce very different conversational energies, as well. You can hear the live presentation of this project's results at the UK Node Millennium Project/Futures Analysts Network Seminar on 22 June, 1.15 – 5.00 pm, the Royal Society, London (<http://futures.research.glam.ac.uk/events/2009/jun/22/uk-node-millennium-projectfutures-analysts-network/>).

Or, take a working vacation, and attend a conference to hear how both competitors and potential clients are using a wide variety of foresight methods: try Istanbul, 4-6 September 2009, the 'Yeditepe International Research Conference on Foresight: Methodological Issues in Foresight Studies' at Yeditepe University (see <http://mac.yeditepe.edu.tr/yircof09.htm> or <http://www.allconferences.com/conferences/2009/20090108040503/> for further information, or contact M Atilla Öner, at maoner@yeditepe.edu.tr). This has a track especially devoted to national and government foresight.

Closer to home, the Social Research Association's annual half-day seminar is devoted this year to exploring how futures research can contribute to social research for government policy: 'Futures research methods and social research practice: Visions for progress', 7th July, 1.30 – 5.00 pm, LGA, Smith Square, London (http://www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/summer_event_2009.pdf). Especially notable will be the presentations by Fiona Lickorish of Defra and Victoria Ward of Sparknow on lessons learned from Defra's experience with horizon scanning and foresight.

Wendy Schultz
(wendyinfutures@mac.com)

Towards the Low Carbon Economy – promised land or multiple delusion?

The agenda of climate change is now well known, across government, business and society. But there are signs of a growing ‘delusion’ – a widening gap between the scientific advice, the policy aspirations, and the actual rate of progress.

The Committee for Climate Change recommends an 80% cut in carbon emissions: even this is doubted by many scientists, who observe arctic ice melting and rising global emissions at much higher rates than even the worst-case scenario, and call for a 90%-plus approach.¹ This is a long way beyond marginal change – more like a transformation across the board, an agenda for the ‘Low Carbon Economy’ (LCE) which is both radical and essential for survival.

Current policies

The climate change and energy policies which the Government announced in April are by any account a major step forward and mark a leading role in world policy:

- The carbon budgets under the Climate Change Act have set a trajectory towards a 2050 target of reducing emissions by 80% from 1990 levels (<http://tinyurl.com/cqf7o7>).
- The Budget itself included £1.4bn of new support for the low carbon energy sector in the next three years, coupled with £4bn in new lending from the European Investment Bank. This will generate an estimated additional £10.4bn of low carbon and energy investment over the next three years, a major green stimulus.
- The Low Carbon Industrial Strategy, Investing in a Low Carbon Britain, sets out the new approach for supporting British-based firms and inward investment in the low carbon and green manufacturing sectors (<http://tinyurl.com/cezbnkq>).
- A key part of that industrial strategy will now be the development of a UK carbon capture and storage (CCS) industry (<http://tinyurl.com/d3mst4>).



Caveats and controversies

But this all contains many caveats, optimistic assumptions, uncertainties and controversies. Firstly it seems that achieving these targets and aspirations will involve new ways of thinking about the LCE, where carbon will become a kind of medium of exchange or alternative currency. And, behind the LCE rhetoric, there are big challenges:

- Full marketisation of carbon is likely to lead to speculation, corruption, moral hazard, black market trading, and all the other spin-offs from markets (as it arguably already has at the international level of ETS 1, CDM & JI).²
- The public is unlikely to change ingrained consumption patterns without being forced or provided with other viable alternatives, with consequent political risks.
- The technology agenda could be a huge red herring – CCS may never work as planned; nuclear power may turn out much more expensive even without the waste disposal and proliferation problems.
- Any UK government of whatever political party will have real incentives for delay and obfuscation. Serious attempts to (a) change behaviour or (b) spend real money will risk losing elections, particularly if the government is weak and divided. So the political double-think/double-talk is very likely to continue.³
- The public, in parallel, is also likely to continue with double-think and double-talk – paying lip service to climate policy plus a few token actions, while at the same time travelling on low-cost airlines (even including fuel surcharge) ever more frequently.

Overall the likelihood is that the ‘promised land’ of LCE will be subject to inertia and delay, spin and ‘greenwash’, with multiple confusion, if not ‘multiple delusion’, the result.

How to respond?

As a policy analyst, futurist and sustainability researcher, I work with many organisations who are keen to play their part. There are libraries and servers full of studies and mission statements on low-carbon policies. But in reality the signals don’t always add up and the barriers are too great; how can we forgo that next flight when future business seems to depend on it? There is a kind of underlying anxiety, paranoia and fatalism. “The world is going to fry and there’s nothing we can do.” “Our descendants will struggle but we will be gone by then.” “Our country cannot afford a low-carbon policy which will damage economic growth.”

How to respond to this, and how to bridge the gap between the promised land and multiple delusion? There is no magic bullet. But in practical terms, there is a continuous process of transparency, of joining the dots, of mutual learning, of global citizenship and corporate responsibility.⁴ We know that avoiding one flight or one tonne of CO₂ is negligible on the global scale. But we can also realise that a strategic transformation path – for firms, organisations, supply chains, civic institutions and so on, is not only essential for environmental purposes, but also for economic and social goals.

Joe Ravetz
(joe.ravetz@gmail.com)

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