

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

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I was first attracted to this book by the reputations of the authors. Andy Hines is one of the leading foresight professionals in the world and Peter Bishop is one of the leading foresight academics in the world. The prospect of their collaboration on a work describing foresight techniques placed the book high on my list of works to read. There was also a third factor – the publisher. The book is published by Social Technologies, a leading research and consulting firm that is in the process of establishing a global presence. When I bought the book, it felt as momentous as if I were buying the very first edition of McKinsey Quarterly, or Windows V1.0. From a futurist perspective, I felt that I couldn't leave the book not purchased. This review aims to look at whether or not the book has lived up to my anticipatory expectations.

The intention of the book is to be practical. It describes itself as setting out guidelines for strategic foresight. I rather see it as a navigators guide into the future. The book identifies 115 guidelines for undertaking strategic foresight activity, which are grouped into six sequential steps – Framing, Scanning, Forecasting, Visioning, Planning, and Acting. This framework has been derived from a wide collaboration between 36 leading foresight practitioners and academics, which was also cross-referenced and synthesised by the Association of Professional Futurists' Professional Development team. The contributing team was global in its origins and cutting-edge in its approach.

Each guideline conforms to a standard presentational structure. There is a small piece to introduce the guideline, followed by the key steps to undertaking the activity described by the guideline. There is then a brief statement of the benefits of undertaking the technique, an example of the technique in action, and a guide to further reading around the technique. The guidelines are written in a clear and practical style, and offer the reader the opportunity to make the most of the collective wisdom that has gone into describing the technique. More importantly, the editors avoid falling into the trap of simply providing a list of things to do. The reader needs to engage with the technique, understand what its purpose is, and to make their own list of things to do from that point.

As an example, I was immediately drawn to Section 3.5.7 – *Game the Future: Explore How the Rules Might Change*. This is an area dear to my heart and close to my wallet as we use gaming techniques to explore future possibilities and scenarios a lot in our work. The guideline starts with an assertion - that social systems can be thought of as a game – and the moves on to deduce the implications of that assertion by describing the technique and then demonstrating how it might be undertaken. It reviews such questions as whether or not the game is co-operative or competitive; whether it is simple (linear) or

complex (non-linear); and whether the game is crisp ($1+1=2$) or fuzzy ($1+1=3$). All of this goes into the basic design of the game.

The description then goes on to explain how elements of all of these are present in each game. An example quoted is the question of who ought to receive a promotion (and a salary raise) on the back of an exemplary team performance. The team co-operated to generate the exemplary performance, but the members of the team, one would presume, will compete to receive the individual promotion. The logical strategy for each team member to adopt would be to co-operate to utilise the best of their co-workers, but also to compete to ensure that their performance outshone that of the others. It is this playing out of various strategies that allows gaming to be used as a rehearsal for the future. The end results of these games are what we call scenarios.

The section ends by quoting the strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction as one of the most successful gaming strategies in recent history. It was certainly one that had very profound results in that humanity didn't destroy itself. However, we all undertake this technique in our own small ways. Who hasn't engaged in day dreaming? *"If I were to win the Lottery, then ..."* This is a game in action, which will result in a scenario. Sadly for us, the scenario has an exceptionally low probability, but that doesn't stop us from buying Lottery tickets based upon that scenario.

There is much that I liked about the book. The clear presentational style helps to guide the reader into the issues. It is almost as if we have a good friend guiding us through some pretty complex matters. I particularly liked the bibliography at the end of each section. It helps the guidelines to have a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. However, it does then beg the question of how the book ought to be used. The Editors suggest that, for executives and analysts, it could be used in one or more of five ways – in the design of strategic foresight projects, to provide 'how-to' answers to specific tasks, as a reference guide, as a refresher for practitioners, and as providing guidelines for excellence to an organisation. I quite endorse the first four uses, but I am lukewarm about the fifth.

Essentially, the process outlined in the book (Framing, Scanning, Forecasting, Visioning, Planning, and Acting) can be taken as a bit subjective. For example, one could argue that the Visioning process ought to inform what it is that we are looking for in the Scanning process. Equally, we might argue that the Forecasting process ought to be much closer sequentially to the Planning process. Different companies engage in these processes in a different order and may aggregate them in different ways.

For example, at Shell, the scenario process aggregates the Framing, Scanning and part of the Forecasting processes at its 'Research' phase. It then aggregates the remaining part of the Forecasting, the Visioning and part of the Planning processes as its 'Scenario Building' phase. It then takes the remaining parts of the Planning and part of the Acting processes as its 'Application' phase, before rolling out the remaining parts of the Acting process as its 'Dissemination' phase.

It is interesting to note that, although Shell would not have followed the model in the book as a blueprint of best practice, it would have undertaken many of the guidelines in the process of undertaking its scenarios. One could argue that if we all end up at the same destination, it may not matter too much about the route travelled to that destination. I am of the view that a process ought to be tailored to the audience. If so, then the book does provide the basic material to construct that unique solution.

The book would be, in my view, a much better resource if it were to have a combined bibliography at the end. The listing of references at the end of the techniques is very useful. However, in the absence of taking copious notes, I found that I was forgetting where I had previously come across various references. Of course, this could be a cultural issue peculiar to me – perhaps I am just used to having a bibliography at the end of a work?

I would also point out that, whereas the techniques are well written in a clear and concise style, the book could appear very episodic if we were to try to read it from cover to cover. I don't think that this is the way to get the best from the book, and, if this were to be our objective, then a different text might satisfy that need. It seems to me that the book is best used as an authority that one dips into from time to time – particularly when designing a strategic foresight project. This may limit the market for the book.

The authors target three groups as potential readers – executives, analysts, and educators. From the perspective of an executive, I can't see the book fitting in as general 'airport reading'. However, for those executives involved in strategic foresight and strategic planning, I would feel that this is a book that they could not do without. It has the concise precision of style, combined with the breadth and depth of knowledge that is needed for a general reference book. This also applies to the case of analysts and practitioners – particularly if they are working their way through uncharted territory. From the perspective of educators, the book does, as the editors claim, provide a general grounding for students of strategic foresight. The book may well end up on a number of MBA reading lists for this reason.

On the whole, I enjoyed the book. I believe that it will provide an important landmark in the literature of strategic foresight. It may not become a business best seller because of the limited audience to which it will appeal. However, I would thoroughly recommend it to those engaged in the area of strategic foresight and strategic planning.

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