PROFILES IN ORGANIZA-TIONAL FORESIGHT

Exploring what is effective foresight in today's leading organizations.

Insights on the practice of foresight shared by 35 organizational futurists.

BY STEPHEN DUPONT

This document provides a 20-page summary of a forthcoming book about organizational foresight by Stephen Dupont. The book is based on an independent study project completed under the direction of Program Director Professor Andy Hines as part of the master's degree in foresight at the University of Houston.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this study is to identify insights to the ongoing discussion about how foresight is practiced on a day-to-day basis in organizations, as told through the personal experiences of organizational foresight professionals.

By gathering insights through one-on-one interviews, my goal is to increase understanding about how today's foresight practitioners working in leading organizations approach their work while striving to build effective foresight practices. This project seeks to "shed light" on:

- How organizational foresight practitioners entered the foresight field
- How foresight is practiced in an organizational environment
- How foresight practitioners view the effectiveness of foresight in organizations
- The relationship between the foresight function and an organization's leadership

The phrase, "shed light," is intentional here – because it is rare to read actual stories about how foresight is conducted in organizations. As Mohamed Saleh Hammoud and Doug Nash noted in their 2014 paper, "What Corporations Do with Foresight," published by the *European Journal of Futures Research*, it is hard to find details about how foresight is conducted by for-profit organizations because of the nature of competition.

This study aims to change that by offering personalized profiles of organizational foresight practitioners who were comfortable with sharing their stories on the record.

In interviewing organizational foresight practitioners, I sought to learn what they are doing to provide effective foresight that is valued by their organizations – so that futurists and foresight strategists working for other organizations may learn from them.

FORESIGHT IN ORGANIZATIONS

Foresight, as a stand-alone function, exists in numerous organizations – corporations, nonprofits, government agencies, professional service firms and NGOs. Its use by organizations dates back to the mid-1940s, at the onset of the Cold War, when the Rand Corporation began to advance the use of foresight methodologies.

According to a 2016 article by Stephen Wunker published in *Forbes*, leading companies, such as P&G, Intel, Ford and General Motors, are bringing corporate futurists into the mainstream.

For this study, I identified more than 100 organizations with an internal foresight function, including corporations (McDonald's, SAP, Ford Motor Company, Deutsche Telekom, etc.), nonprofits (International Federation of Red Cross-Red Crescent, British Heart Foundation, etc.), NGOs (Nesta, Unicef, etc.), professional service firms (Gartner, Deloitte, etc.), and governments/government agencies (U.S.D.A .Forest Service, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, etc.).

In his article, Wunker noted, "Futurists are individuals whose job is to observe and predict. They research trends, talk to people with different backgrounds, and study how things are changing. They look well beyond their own industries to understand how economic, social and technological forces will shape consumer demand and impact their businesses."

In a 2013 paper, published by *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, Andy Hines further defined the role of the organizational futurist as: "A futurist working as a full-time employee for a single organization with responsibility for foresight activities. It is a role that should "be occupied by someone with expertise as a professional futurist who could work "inside" with clients and help translate the foresight work – thus promoting the integration of foresight within the organization."

In practical terms, organizational foresight practitioners perform duties include the following:

● Provide long-term thinking about a specific project or organizational decision.

● Identify signals of change and providing analysis about the impact of change on the organization and its interests.

● Facilitate discussions about change within the organization and changes that may affect specific stakeholders, such as customers, investors, employees, or constituents.

● Assist other functional groups within the organization (strategy, human resources, marketing, customer research, sales, engineering, product design and innovation) with thinking about the future of their function or the services each provides (e.g., future of the workplace, new products, etc.).

LEARNING HOW ORGANIZATIONS APPLY FORESIGHT

This study directly informs how foresight is applied in real-life in organizations, and how foresight practitioners seek to make their application of foresight more effective.

Similar to the evolution of other professions – human resources, marketing, communications, legal, project management, etc. – as more people enter the foresight field and as more organizations integrate foresight professionals into their staffing, the need to better understand approaches and practices increases. This includes learning how to effectively apply foresight within a range of organizational types, including companies, professional service firms, nonprofits, government agencies, and NGOs.

As a comparison, the public relations profession, which coalesced in the 1920s, broadly describes a profession of people dedicated to delivering communications in a professional manner. Over time, as this profession matured and expanded, different approaches have emerged based on different types of organizations (B2B, B2C, government agencies, publicly traded companies, etc.), different industries (education, healthcare, etc.), and various rules, regulations and ethics codes that are enforced by various entities, from state and national governments to professional societies.

Jo Lepore, head of foresight at McDonald's, leads an internal workshop on foresight.

This project will help both experienced professionals and those new to the field to learn from real-life foresight practitioners who work for present-day organizations how to establish a foresight practice within an organization and how to maintain one over time. Most importantly, this study shares lessons on optimizing the effectiveness of foresight work, thus optimizing its impact and garnering credibility within the organization.

How this Project was Conducted

The primary method for this project was semi-structured interviews using a list of questions focused on the following areas:

- Role of the foresight function within the organization,
- Day-to-day application of foresight,
- Foresight practitioner's approach to foresight, and
- How the foresight leader entered the foresight field.

The interview questions served as a guide for each interview, with additional follow-up questions unique to each conversation.

Seeking Interviews with Foresight Practitioners

LinkedIn was primarily used to identify organizational and corporate foresight practitioners to invite to participate in this study.

At least 150 LinkedIn Inmail (email) invitations were sent to those who identified themselves as providing foresight for an organization. The majority of those invited to interviews were "cold" invitations (first contact between the researcher and the person being invited for an interview).

About 50 people responded to the author's invitation, however, not everyone could participate or chose to participate. Some foresight practitioners said they could speak, but not on the record. Others said their organization (primarily government agencies) would not give them permission to speak on the record.

Interviews began in August 2023. The majority of the interviews were conducted between November 2023 and April 2024. Nearly all interviews lasted at least one hour. In addition, several of those interviewed provided written responses to the interview questions, which were provided in advance to all interviewees. Nearly all of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and conducted in English. These interviews were recorded both with video and audio. Transcripts were completed with Otter.ai.

Profile subjects were invited to review and offer additional comments or edits for completeness and accuracy. Through this collaborative effort, those being profiled had the opportunity to clarify their thoughts and it also allowed the author to ask additional questions that may not have been covered during the interviews.

FORESIGHT PRACTITIONERS INTERVIEWED

This study is based on 35 successfully completed one-on-one interviews with organizational foresight practitioners who chose to be named participants. Five additional interviews were conducted for additional context, with these participants remaining anonymous. These interviews included the following:

Table 1. Research Interview Participants, Corporations

Interviewee	Title	Organization	Reach	Interview Date
1. Jo Lepore	Global Foresight Director	McDonald's	Global	Aug. 10, 2023
2. Ben Moncrieffe	Head of Strategic Foresight	Jaguar Land Rover (JLR)	Global	Nov. 3, 2023
3. Erin Bradner	Director of Strategic Foresight	Autodesk	Global	Nov. 6, 2023
4. Adam Brase	Executive Director, Strategy Intelligence; Administrator, Mayo Clinic School of Graduate Education	Mayo Clinic	Global	Nov. 9, 2023
5. Jen Brace	Chief Futurist	Ford Motor Company	Global	Nov. 21, 2023

6. John Miranda	Senior Director, Strategy, Analytics, and Competition	Intel	Global	Nov. 29, 2023
7. Callie Blixrud	Senior Manager, Experience Strategy	Best Buy	United States	Nov. 29, 2023
8. Rodney Woods	VP and Chief Clinical Engineer	Blue Cross Blue Shield of Tennessee	Tennessee	Nov. 29, 2023
9. Marty Resnick	VP, Analyst, Co-Lead of Gartner's Futures Lab	Gartner Group	Global	Nov. 30, 2024
10. Michael Spink	SVP, Research and Development	Civic Federal Credit Union	North Carolina	Dec. 1, 2023
11. Bryan King	Senior Strategist-Foresight Intelligence	Mayo Clinic	Global	Dec. 7, 2023
12. Annie Hardy	Senior Visioneer	Cisco	Global	Dec. 14, 2023
13. Josef Hargrave	Director, Global Foresight Leader	Arup	Global	Dec. 19, 2023
14. Hannah Kim	Associate Director, Futures, Brand and Innovation	Kantar Consulting	Global	Dec. 21, 2023
15. Jongchae (Jeff) Oh	Director, Group Leader, Technology Planning & Strategy	Samsung SDS and SK Telekom	South Korea	Dec. 22, 2023
16. Lauren Praverman	Global Insights Director, Foresight & Trends	Pepsico	Global	Jan. 11, 2024
17. Suzette Malek	Senior Global Research Manager, Societal Trends and Innovation Insights	General Motors	Global	Jan. 18, 2024
18. Stefan Kohn	Innovation Manager	Deutsche Telekom	Global	Feb. 2, 2024
19. Eric Kingsbury	Director, Competitor and Market Insight, Global Decision Analytics	Experian	United States	Feb. 2, 2024
20. Travis Kupp	Associate Director, Futures Lead	UCB	Global	Feb. 6, 2024
21. Eli Margolese-Malin	Senior Innovation Consultant	American Family Insurance	United States	Feb. 9, 2024
22. Morgan Schanski	Manager, Consumer Foresight	Adidas	Global	Feb. 16, 2024
23. Peter Schwartz	SVP, Strategic Planning	SalesForce	Global	Feb. 29, 2024
24. David Jonker	VP, SAP Insights	SAP	Global	April 5, 2024

Table 2: Research Interview Participants, Government

Interviewee	Position	Organization	Reach	Interview Date
25. David Bengston	Research Economist	USDA Forest Service	United States	Nov. 16, 2023
26. Eric Popiel	Group Manager, Future of Work Group	U.S. Office of Personnel Management	United States	Dec. 8, 2023

27. Isidora Beatriz Gonzalez Rios	Advisor, National Council of Science, Technology, Knowledge and Innovation	Asesora de la Secretaria Tecnica del Consejo Nacional CTCI (Chile)	Chile	Dec. 12, 2023
28. Pascale Junker	Megatrends Observatory	Ministry of the Economy, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg	Luxembourg/ EU	Feb. 8, 2024
29. John Carney	Senior Principal Synthesist, Futures and Innovation Group	Government of the United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence	United Kingdom	Feb. 8, 2024
30. Jeny Mathews-Thusoo	Program Lead-Resilience & Futures	City of Calgary, Alberta, Canada	Calgary and Alberta	Oct. 31, 2024

Table 3. Research Interview Participants, Non-Profits

Interviewee	Position	Organization	Reach	Interview Date
31. Ben Holt	Global Lead for Strategic Foresight	International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent	Global	Oct. 27, 2023
32. Leila Valery	Strategy Manager, Futures & Foresight	British Heart Foundation	United Kingdom	Dec. 15, 2023

Table 4. Research Interview Participants, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)

Interviewee	Position	Organization	Reach	Interview Date
33. Jasmina Byrne	Chief of Foresight & Policy	Unicef	Global	Dec. 18, 2023
34. Laurie Smith	Head of Mission Discovery	Nesta	Global	Jan. 19, 2024
35. Joshua Polchar	Strategic Foresight & Advice	OECD	EU	Jan. 24, 2024

MAJOR THEMES FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Through the author's interviews with organizational foresight practitioners, a number of themes emerged that all futurists should consider in their daily practice and mastery of foresight.

Purpose of foresight as practiced within an organization – Organizational foresight practitioners were clear: the purpose of investing in a foresight function is to help the organization make smarter, more thoughtful strategic decisions today. Some organizations, by the nature of what they make or offer, already have future-focused employees (such as automotive manufacturers). Foresight can help enhance that future-thinking culture and increase the organization's competitive advantage by identifying potential opportunities, spurring creativity and innovation, and anticipating potential risks and disruptions.

Bring something new to the conversation ("Tell me something I don't already know.") – There was a clear awareness among the interviewees that they deal with some of the smartest, most knowledgeable people in an organization who are familiar with reports produced by major consulting firms (McKinsey, Deloitte, PwC, etc.). This means they face pressure "as the futurist" to bring something different to the table that senior leaders haven't already thought of or anticipated while Searching for the right questions and asking difficult questions is an important part of getting at the foresights that no one is thinking of – and it may be the most difficult part of the job.
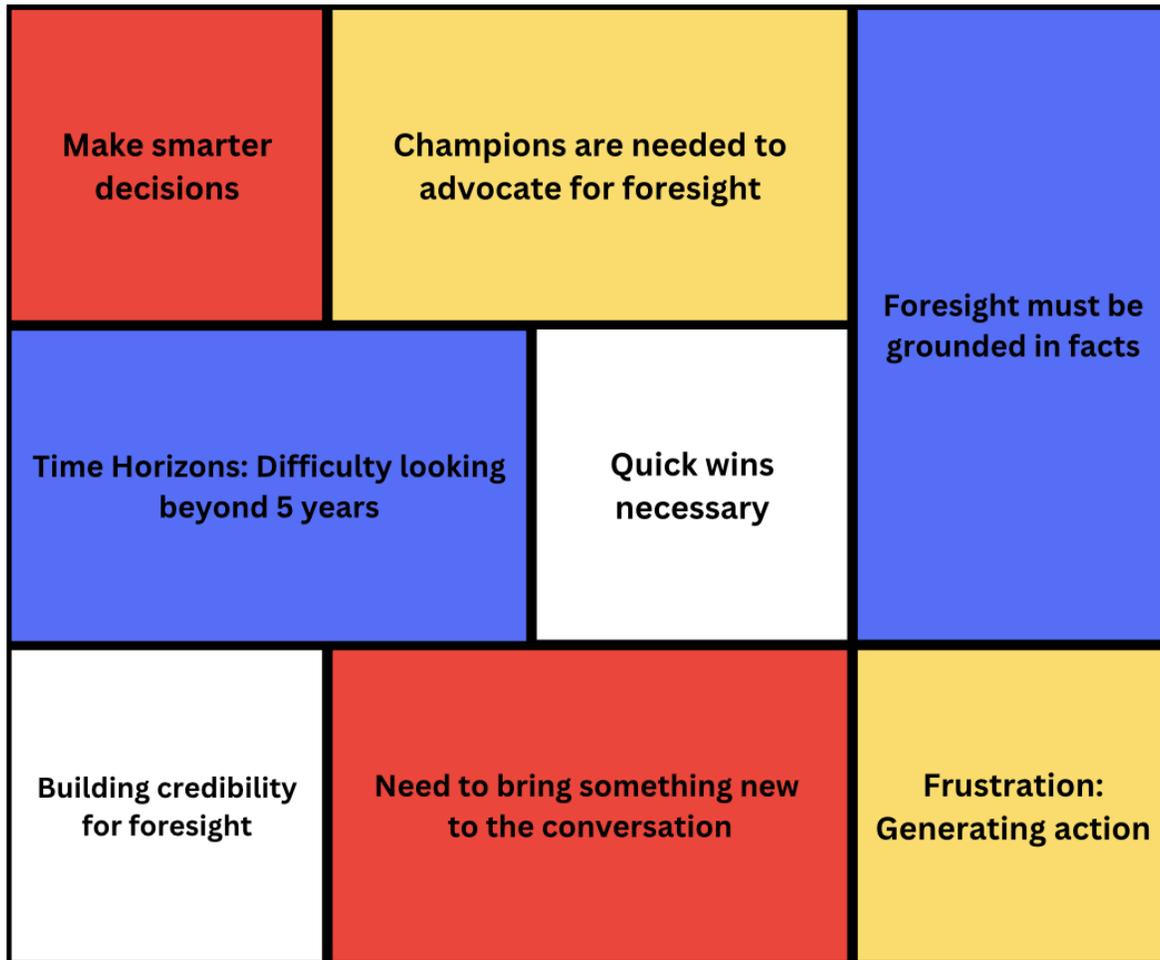

Erin Bradner, Autodesk

"Producing foresight research is only half the work. I apply the 50-50 rule. 50% is research and documentation and 50% is fostering discussion, debate and decision-making with the Strategic Foresight intelligence," said **Erin Bradner, who leads foresight for Autodesk.** *"I agree with (Jim) Dator that: 'The major task of futures studies is to facilitate individuals and groups in formulating, implementing, and re-envisioning their preferred futures.'"*

Time Horizons – Many of the foresight practitioners interviewed said they used the Three Horizons tool for their foresight work. For some industries, such as the automotive industry, there is a necessity to look 7-10 years out, simply because it takes that long to introduce a new vehicle and prepare the manufacturing capabilities to roll out those vehicles. However, in some organizations, those interviewed recognized that the organization's business leaders have difficulty looking beyond 3-5 years. This is why obtaining "quick wins" is essential in building trust in foresight – to encourage leaders to extend their thinking to longer periods.

Foresight language not fully embraced – At some organizations, such as Ford, the Mayo Clinic, Arup or McDonald's, foresight has been fully embraced by the organization, and terms such as "foresight," "futures thinking," "futurist," etc., are freely used throughout the organization. For example, at Ford, the head of the foresight function, Jennifer Brace, uses the "Chief Futurist" title. On the other hand, many of those interviewed said they could not use such terms, and actually, were quite cautious about using them. Instead, they used words such as long-term planning, long-term forecasting, trend spotting or long-term strategy to better "fit in" with the existing corporate culture.

Make smarter decisions	Champions are needed to advocate for foresight	Foresight must be grounded in facts
Time Horizons: Difficulty looking beyond 5 years	Quick wins necessary	
Building credibility for foresight	Need to bring something new to the conversation	Frustration: Generating action

Major themes heard during interviews with organizational futurists.

Champions needed – Most of the organizational foresight practitioners interviewed credit an executive for encouraging the use of foresight in the organization. However, those interviewed said it's critical not to rely on just one champion. Organizational foresight practitioners must invest in building bridges to other departments and creating a community within the organization that embraces foresight. Having champions at all levels – from the top-down – and throughout the organization (multiple departments, groups, etc.) is important. In terms of corporate politics, it may be even more important to have champions among divisions, groups or departments that are responsible for revenue-generation.

Quick wins necessary – Measuring actual results of foresight is difficult – because "the future hasn't happened yet." Organizational foresight leaders who have been in their positions long enough have seen some impact – foresight that results in decisions/policies, which in turn, obtains a desired result. A number of practitioners said it's important to get "some quick wins" – short-term forecasts that actually happen as forecasted. Quick wins build trust, which lead to larger projects. For example, leaders are expecting their foresight teams to help them prepare in order to prevent being caught off guard – such as with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Build your credibility from the outside in – Building trust in the foresight function is critical to its ongoing success. In an interview, Peter Schwartz, author of *The Art of the Long View* and foresight strategist for SalesForce, said that organizational futurists need to build credibility throughout external channels and re-merchandise their external success internally. This can be done by writing books, giving speeches, publishing peer-reviewed papers and thought-leadership pieces, and being invited to speak at conferences.
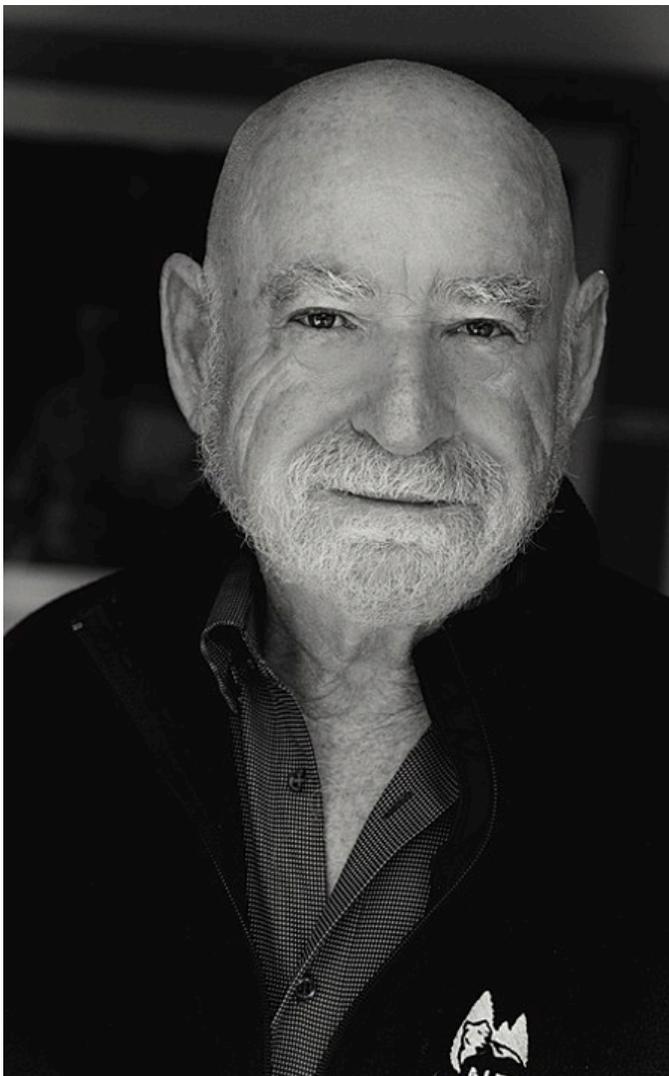
Peter Schwartz, SalesForce

Show me the work – Nearly all of those interviewed said they needed to create tangible products to demonstrate their work and be readily shared throughout the organization.

Examples include **t**rend reports, foresight project reports, newsletters with scanning signals and commentary, executive briefings for senior leaders, internal presentations, white papers, and even videos.

Ground Your Foresight in Facts – All of those interviewed said any reports, presentations, recommendations, talking points for senior leaders – must be grounded in data/facts. Leveraging data generated by the organization (Innovation, Marketing, Market Research, Customer Insights, Voice of the Customer, Engineering teams) or its outside consultants is an essential practice.

Biggest frustration: Taking action – Organizational foresight practitioners interviewed said their greatest frustration is seeing a *lack of action* being taken on their recommendations. Many of the foresight leaders expressed a frustration with persuading leaders to make new policies or take action on recommendations coming out of foresight projects.

DEFINING EFFECTIVE FORESIGHT IN ORGANIZATIONS

One of my primary goals of interviewing organizational foresight practitioners is to understand what effective foresight actually is in day-to-day practice.

Merriam-Webster defines "effective," an adjective, as "producing a decided, decisive, or desired effect." The foresight practitioners interviewed for this study might describe effective foresight as: "a continuous, systematic, collaborative, integrated process that helps organizations generate more value by making better decisions today because the organization's people have a deeper understanding of possible futures and their implications."

Effective foresight has several key characteristics, such as:

Continuous – The foresight process should not be a series of one-off projects. Just as other functions (HR, marketing, legal, operations, IT, etc.) operate continuously, foresight within an organization should as well, constantly helping the organization navigate an ever-changing future. ***Jennifer Brace from Ford Motor Company*** *emphasizes that effective foresight needs to be a "continuous process of quality improvement" while helping teams "prepare for the future, regardless of which [scenarios] come true."*
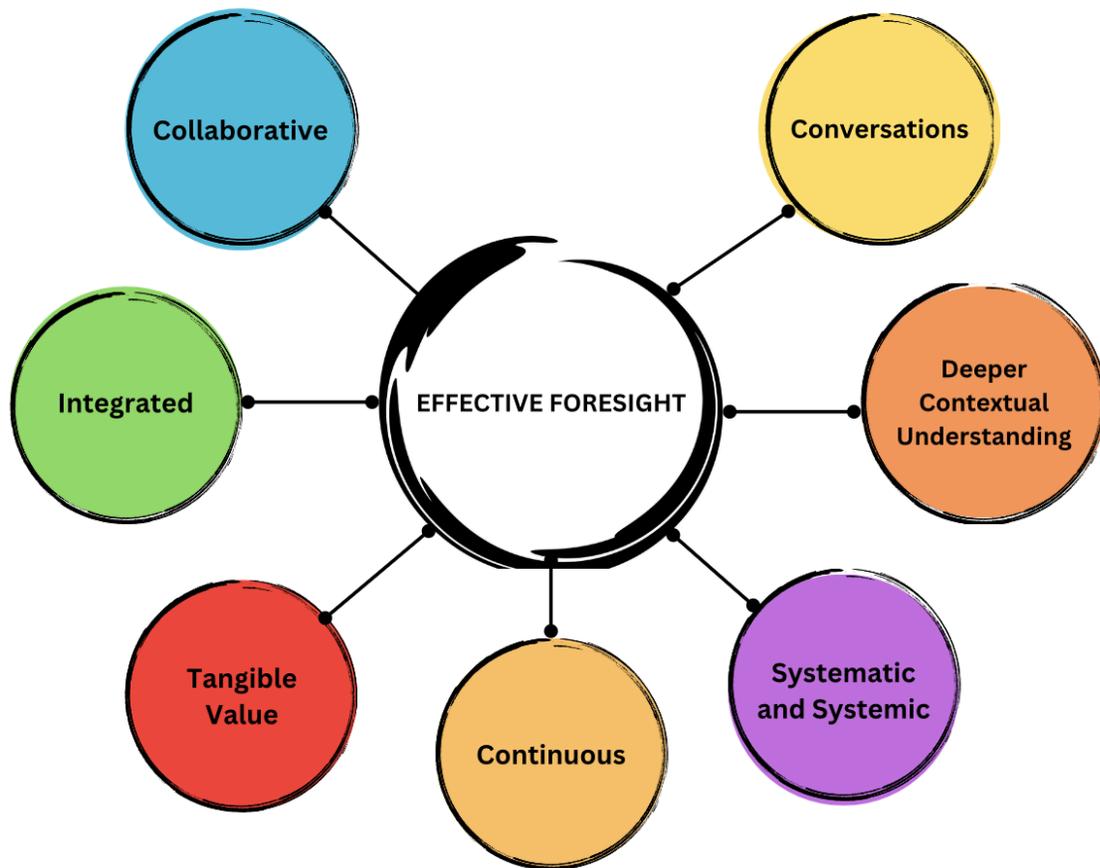
Systematic and systemic – Foresight must be both systematic and systemic within an organization. The foresight process must be focused on helping the organization continuously enhance its systems to help the organization navigate a changing landscape and obtain its preferred future. This includes the systems within the organization and external systems upon which the organization depends. The foresight process, in of itself, is also a system, which must be continuously nurtured and enhanced in order to become more effective.

Integrated – The foresight process is integrated throughout the organization: all functions within the organization embrace a futures mindset and incorporate foresight into their strategic thinking and planning process. Foresight directly informs the strategic decision-making process – present day and near-term decision-making becomes more effective (smarter, better decisions) because of foresight.

Creates tangible value – Because the foresight function helps an organization and its leaders make better decisions today, over time, foresight becomes valued throughout the organization. External stakeholders come to value the organization more because it has embraced foresight as a strategic process that increases the value of the organization.

"Effective foresight consists of projects, programs, capabilities, and experiences that envision and explore the future," said **Josef Hargrave at Arup**, *"which lead to tangible change in the present, more informed decision making, more creative ideation, more assurance in policy development, and more forward-looking strategies."*

Josef Hargrave, Arup

Collaborative – The foresight process involves the participation of people throughout the organization, external stakeholders, outside experts and advisors. It engages people. Networks are built to gather and share information. Communities are formed where foresight practices are shared, which incorporate diverse perspectives, experiences and expertise.

Conversations – The foresight process spurs conversations throughout the organization, which lead to deeper understanding about possible futures and their implications. More conversations about the future helps to identify blindspots, risks and opportunities, which, in turn, influences strategic decision-making. Conversations also creates a shared understanding and vision of future possibilities and potential impacts, which can help the organization become more resilient to adapt to disruptions.

Deeper contextual understanding – The foresight process, through collaboration and conversations, leads to a deeper contextual understanding of the future as well as the present.

David Bengston, U.S.D.A. Forest Service

"Foresight work provides information about the future context in which decisions today are made through a better understanding of possible, plausible, and preferable futures," said David Bengston from the USDA Forest Service. "Foresight work can therefore be effective without leading to particular decisions by providing a better understanding of the context."

Effective foresight isn't just about developing possible alternative futures. It includes:

- Creating better understanding of potential changes,
- Building organizational capacity to adapt,
- Fostering strategic conversations,
- Identifying emerging opportunities and risks,
- Supporting better decision-making in the present,
- Developing more robust strategies, and
- Increasing organizational resilience.

For foresight to be defined as effective foresight, it also requires ongoing support and resources, strong leadership champions, and clear connection to organizational goals and operations. It's not a one-time exercise but a continuous process of learning, adaptation, and improvement that helps organizations navigate uncertainty and change.

Organizational Futurist	Defining Effective Foresight (within an organization)
Jennifer Brace, Ford Motor Company	"Effective foresight involves understanding that the path forward is not linear and developing perspectives and tools that help to **make change less disruptive and easier to navigate.**"

Joanna Lepore, McDonald's	"When word travels of great work you did for one team or function to another, and it snowballs into a culture shift in the business. The work therein speaks for itself, people can instantly see value in it, and your impact grows organically. It's important to note that effectivity is equally doing work that **provides guidance for long-term planning, but also helps shift the culture** of the business away from the purely short term.
Laurie Smith, Nesta	Foresight is effective if it **ultimately increases the impact and contributes to the goals of the organization**. It's fine for that impact to be indirect, uncertain or take time – we are talking about the future remember!"
Josef Hargrave, Arup	"Effective foresight consists of projects, programs, capabilities, and experiences that envision and explore the future, which **lead to tangible change** in the present, more informed decision making, more creative ideation, more assurance in policy development, and more forward-looking strategies."
Ben Moncrieffe, JLR	"Effective foresight inside a corporate business is fundamentally about **finding competitive advantage** – the same as the role of strategy. I'm tasked with helping the business to define 'where to play and how to win' through the identifying growth opportunities, driving business resilience and being a vigilant organization."
David Bengston, U.S.D.A. Forest Service	"Foresight work provides information about the future context in which decisions today are made through a better understanding of possible, plausible, and preferable futures. **Foresight work can therefore be effective without leading to particular decisions by providing a better understanding of the context."**
Ben Holt, IFRC	"Sometimes it's useful to think about foresight from the perspective of head, heart and hands. The head part is 'How do we convince people to consider using strategic foresight?' The heart piece is that passion and a belief in the ideas we generate, and the hands is about the practical stuff – is **foresight becoming embedded into their ways of working**."
Eli Margolese-Malin, American Family Insurance	"Effective foresight 1.) **helps people think different** (and plan different) about current and future risks/opportunities, 2.) it **provides a coherent story** of the future around which one can build roadmaps and visions, and 3.) **it is living foresight**, in other words, its process and results must be regularly updated/refreshed/refined." "Getting people together and presenting stories to them" is often the most effective approach, highlighting the importance of both engagement and communication.
Travis Kupp, UCB	"I would define effective foresight as the set of activities that allow an organization to **make material organizational decisions that result in its sustainability."**

Foresight as a Quality Process?

Related to the question of effectiveness, I also explored the question of quality. In a nutshell, I wanted to know if organizational foresight practitioners saw foresight as a function that contributes to the ongoing quality of the organization. If it is difficult to measure the long-term results of foresight (because it may take years to do so), is it reasonable to wonder if foresight contributes to the incremental quality of the organization? If senior leaders are under pressure to demonstrate continuous improvement in their operations, it stands to reason that foresight professionals also must regard quality improvement over time as a factor of effectiveness.

For additional context, I was inspired to explore this line of thought based on my reading of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig, in which the question, "What is Quality?" serves as the central theme, and reading about W. Edwards Deming's 14 Points for Quality Management.

As in asking the question about foresight effectiveness, there was no clear consensus on this question either. Some did see it as a quality process; others did not.

Eli Margolese-Malin, American Family Insurance

"Foresight is, by nature, a process of quality improvement – both refining/updating its outputs for improved futures as you describe, and refining/improving/updating the tools and frameworks used," said Margolese-Malin. "I would hope the desired future doesn't change much over time, but new scenarios should be run whenever shifts/emerging issues that could impact the organization emerge."

Jo Lepore at McDonald's noted that while foresight should deliver quality over time, that's not a given, based entirely upon how foresight is conducted within the organization.

"If foresight becomes embedded throughout an organization, will it, over time, help an organization increase the quality of the organization or the products and services it offers? To this, Lepore said, "If we look at what a company is up against, it's clear that foresight delivers quality guidance to counter and help navigate that. Its value is intrinsically linked to the survival of a business and therefore should by its nature help the business grow. However, quality of a deliverable and quality improvements-over-time are dependent entirely on how foresight is done. And that is not a given."

On the other hand, Travis Kupp, who leads the foresight function at French pharmaceutical company, UCB, said:

"Foresight is not by definition a quality process," said Kupp. "In the cases where it does add to the quality of an organization, we must be clear about what we mean by 'quality.' In my definition of effective foresight, I place sustainability as the sole desired outcome. This can be interpreted in multiple ways. The basic interpretation is that foresight leads to the continued existence of an organization in the future. Going any further depends on the purpose of the organization. Most corporations would replace sustainability with some form of growth. Some would include environmental and social benefit. Non-profits, on the other hand, might be interested in getting smaller and ceasing to exist in the future where their mission has been accomplished.

All of this is to say that I think foresight can add to the quality of an organization to the extent that it can be shown to have improved the organization's ability to achieve its desired outcomes or modified what outcomes are desired in a meaningful way. It is hard to imagine that this would not manifest in offerings to some extent."

HOW TO ENHANCE EFFECTIVENESS OF FORESIGHT WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION

For this study, I sought to learn how organizational foresight practitioners seek to establish respected and effective foresight practices within their organizations so that the organization and its various leaders can make smarter decisions today that lead to a better future tomorrow.

The organizational futurists interviewed for this study offered the following insights about practices to make foresight more effective:

Build support among leaders at all levels – While it is critical to have champions for foresight at the highest levels within the organization, it also is important to have executive champions at all levels to drive the use of foresight, as Erin Bradner at Autodesk said, "both top-down and down-up." Similarly, those interviewed said it is essential for foresight to be integrated throughout the organization to enhance and strengthen the strategic decision-making process, and this too, requires leaders to embrace and advocate for foresight. Leaders also are critical to appropriately fund the foresight function with the tools and staffing it needs to be effective, and to protect it during downturns.

Strong communications – All of the foresight practitioners interviewed for this study emphasized the critical importance of communication to the foresight process. Communications is essential in building awareness, understanding and trust of the function. It's essential in educating the organization about the value of the function. It's critical in sharing the foresight work product internally (creating tangible things – reports, displays, presentations,

workshops, etc., help people "see" what foresight is). Communications is helpful in building thought leadership for foresight externally, too. Storytelling allows forecasts and scenarios to come alive. Foresight practitioners need to develop their communications skills to succeed within an organizational setting.

As Eli Margolese-Malin from American Family Insurance notes, "getting people together and presenting stories to them" is often the most effective approach, highlighting the importance of both engagement and communication.

Organizational integration – Embedding foresight into as many existing processes is a worthwhile goal for organizational foresight practitioners rather than creating a siloed function. According to those interviewed, foresight should be directly connected to business operations. It should be a continuous process with a clear link to strategy development. To foresight practitioners such as Jennifer Brace at Ford, success is when other departments are thinking about and implementing foresight and coming to the foresight team to support their efforts.

Ben Holt at the IFRC

Foresight must be integrated into the "pipework" of the organization. As Ben Holt at the IFRC notes, "You need to get down to the nuts and bolts and the pipe work of the organization – go talk to the people who are making things happen."

Mastering the craft of foresight – There was agreement among those interviewed that foresight practitioners within organizations need to continuously enhance their foresight skills. In addition to understanding foresight methods, they need the ability to think systematically and nurture their research and analytical skills to speak in the language of the organization. On the other hand, they also need to be creative thinkers who are able to build and share stories of

the future based on a foundation of facts and figures (especially in engineering cultures). They're ability to work across disciplines is essential, too.

Robust methodology – Many of the organizational foresight practitioners interviewed take a systematic and robust approach to conducting foresight for their organizations. They use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods for scanning and analysis. Obtaining quantitative data is essential to offering foresight work product, such as scenarios, based in credible facts and data. Frameworks such as STEEP are used, or variations of STEEP, such as SPHERES, which is used by Eli Margolese-Malin at American Family Insurance, to guide horizon scanning process. Organizational foresight practitioners understand that to be respected within the organization, especially an organization dominated by an engineering culture, their work must be robust and grounded in a solid methodology. It's worthwhile to note, that many organizational foresight practitioners continue to their learning about foresight through participation in learning opportunities offered by outside organizations, such as certificate programs offered by a university, such as the University of Houston, or a private foresight organization such as the Institute For The Future (IFTF) or the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies.

Collaborative approach – Effective foresight is collaborative foresight. Those interviewed shared the importance of building networks throughout the organization – a community of employees who are interested in futures thinking. This network is essential in identifying signals of change and obtaining a diversity of perspectives. Similarly, it's important to involve employees in the process of foresight – allowing them to participate in workshops where they can get their hands dirty. Partnerships with subject matter experts throughout the organization is essential to gain in-depth insights.

Josef Hargrave from Arup emphasizes that "collaborating with the rest of the business is a massive enabling factor. That's critical for our success."

Building futures literacy – Educating and training employees throughout the enterprise about foresight basics and their value to the organization is a high priority for most of the organizational foresight practitioners interviewed. Increasing futures literacy leads to building credibility for the foresight function, developing a community of futures thinkers, gaining the trust of influential leaders, and acquiring foresight projects, which creates the opportunity to hire staff and obtain more sophisticated foresight tools. Often, the goal of increasing futures literacy is to ensure that foresight is included at the onset of new strategic projects – where it informs the strategic decision-making process. David Bengston of the U.S.D.A. Forest Service noted the value of expanding awareness of futures thinking throughout an organization even if it doesn't result in decisions linked directly back to the foresight process.

Measurement systems – While organizational foresight practitioners desire to measure the effectiveness of their efforts, it can be difficult. For one, realizing a preferred future may take a decade or more. Second, many other factors may be involved in the decision-making process that makes it difficult to directly tie the influence of foresight to an outcome. Where foresight has been embraced by an organization for a longer period of time, there's the benefit of being able to compare recommendations, scenarios or trends made in the past to what has transpired in the present. Jennifer Brace from Ford pointed out that, "having the history of foresight (more than 20 years at Ford) allows us to reflect on what we've learned from past projects," emphasizing the importance of organizational learning and continuity.

For organizational foresight teams with a shorter tenure, measuring the foresight process can be useful in justifying budgets and staffing. These metrics may include, but are not limited to:

- Influence of foresight on decision-making;

- Internal engagement, such the number of workshops conducted or the number of people who read an internal e-newsletter;

- External thought leadership, such as articles published in leading journals or being invited to participate in a conference; and

- Leadership development, such as teaching executives about how to use foresight in strategic decision-making.

Arup's Hargrave noted the value of being able to generate revenue for Arup's foresight function by being able to serve as consultants to external clients, as another measure for organizational foresight professionals to consider, where applicable.

Cultural influence – Some foresight teams deem effectiveness at their ability to influence and shape the culture of organization – encouraging it to become more futures forward. This is evidenced by foresight teams creating communities of foresight thinking or internal networks of people who champion foresight throughout the organization. As Erin Bradner, director of strategic foresight for Autodesk noted, it must be a top-down as well as a bottom-up approach to building awareness, educating and gaining acceptance for foresight throughout the organization.

It's important to note that understanding the culture of the organization is essential for foresight to thrive. In an engineering-driven culture, such as an automotive manufacturing company, foresight must be grounded in data, and shared in a language that engineers understand, for example.

Effectiveness Relies Upon Many Factors

Effectiveness isn't achieved through any single element but rather through the combination and integration of these various components. It requires sustained effort, organizational commitment, and continuous development of both capabilities and relationships.

In addition, effectiveness in foresight appears to be contextual – what works in one organization may need to be adapted for another. The key is finding the right balance and mix of these elements that fits the specific organizational context and needs.