Nurturing *Futures* Intelligence
by Randall Lawton, board member

"The surprise-free future isn't." —Herman Kahn

Firms *prepared* for the future are 33% more profitable and grow twice as fast as others, research says. Companies that scan a variety of environments, such as technology, politics, environment, competition, and customer landscape, develop a strong understanding of market shifts and of new features that meet customer needs, and so their revenues increase.

That future-preparedness is the advantage foresight provides, adding a third dimension to planning. In other words, instead of "business as usual," successful planning is derived from a methodical look at *plausible alternative futures*. The scanning and scenario development, fundamental to foresight, inform the strategic thinking and planning process, offering a distinct advantage.

The foresight scanning process involves the systematic collection of information in an attempt to find, collect, and analyze trends and events and, at the same time, identify discontinuities, emerging issues and opportunities that had not been known or understood previously. However, whether your organization is for-profit or non-profit, when you find relevant signals relating to your topic, you don't know whether the "signal hit" is strong or weak, disruptive or opportunistic, or additive to what you already know about the space your organization resides in.

Almost everyone searches with Google about any subject of interest; such broad searches are the beauty of the Internet. Whether conducting a project scan or ongoing scanning to remain informed on an established domain topic, the time burden seems reasonable for the outcome it produces. Foresight, however, takes us an important step further, preparing us for *surprises*. It supports exploration of ideas that are creative and unusual – not controlled by current paradigms – about an organization and its plausible opportunities and risks. Much of this is derived from the organized and focused search process called scanning and its beneficial discoveries.

Foresight offers research methodologies that educators, engineers, scientists, development specialists, and marketers use. But, when *organizational leaders* focus on signals of change organized within the STEEP framework (Social, Technological, Environmental, Economic, and Political), what we have is a system-wide look at the organization and its future. Now we're getting somewhere.

Effectively facilitated foresight processes use structure and analytics to ensure that leaders address these futures in an unbiased manner and build plausibility consensus about how they could impact the organization's future. Leadership engaged in such dialogue approaches decision making with a changed mental model, prepared for whatever future unfolds.
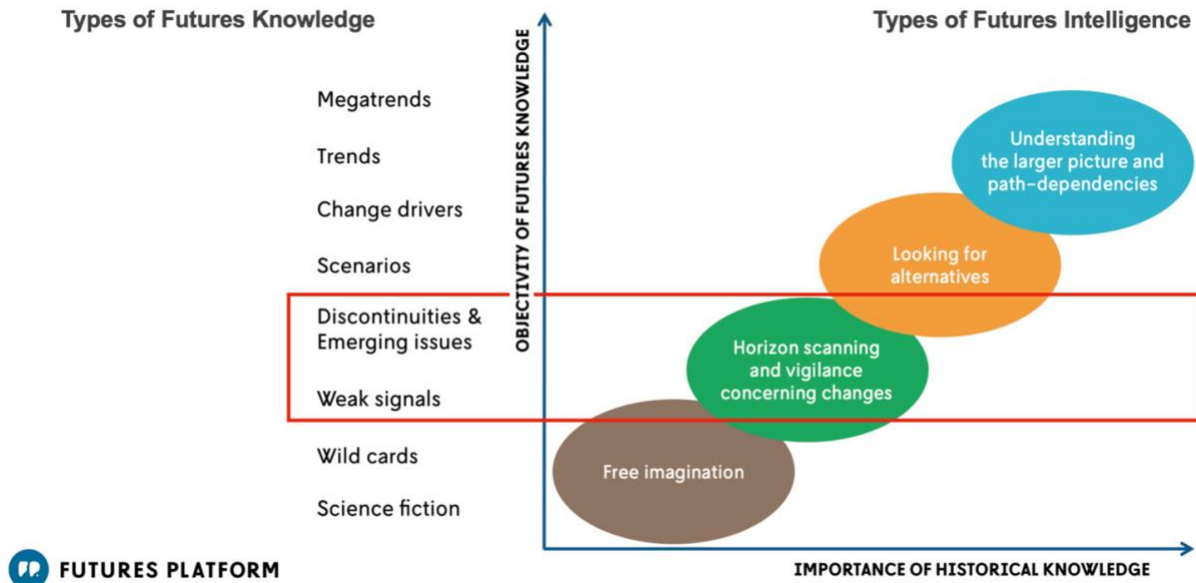
Of course it all begins with effective scanning for signals, the research step. Nothing starts without bringing in the new and innovative, but analysis and scenario building are the next critical steps toward delivering plausible alternative futures around which leadership develops consensus. When the signals you find are strong, current, or impending within your planning horizon, they strengthen your understanding of the trends and driving forces impacting your organization or unleashing unknown opportunities.

We do not sit down and simply *write* scenarios that are plausible and likely fictitious; we *derive* them through a process that begins with scanning and the discovery of trends and events with possible meaning. The search process should yield enough weak and early signals of change "hits" to suggest "collaboration," making them a convincing part of plausible alternative futures. *One* transformational sounding signal of change is interesting, but *several* from *different* sources addressing a similar trend begin to yield a story about a "surprise" future. These become the basis for Plausibility = credibility + novelty + impact.

"The Four Futures" introduced in Strategic Foresight workshops:
- **Continuous or base line**: status quo (normal) growth and change
- **Decline/Collapse**: system degradation or failure as crises emerge
- **Constrained/Limits + Discipline**: adapt to growing internal or environmental limits
- **Transformation**: new technology, social, or business factors- disrupt the system

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Whether working on a short-term foresight project or doing ongoing research within a topic of interest, the scope of finding/searching/scanning is perhaps the most important process that foresight offers: It is an <u>organized</u> source of discovery. The chart below from *Futures Platform*, a foresight firm in Finland specializing in future trends, scenarios, and long-term change, demonstrates the landscape of the various knowledge types, from megatrends to wild cards to science fiction. Start a deep scanning dive into your topic, and you really don't know what type of information signal "hit" will present itself. However, as you collect signals and analyze signals that prove to be valid in association with many *other* signals, the patterns will speak to you and self-sort. That insight will then become your futures Intelligence, and you will be on a path toward truly understanding the future of your topic.

Types of Futures Knowledge

OBJECTIVITY OF FUTURES KNOWLEDGE

- Megatrends
- Trends
- Change drivers
- Scenarios
- Discontinuities & Emerging issues
- Weak signals
- Wild cards
- Science fiction

Types of Futures Intelligence

Understanding the larger picture and path–dependencies

Looking for alternatives

Horizon scanning and vigilance concerning changes

Free imagination

FUTURES PLATFORM

IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

Other creative methods, such as free Imagination, exploring wild cards and, indeed, science fiction, stretch our paradigms about how our world might be. Envision's Strategic Foresight workshop presenter, Garry Golden, calls these tools the "play side" of foresight. However, creative, right-brain, out-of-the-box thinking techniques are serious components of future thinking. If they are not embraced, one is less prepared for the "surprise future" that might unfold. It is this process of future preparation on several knowledge levels that creates a more robust and future-prepared organization.

Envision offers foresight training to business, government, education and nonprofit leaders to guide our community's future. Through workshops, consulting, facilitated networking, World Future's Day, and signals teams, we examine the future of several categories of interest that we believe are tied to making Greater Green Bay a community of choice. We anticipate and lead change by teaching and applying proven strategies that identify disruptors to shape a preferred future. Through all of these endeavors, we hope to be developing intelligence about the future.