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## Cultivating strategic foresight in practise: A relational perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on relationalism as a theoretical lens, we examine how normative organising structures, rights and authority relationships influence the cultivation of strategic foresight among organisational members lower down the organisational hierarchy. We adopt a case-based approach involving three software firms, whose innovation teams served as our empirical research sites. Our study highlights the triadic influence of individual, organisational and contextual organising practises on the cultivation of strategic foresight. We identify four relational assemblages of practises that enable (or impede) the enactment of strategic foresight in practise. These include strategic conversations, perspective taking and reflexivity-in-practise, over-emphasis on formal knowledge and technical rationality, and benevolent conspiracies. We add to research on strategic foresight by extending our understanding of the vital role that lower-level employees may play in the cultivation of organisational 'foresightfulness'. We therefore urge management advisors to accord lower-level input recognizably respectful consideration, if not adoption.

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## 1. Introduction

The ability to identify, interpret and (re)configure sources of potentialities into resources and productive outcomes is frequently highlighted as a key capability of foresightful organisations (Chia 2008; Constanzo & Mackay 2010; Rohrbeck 2012). The concept of strategic foresight has enjoyed a sustained rise to prominence in organising, triggering interest in the wider social, historical, and intellectual context within which strategic foresight emerges or fails (Stiglitz & Bilmes 2008; Whitehead 1967). Nevertheless, with respect to the cultivation of strategic foresight, current explanations prioritize the trans-individual 'foresightful' actions of the 'heroic CEO' (Ahuja, Coff, & Lee 2005; Gabriel 1995) and the collective organising practises of Top Management Teams (TMTs) (Andriopoulos & Gotsi 2006; Vecchiato 2012). Against this background, what remains unclear is the contribution of 'ordinary' organisational members positioned further down the organisational hierarchy. The literature is silent on how the situated organising practises and relationships of lower-level employees influence strategic foresight. This line of research may have been sidestepped because strategic foresight is frequently conceptualized as a longer-term objective, while the seemingly run-of-the-mill work of lower-level employees comprises primarily short-term activities.

To better understand the role played by lower-level employees, this paper examines how organising practises and relations influence the cultivation of strategic foresight. Developing our contribution in the

context of the global software industry, we explore the potential for 'relationalism' to encourage new understanding about how the organising social relationships and situated interactions of product innovation teams influence strategic foresight. Our study makes two contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on strategic foresight by demonstrating the importance of lower-level employees in the cultivation of strategic foresight. Second, by drawing on a relational perspective, it illuminates the potential for taken-for-granted everyday organising and authority relations to enable (or impede) the enactment of strategic foresight in practise.

The paper is organised as follows. First, we provide an overview of the concept of strategic foresight and the different perspectives on theorizing strategic foresight in organising. Next, we explore its relational dimension and examine how structural and authority relationships in a bounded system extend understanding of the creative emergence of organisational foresight in practise. We then explain our research methodology, detailing our approach and analytical methods, after which we present our evidence on how the relational orientation of innovation teams might enable or impede organisational foresight. Finally, we discuss our findings and the implications of our research for theory and practise.

## 2. Strategic foresight

## 2.1. Concept, process and perspectives

Referring to foresight as a human attribute, Alfred North Whitehead (1967, p.89) defined it as "the ability to see through the apparent confusion, to spot developments before they become trends, to see patterns

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before they emerge, and to grasp the relevant features of social currents that are likely to shape the direction of future events". For Slaughter (1995, p.1), "foresight is not the ability to predict the future... it is a human attribute that allows us to weigh the pros and cons, to evaluate different courses of action and to invent possible futures on every level with enough reality and meaning to use them as decision making aids". Conditioned by these early conceptualizations, strategic foresight is frequently presented as a managerial function and competence (Mackay & Burt 2014; McKelvey & Boisot 2010), which enables organisations to "penetrate and transgress established boundaries and seize the opportunities otherwise overlooked by others" (Chia 2008, p. 27). From this perspective, Rohrbeck and Schwarz (2013) delineate strategic foresight as the ability to implement actions that reflect critical decision-making; to discern, perceive and interpret weak signals and deduce relevant courses of action. The theoretical and managerial implications are that strategic foresight places organisations in a state of preparedness, broadening their vision to probe emerging social and technological trends in ways that result in innovations responsive to fast-paced business environments (De Moor, Saritas, Schuurman, Claeys, & De Marez 2014).

So how can organisations cultivate strategic foresight? Within an organising framework of intervention and 'scientific rationality' (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011), multifarious methodologies like scenario thinking (Wright & Cairns 2011), business war-gaming (Schwarz 2009) and scenario planning exercises (van der Heijden 1996) have been developed (and promoted by foresight scholars and practitioners) to help organisations enhance their foresightfulness. Underpinned by a complex set of methods and interactive processes, each consisting of sequential discrete actions and prescriptive steps, foresight exercises represent annual rituals in many organisations. However, their episodic, linear nature makes them appear 'cognitivist' and ultra-rational in form. Moreover, the level of employees involved in these exercises is unclear so managers as decision-makers are frequently privileged as protagonists, making the 'visionary' manager the locus of organisational foresight. To address the complications of attributing organisational foresight solely to managers, strategic foresight in the form of strategizing is frequently conceptualized as a distributed capability that enables organisations to produce meaningful, future-oriented knowledge (Bradfield et al., 2005). This shift in locus attribution in unpacking and theorizing strategic foresight prioritizes middle-managers and, sometimes, 'ordinary' employees as people whose 'actions' and 'doings' may influence organisational foresightfulness (Constanzo and Tzoumpa, 2010; Cunha, Palma, & Da Costa 2006).

Recent advances within the foresight literature have redirected attention to theorizing strategic foresight as a social practise, suggesting the everyday organising activities and micro-interactions between organisational actors are relevant for understanding strategic foresight (Cunha et al. 2006; Sarpong & Maclean 2011). Emphasizing practise as the site of the emergence of strategic foresight, this stream of studies treats foresight ontologically as flexible and perpetually *becoming* (Kaplan & Orlikowski 2013; Tsoukas & Chia 2002), recognizing that the intrinsic temporality of organising often treats the past, present, and future as 'durational' indivisible (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia 2012a; Sarpong & Maclean 2011). In this regard, they strive to accommodate novelty, improvisation and the potential for change arising from collective 'foresightful' actions. While the practise perspective offers compelling and useful ideas, it faces the methodological challenge of sifting, mapping and interpreting the potential teleological structures of normative past and present foresightful actions. Table 1 summarizes the main areas of difference between the two established approaches to cultivating strategic foresight.

Contributing to research on foresight, particularly the practise approach which remains in a pre-paradigmatic stage, our relational approach emphasizes the influence of taken-for-granted relations and organising arrangements on the cultivation of strategic foresight. Thus, the coming to presence of strategic foresight relies not just on

**Table 1**  
Established approaches to cultivating strategic foresight.

Dimensions	Corporate foresight exercises	Social practise approach to foresight
<i>Representation</i>	Strategic foresight as a derived outcome of ad hoc corporate futures exercises.	Strategic foresight as ongoing creative reconfiguration of sources of potentialities and limits into resources and productive outcomes.
<i>Primary emphasis</i>	On purposeful generation of probable futures or heuristic narratives during corporate futures exercises and scenario planning workshops.	On strategic conversations among actors, temporal reflexivity-in-practise, prospective sense-making and improvisation within contingencies of the moment.
<i>Process characteristics</i>	Relies on the contribution of external consultants or futurists whose role is to facilitate the filtering and combination of information dispersed in time into meaningful, future-oriented knowledge.	Problematizes the use of external consultants. Strategic foresight in the form of strategizing emerges from everyday organising practises that involve micro-interactions and the interpretation of subtle cues in practise.
<i>Organising logic</i>	Rational episodic intervention organised around a framework of scientific rationality.	Flexible, relational in context, perpetually becoming.
<i>Limitations</i>	Often appear as an act of imposing dominant logic on subaltern groups, either through the truncation of alternative scenarios, or through an ideological understanding of outcomes.	Identifying organising practises and activities that can be counted as partly constitutive of strategic foresight.

organising practises, but on the relational actions induced by the inter-dependent relationships and interactions of organisational members in their situated practise (Simpson & Mayo 1997; Young, Gilbert, & McIntyre 1996). Experiences obtained through interactions and inflexions can inform the logical accountability of strategic foresight in organising. In what follows, we chart our relational approach to strategic foresight and specify its underlying logics.

## 2.2. A relational approach to strategic foresight

The notion that all social practises occur in relational contexts has led to the emergence of relationalism as a meta-theoretical perspective in theorizing heterogeneous relationships in organisations (Bello, Chelariu, & Zhang 2002; Cooper 2005; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass 1998), focusing on their influence on how work is organised (Milton & Wesphal 2005). With its conceptual development rooted in cultural psychology, the contemporary 'turn' to relationalism is grounded in field theory and is concerned with the dialectical analysis of thought and action (Ho 1998; Ho, Peng, Lai, & Chan 2001; Lebra 1976). It privileges the heterogeneous configuration of relations and practises in examining the linkages between social structures and relevant organisational outcomes (Paswan et al., 1998). Chia and Holt (2006, p.38) present 'relationality' as a methodological framework that emphasizes:

Relationships and action by which individual and organizational entities are understood as manifestations of a *latent* movement, or field of re-lat-ionships, that is distinct from any aggregative sum of parts.

Deriving meaning from relations and interactions, relationalism can enrich our understanding of the theory and practise of strategic foresight by providing a dynamic, open-ended approach to account for the emergence of strategic foresight. Following de Jouvenel (1967)

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