An organizational futurist role for integrating foresight into corporations

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A B S T R A C T

Integrating foresight into corporations has proved to be challenging and rare. The paper proposes an organizational futurist role as an internal champion and broker to facilitate the integration process. It builds on the direct experience of one of the authors in crafting the role by revisiting and critically reviewing the papers reporting on findings from that experience. A literature review is then used to reflect on the gaps identified and to stimulate new conceptualizations in order to ground the role in a more suitable academic approach. The paper proposes several tangible approaches for how an organizational futurist role might respond to three principal challenges to the integration of foresight identified and confirmed by a review of the literature. The paper concludes with a research agenda to explore those approaches.

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1. Introduction

This special issue suggests that foresight is increasingly being used by corporations. This paper adds, however, that the integration of foresight work, where it is melded with and part of corporate culture and work processes, is still relatively rare [1]. It suggests that the integration of foresight can "create an impact and add value" [2].

An organizational futurist role is proposed to aid with integration. An "organizational futurist" is defined as a futurist working as a full-time employee for a single organization with responsibility for foresight activities. Hines' original idea was that this organizational futurist role 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 [3]. It could be viewed as a reinterpretation of a more traditional planning role but it is distinguished from planning as more of a generalist role in that it seeks to raise foresight capacity across the full range of organizational activities. It goes beyond a single application area, such as

planning, or any other single role, for instance, technology forecasting. It embraces both strategic planning and technological forecasting as components of a larger kit of several approaches and tools that can be drawn upon to integrate foresight as broadly as possible across the organization.

The approach used to explore the topic begins with Hines' direct experience in crafting an organizational futurist role. His consulting experience in the early- to mid-1990s led him to conclude that the "internal delivery of our work" was the firm's number one business challenge and clients consistently reported back their inability and ineffectiveness in applying the foresight work internally. This motivated his decision to spend a decade working inside two Fortune 500 corporations to gain first-hand experience of why it was so difficult, and to craft and explore the feasibility of an organizational futurist role to improve the prospects for integration [4].

This paper begins with a consideration of that experience, framed as a reflective practitioner account [5]. It has been observed that many research publications emerged out of the researcher's personal biography [6]. While, theory and practice are typically separated in academic research [7], the goal in using the reflective practitioner approach is to bring them back together. Schon also noted how "the epistemology appropriate to the new scholarship must make room for the practitioner's reflection in and on action" [8].

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This paper draws upon the Hines dissertation, supervised by Gold, which critically reviewed ten of his publications reflecting on the role of the organizational futurist and the challenges of integrating foresight [4,9–17]. It seeks, through a literature review, to investigate whether the challenges identified by Hines were unique to his experience or if they were shared by the larger foresight community. It then critically reviews Hines' responses to those challenges and re-conceptualizes the organizational futurist role by drawing upon the theoretical framework of social constructionism, narrative and discourse theory, institutional theory, organizational learning theory, and business and management research.

This article assumes that integrating foresight will enable corporations to more effectively anticipate and influence the future, and work toward their preferred futures. This assumption is clearly open to challenge and critique and many corporations do not seek the help of foresight or professional futurists. Indeed, much strategy and policy-planning work has been conducted that over the past 30 years without using the foresight or futurist label; in some cases, purposely avoiding it because it was a label of disrepute in planning circles [18]. Nor has the case been decisively made for those who do use it that foresight can deliver on this promise. Indeed, even futurists themselves have raised this question. For example, Molitor charged that "as a practitioner and teacher of forecasting engaged for some 50 years in the futures field, I can't recall any personal experience with scenario exercises that was worth the time and effort spent" [19]. While this critique was aimed at a particular method, it is nonetheless a daunting charge.

2. Research approach

Hines' interpreted his experiences and shared insights on the organizational futurist role internally in a community of practice [4]. They were also shared externally in a regular dedicated column in the journal *foresight*, as well as being discussed and analyzed at conferences, workshops, and professional forums [9,14,15,20] and other publications [12]. Some key learning points were synthesized in a paper "The Organizational Futurist's Audit" [4] that won the Emerald Literati paper of the year in foresight in 2003.

For the dissertation, ten publications were selected for a critical analysis that systematically broke down the works and identified and evaluated potential alternative explanations. It noted inconsistencies and gaps and treated them as sources of potential new research questions. The specific critical approach that was used is taught at the University of Houston Graduate Program in Foresight [21]. This review suggested new research questions to address and shed further light on the potential of the organizational futurist role. The questions were explored through a literature search and analysis, drawing on the foresight literature but expanding well beyond it.

The critical review and literature search, as reported below, revealed that Hines' experience surfaced challenges that were indeed shared by the foresight community. This confirmation suggested it would be useful to offer the organizational futurist role as a potential aid in assisting with foresight integration, but first it was necessary to review, critique, and reconceptualise that role drawing upon the literature between the time of the experience and the present.

Thus three principal challenges to foresight integration are identified in Section 3. Section 4 then proposes how an organizational futurist role can help deal with them and assist with the integration of foresight.

3. Challenges to integrating foresight

The exploration of the organizational futurist role began with the broad question of why it was so difficult for clients to use foresight work. A recent paper exploring this very question suggested that foresight "delivers a type of knowledge that is difficult to apply in organizations," because there is a mismatch in timeframe such that the organization and its members have difficulty in fitting foresight findings into existing decision-making processes [22]. This creates a gap between foresight and regular organizational processes that cannot be easily bridged. This "why so difficult" question is reframed here into three primary challenges, based on Hines experience and confirmed in the literature review.

Before discussing these challenges, a few comments on the current state of foresight seem appropriate. In this paper we are specifically concerned with the use of foresight provided by professional futurists. Everyone, including corporations, uses foresight in their daily lives and practices but usually, they do not do so systematically. That is, such use is not based on concepts, approaches, and methods developed and used by professionals for formally studying the future.

Professional futurists have often not been clear about describing what it is they do offer. The field is still grappling with what to call itself and what its boundaries are [23] and this "may hamper progress in the field" [24]. The terms within foresight are often confusing in that different practitioners describe the same terms in differing ways [25]. Clearly, these deficiencies cast doubt on the validity of those who practice foresight to the claim of professionalism, as part of an effort to reduce a client's decision-making complexity [26].

While Hamel and Prahalad's best-selling *Competing for the Future* brought some notoriety to using foresight for strategy-making [27], that work paid no attention to professional foresight or futurists. A review of the index found no mentions of a professional futurist or futures studies or professional foresight. Foresight work has been done and written about by professional futurists, albeit with little attention focused on building an on-going foresight capability within corporations. There is "little reliable data on the extent to which foresight is used" [28]. It may even be that the use of foresight is under-estimated, since commercial competitive considerations keep much work confidential [29].

The challenges are identified below, with Hines's experience noted first, followed by insights or confirmation from the literature review. Section 4 proposes responses to these challenges.

3.1. Episodic use of foresight

Both the Kellogg Company and Dow Chemical hired Hines as part of company-wide initiatives to become more innovative. In both cases, the initial enthusiasm for the initiatives and the foresight work waned amidst a leadership transition that resulted in pressure for cost-cutting and less emphasis on experimenting with new approaches. One might assert that a