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By: Alireza Hejazi

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7 Strategic Points for Running Your Foresight Business *in Post-Recession Market*

These strategic business points can be helpful for professional futurists who are going to maintain their competitive benefits in a market that is being recovered gradually with post-recession challenges and opportunities.

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in Post-Recession Market

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Foreword

The understanding of the world as turbulent, ever-changing, risky, and always challenging is being translated into new concept of what it means to be a futurist, especially a professional one.

New paradigm of futuring can be conceived as the ability to use foresight skills to build a culture of futurist performance, trust, and integrity. It means that professional futurists should be able to analyze their situation and tailor their futuring behavior to improve their professional effectiveness.

As the futurists, we know that there is more to life than work and more to work than making money. Considering high ethical standards in our social and interpersonal conduct, we should seek for higher levels of quality and professionalism. Futuring involves people in relationship, influence, change, shared purpose, and taking personal responsibility to make things happen according to our preferred futures.

The professional futurists deal with challenging issues in and out of their field of study and work. Some external issues are related directly to their professional survival, especially in a market that is being recovered gradually after recent years' significant recession.

We will face with a number of inevitable realities that may affect the conditions of our profession and make it necessary to review our past business models and policies: an increased number of futures and foresight graduates, new foresight companies and futuring institutes, economical limitations in hiring pro-futurists, new markets for foresight services, unforeseen fields of studies that may need foresight expertise at strategic levels and other opportunities and challenges that will impose wanted or unwanted changes on our work and life.

As the futurists, we should be prepared to encounter with new conditions and increase the chance of our professional survival in a confused time. Such readiness requires our total awareness along with using our foresight skills more effectively than ever. A sound mix of soft and hard methodologies can give us the ability to predict and control various aspects of the environment to keep our profession running smoothly.

This short report contains seven essential points that may be considered by professional futurists if they are going to maintain their competitive benefits. The leading futurists who have been working with a growing body of knowledge and experience can extend their role from leaders to coaches and help younger futurists to find professional solutions for challenges ahead in such an uncertain market that is becoming more competitive than ever. Are you up to the challenge?

1. A Realistic Assessment of Our Services & Products

Given the fact that in the coming years more Futures graduates (Gary, 2010) and companies will arrive at the market, we should have a realistic assessment of our services and products in advance if we are going to maintain our competitive benefit. The origins of competitive benefit lie in the unusual foresight ability of the firm's managers (Cockburn et al., 2000). Meanwhile, a few extraordinarily effective leaders possess a set of potent abilities and intuitive instincts that enable them to readily reposition their organizations in anticipation of market change (Savage and Sales, 2008). On the other hand, futures companies who are to introduce a new product or service may find that competitors with more foresight services are already on the market (Amsteus, 2011).

What should we really do in such a competitive environment? According to Morrisey (1992), the futurists should consider 8 important criteria in assessing their services and products if they are going to keep their competitive benefit: Capability, Demand, Competition, Price, Cost, Desire, Preparation and Timing. In fact, our competitive accomplishment relies heavily on a realistic assessment that we should makeover our existing and potential capacities as the futurists.

In a broader range, we should ask ourselves questions like these: Do we have a clear exploitation strategy for our academic studies? How is our connection to the society after our graduation? How have we canalized our studies outputs (books, articles and perhaps softwares) into our works? How can we develop a new foundation for Futures work (not the studies)? Are our expected projects outcomes sufficiently close to the market's needs (in case of applied Futuring)? What will be the economic impact for each partner we may have in our projects? How does each partner benefit from a proposed Futures transnational cooperation? Medium- to long-term advantages? And finally, how can we develop internationally accepted protocols for Futures cooperation?

These questions and many others like them can be addressed only if we put on glasses of realism and look at our profession without any tendency. Usually we like to overestimate our capacities and performance and this is a big hurdle that we should overcome. We should never underestimate or overestimate our real potentials. We know

our weak and strong points and should plan to make a balance between what we really have and what we are going to achieve in near and long terms.

2. What Does A Futurist Do That Others Don't?

Thinking about unthinkable and speaking the unspeakable—just barely (Cornish, 2007). F. Scott Fitzgerald once said: "The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." In the same manner, a futurist is able to describe and critique one's own mental models of how the world works. Many people cannot understand the difference between a futurist and a strategist. Our first task is to draw a distinguishing line between these two different professions. At a higher level, we should define our leading roles.

According to Savage and Sales (2008), there are a number of traits for the futurists if they are going to undertake leading roles in their communities. These traits are:

- Regularly and systematically scanning and analyzing information on a wide range of topics, including those which are unfamiliar.
- Exposing oneself to unique, perspective enhancing experiences.
- Willing and eager to look past what is already known.
- Constantly playing out how the future might unfold by thinking, writing, and talking about the subject and soliciting a variety of views.
- At ease considering alternative futures; not stuck on one particular version of the future.
- Living as if very different futures could unfold from the facts of the present.

In an effort to define professional standards, Slaughter (1999) mentioned 10 top attributes that can be considered as the most essential professional characteristics of the futurists, including:

1. Clarity about the foundations of FS.
2. The ability to engage in "thinking in history".

3. Making explicit assumptions about human nature.
4. A frank examination of values.
5. Taking a broad view of the future context.
6. The critical use of imagination.
7. The ability to engage in work characterized by "sophisticated uncertainty".
8. Awareness of the futures tradition and embedded cultural assumptions.
9. Focus of any particular piece of futures work on four main levels (from pop futurism to deep epistemology).
10. Offering high quality futures work by the integration of "hard" (quantitative) methodologies with "soft" (interpretative) ones.

On the other hand, Marien (2002) believes that Futures Studies is changing in character, along with technology, politics and culture. In this case, new capacities may be found within FS. We should also look for new traits of the futurists in the coming years.

3. Which Markets Can We Serve?

This is a great question that makes the future venues of our profession. To identify the markets that we can serve, we should determine our potential clients and audiences. We can summarize them as following:

Generally speaking, we are faced with: the organization, dissidents, think tanks, opinion formers, stakeholders, critics, and advocacy groups (The Henley Centre, 2001). Coming back to our societies, we can find all of these audiences as potential customers of our services. But, in a business sense we usually deal with the organization and stakeholders.

On the other hand, if we regard consulting as "coaching", just as what has been suggested by Rubenstein (2006), there are two kinds of audiences for our services. A Type 1 client is one who asks the coach to assist him or her in doing something better. This may be

doing a job better, improving certain skills including communication, leadership, project management or other skills that the person may use in his or her profession or as a hobby.

A Type 2 client seeks a coach to assist him or her in embarking on a new endeavor. This is not a "let me be better" activity at all. This is a "Assist in directing me to a new future where I will shine."

In a practical sense, people who need to plan for their alternative futures, are mainly in public sector: Defense & Intelligence, Politics & Economics, and Culture & Religion. We may target these kinds of clients for our foresight services.

Serving a potential market needs other essentialities, including our speaking practices as a futurist speaker not just in formal speeches, but also in short talks. Dr. Inayatullah's (2000) has mentioned great points of: timing, using metaphors, and eclecticism in this regard. For longer professional sessions we may consider other traits like: depth, collaborative participation (interaction), using scenarios, and making surprises to attract the audience' mind.

A real futurist should be a psychologist. We deal with different states of our clients' minds. We should treat them as expert hypnotizers who are going to trance them into the future, but in a conscious manner. We should magnet them with future-oriented discussions, or push their desired futures to their future-sensitive minds. We should become fut-o-psychologists?

4. Coping with Classic Challenges in Post-Recession Market

Strategic foresight consultancy can be faced with the same challenges that classic marketing has been always encountered. According to Washburn (1996), these challenges are:

- To exploit existing markets and existing products and services profitably.
- To find profitable new markets and profitable new products and services.

- To provide the services necessary so that these two tasks can proceed effectively and efficiently.

Today, we may meet the same challenges in post-recession market. Nothing is changed. A new analysis of attitudes and spending reveals a return to traditional values, driven by consumers searching for quality, affordability, and connection (Gerzema and D'Antonio, 2011). The researchers believe that consumer spending patterns are changing as part of a trend that has been quietly gathering strength over the past 10 years. We should assume that shift of consuming behavior may be also true for our strategic foresight consulting services and products.

The final result of aforementioned analysis is that "the most successful companies will respond to post-recession shift of consuming behaviors by adopting a business model in which all three parties — the business, the customer, and the community — win in every transaction." It seems that we should redesign our foresight business model according to such suggestions. Perhaps we need to conduct our future-oriented surveys and analyze resulted data to draw up new business models and policies as the futurists who are going to serve current and future markets.

5. Discovering Unused Capacities of Foresight Networking

The Internet provides unprecedented opportunities for professional networking, what is called "netergy" (Wildman,1998). There are many other unused capacities of the Internet that we may have no clear imagination about them, but should be discovered and used to improve our foresight services. Professional networking, as one of these potentials can enhance the quality of our services. We should work out this great potential in an effective manner, so that our strategic foresight consultancies become what is most needed in the 3rd millenium (Samet, 2010).

Block (2002) wrote the first draft of his great book: "Flawless Consulting" when there was no trace of the Internet: 1978. If he is going to develop the same book today (2011),

should he keep an eye on the Internet and its potentials for the improvement of consultancy services?

Remembering what I learned during my past MA years, I recall the facilitating role of Enterprise Information Portals (EIP), especially in organizations. Today the EIPs are energized with professional links to some of social networks (Seppä, 2006). For instance, what we are experiencing at "Shapping Tomorrow" is an evolving model of what we'll have in the coming years. We should develop new speaking and training skills to adapt with future shapes of foresight networking.

We need to promote networking between Futures universities and organizations internationally to develop an international protocole of teaching futures studies at MA and PhD levels. In addition, interlinking between foresight consultants can be regarded as a joint credit for the improvement of global face of our profession. This will empower foresight practitioners social identity and rank (Mahaffie, 2002). Future foresight networks should also provide enough stimulus for the students to enrich them by their contributions and providing useful content available to succeeding generations of FS and foresight students (Masini, 2002).

6. Common Core of Our Foresight Speaking & Practice

When we study different works and think about their core ideas, we may find common thoughts of their writers expressed in different manners. This is a sample of what can be found in the works of two well-known authors: Block and Morrisey. Coming back to what we can learn from Block's *Flawless Consulting* (2002), we may find his work enough useful to build up our consultancy understanding. Block raises 5 main questions at the beginning of his "Contracting Meeting" chapter as following that they can shape the core of our foresight speaking performance when we offer a foresight consultancy service:

1. What do you want to discuss?
2. Who is the client for this project?

3. Who else will be at the meeting? What are their roles?
4. How much time will we have? and;
5. Do you know that you want to begin some project, or are we going to discuss whether we do anything at all?

By keeping such questions in mind we can always balance our speaking conduct as futurist consultants. On the other hand, we can find a similar perspective from Morrissey (1992). He has summarized Block's questions not just for speaking, but also for practice (training), in this manner:

1. What do you want to have or become?
2. How do you select your highest priority objectives?
3. How do you validate your objectives?
4. What do you do with the "Leftovers"?
5. Where do assumptions fit in the planning process?

Block and Morrissey's questions are not exactly the same, but they may seem somehow similar. Don't you think that humans think in a joint fountain of thought? Do we have a common core of thought? How this common core can be used in our futurist professional practice both for speaking and training? We're not going to be too philosophical, but sometimes we may like to develop our minds in unconventional ways.

7. What is Next to Foresight Practitioners?

According to Thomas Frey (2011) "all jobs will eventually fade into the sunset and new jobs will be needed to take their place. With the pace of life constantly speeding up, we must also consider the possibility that jobs will disappear far faster in the future than they do today." Can we consider such a fate for our profession: Strategic Foresight?

If that is the case, even for foresight practitioners, then we will need a serious review over our past and current conducts and also our communities and organizations' coming

foresight needs. Perhaps a new generation of foresight experts whose expertise can match or even exceed future foresight needs enter the market. How can we update our training and skills for such an amazing tomorrow? And how can we keep our competitive benefit in that time?

Frey believes that "the same laws that were devised to protect workers in the past are the same laws that are now preventing companies from hiring in the future". He is right. Companies have an obligation to hire the fewest number of people they can. They are committed to their shareholders, current staff, and customers, and these commitments form the limitations that the business goes with its current path.

Capturing the ideas of a number of leading futurists on the evolving nature of our field of study recently, I found something great in Andy Hines' perspective (2006). He (Hines, 2011) reiterates again what has been always one of my real concerns: we should "have some sort of content expertise, like being an expert on the future of something." Without a certain orientation we may find it difficult to keep our position in a competitive market.

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Correspondence concerning this report can be sent to: info@futuresdiscovery.com

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