E-Monthly

Iranian Society of Futures Studies

No. 9, February 2011

Organizational Futures Studies

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Iranian Society of Futures Studies E-Monthly
On Futures Studies

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For all of the members and who are interested in Futures Studies
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Editorial

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Book Review

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Web Surfing

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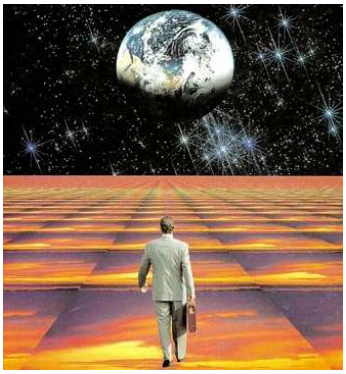
Virtual World

The James Martin 21st Century School at the University of Oxford is introduced …

Editorial



Organizational futures studies help us understand how to start our futuring at an organization from a definite point, and meanwhile, raising new questions for those who have previously set their roles and duties. This may encourage them to think about their past and current functions and review them if it is necessary to do so. The goal of organizational futures studies is to inform the managers with their potential roles and challenges in shaping preferred future of the organization. In fact, the managers may use this tool to define their own roles and other members' duties in building preferred futures for the organization. An organizational futurist needs a number of skills to perform his/her foresight activities, but it is not limited to attaining required skills. While there is a growing demand for organizational futurists, the role is evolving to more of a broker function than the building of a function more typical of the past.

In fact, contemporary organizational futurists are seeking an answer to this question: "how to institutionalize futures thinking without being institutionalized?". Futures work in the organizational setting is very demanding-- at its worst it is demanding and at its best it is rewarding. The main question that has captured the futurists' minds is: "what do you need to think about to create or build a futures function inside today's organizations?". The futurists deal with this and other similar questions by starting their foresight process to prepare answers for the key issues and challenges that will likely be ahead, and offer potential responses based on their own experiences and create a foundation for that process. It is ideal to offer these questions and answers to those who have no previous information about the future functionality of organizations, so they may introduce an example of their desired organization.

One of the oldest dreams of the futurists is becoming successful in helping someone on the inside understood what the futurists were talking on the outside about and trying to achieve desired results. Another goal of organizational futurists is to realize this long awaited dream.

Today's organizational context is different from the 1980s and early 1990s when futurists were often employed in organizational planning functions. Those positions have largely been "re-engineered" out of existence. Most of what passes for strategic planning today is little more than number crunching and spreadsheet manipulation. Futures, in the organizational context has been slowly re-appearing, but in non-traditional places, such as market research and new business development. And more happily, a couple dozen organizations have established small "foresight" groups. Again, sometimes with professional futurists on staff, but more often not.

An important cautionary note is that this re-emergence in new places and new forms is more often the result of the efforts of enlightened individuals rather than a serious organizational commitment to future. Either an enlightened manager sees the need and has the freedom and power to make it happen, or a futurist sneaks under the radar or emerges from the inside. Most likely, senior management blesses or at least tolerates the function, but with a few exceptions, it is typically not initiating it. The renewal of organizations according to future needs is not just a recommendation or a temporal fashion, but an inevitable need that becomes clearer with the increasing inefficiency of traditional and old organizational structures.

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What are the main challenges of organizational futures studies?

Futures work in the organizational setting is very demanding-- at its worst it is maddening and at its best it is rewarding. We may start our endeavor by asking the question of "what do you need to think about to create or build a futures function inside today's organizations?"

A ten-question issue audit for futurists is proposed to prepare for the key issues and challenges that will likely be ahead, and offer potential responses based on the writer's experiences and those of colleagues in similar positions in other organizations. Ideally, it will give those presented with a ``blank check'' to create a futures function a place to start, if not a blueprint from which to build.

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While there could be a competitive dynamic between in-house and external consulting futurists, experience suggests that the two be best friends. This partnering presents the opportunity to test and apply theory and research directly on the field of play. While most often the educational futurists work will first collaborate with the consulting futurist to do a translation activity to make it more palatable for the organizational world, there will likely be more and more cases of leapfrogging from the university to the organizational setting.

The premise is to think of our work with internal clients in terms of dating or courtship. We hope to attract our internal customers enough such that they say ``yes'' when we ask them for a first ``futures'' date. If we perform well on this first date, analogous to going for a cup of coffee, we can then ask permission for a second date, perhaps the equivalent of dinner. If we perform well on that . . . We get to do progressively deeper and more interesting work, provided we ``deliver the goods'' of the early simpler dates or tasks.

Experience suggests this approach is a viable one. A key dynamic that makes this especially suitable for the organizational world is the need that internal clients have for saving face or maintaining credibility. It will almost always be politically wiser not to take the risk of doing a futures-related project. So our sponsors will look for a track record to back them up as they insert their necks in the political noose. The risk of this approach is that we get caught up in ``delivering the goods'' and lose focus on the futures agenda. Constant checking in with ourselves and our work is the best way to avoid this trap.

Finally, a key assumption made here is that there are lots more futures work available than there are futurists to do it. Unfortunately, some of our colleagues see a small pie and guard their knowledge closely. Yet there is a much larger pie out there for the taking if we can demonstrate our worth in the organizational context. Our expertise could be much more widely applied, in areas that today are dominated by the mainstream consulting firms. It will take more effort and creativity on our part to forge into new areas where our expertise is sorely needed-- the organizational context being one of the key fronts in this battle. So let us get to it. Here are the ten questions every organizational futurist should be thinking about and, sooner or later, able to answer.

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