

# Perspectives on Strategic Foresight

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(Download at [cals.arizona.edu/~caldwell/docs/schloss-foresight.pdf](http://cals.arizona.edu/~caldwell/docs/schloss-foresight.pdf))

## What is strategic foresight and when do you do it?

It is a way of understanding possible future conditions (not specific events) for a particular topic or organization. It applies to all subject areas and it should be done before a strategic plan is developed. Strategic Foresight is Strategic Thinking and therefore should be done before planning of any type. The time frame depends on the organization, but generally is 20-25 years. Anything shorter is largely already in motion and anything longer is too far out to sufficiently understand the possible changes. The range of options can be better understood by developing a few scenarios of possible futures.

## What is the most important reason for doing a strategic foresight?

So you can make better decisions today. Use it to define your future.

## What are scenarios?

They are short stories about possible futures, based on possible, likely, or unlikely events. They should be plausible and cause you to think in new ways. There should not be too many 4 is probably a good number. Good scenarios are difficult to write but are powerful in having people think about possible futures.

## What are the major futures organization's and how do they differ?

1. World Future Society – [wfs.org](http://wfs.org) – members have a great range of interest and abilities
2. World Futures Studies Federation – [wfsf.org](http://wfsf.org) – members focus on how to do futures studies
3. Association of Professional Futurists – [profuturists.org](http://profuturists.org) – members doing future studies
4. Shaping Tomorrow – [shapingtomorrow.com](http://shapingtomorrow.com) – much like an environmental scan (all on-line)

Stay away from groups that are extreme in their views, focus on a narrow topical area, are trying to sell a product or service, or just seem strange.

## Some definitions

*Foresight* – ability to anticipate (not predict) the future by appropriate study

*Forecast* – estimate future events and their probability; relies on past events for data

*Strategic Plan* – short plan defining few (say 5 or fewer) key choices/directions

*Operational Plan* – detailed plan to implement the strategic plan

## A Possible Sequence of Preparing a Strategic Plan

1. Define the scope – time frame, full organization or component, purpose, audience
2. Do an environmental scan to get a feeling for that changes are taking place (or might)
3. Do a futures analysis (see below) to see how the parts integrate into the whole
4. If needed for clarity – develop several scenarios out to 20 or so years (4 recommended)
5. Do a SWOT analysis to determine what is appropriate for the organization
6. Write a draft plan (with appropriate participation of those that will implement the plan)
7. Revisit the whole process to see what changes you should make in the final plan

## Key Features of Strategic Foresight

1. How reliable is our knowing about the futures? Improve the reliability, within reason, of your knowing this information. Be aware of what you don't know.
2. Understand our organization's role in the future - How will changes impact us, which changes are unique to us?
3. What key issues about the future will likely impact us – so we need to know more about them?
4. What is our range of uncertainty? Should we develop some scenarios?

## Some Dos and Don'ts

### DO

1. Learn from history (up to a couple of hundred years if appropriate)
2. Focus on what might happen in the future rather than extrapolate the past
3. Read widely and use a systems perspective – key factors affect one another
4. Recognize that change is occurring and the future is uncertain but we can still learn about it

### DON'T

1. Focus on historic trends rather than future possibilities
2. Stress details and metrics
3. Copy an approach and content from another organization without appropriate modification
4. Skip the strategic foresight process and go straight to writing a strategic plan

## Characteristics of the Person Doing a Strategic Foresight

1. Understand the era we are in – certain or uncertain, slow changes or fast ones
2. Know the difference between a fact and an assumption
3. Ability to integrate differing views and perspectives into a coherent summary

## My Own Frame of Reference

1. We are in a transition period - from a technology era to a sustainability era, where sustainability is broadly defined, such as: environment and resources, innovation and business, political systems and infrastructure, economy and government.
2. We should expect change and uncertainty – during major transitions things change, in expected and unexpected ways and there is a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty.
3. We know a lot more about the future than many think – history tells us some things the internet shares them easily; there are lots of ideas and well thought-out analyses of possible futures.
4. Many strategic plans focus on past conditions and biases past rather than future conditions.

## Further Reading

Note: all these books are by experienced futurists and address practical aspects of foresight. They all use different approaches but provide the same essential ideas. These are the example of books to read before you begin a strategic planning process.

1. Hiemstra, Glen. 2006. Turning the Future into Revenue: What Businesses and Individuals Need to Know to Shape Their Futures. 226 p.
2. Hines, Andy and Peter Bishop. 2006. Thinking About the Future: Guidelines for Strategic Foresight. 243 p.
3. Johansen, Bob. 2007. Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present. 258 p.
4. Johansen, Bob. 2009. Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World. 192 p.

## Additional Reading (from website of former Anticipating the Future course)

What makes a good futurist?

[cals.arizona.edu/~caldwell/understandingfutures.html](http://cals.arizona.edu/~caldwell/understandingfutures.html)

Scenarios, Foresight, and Change

[cals.arizona.edu/futures/sce/scemain.html](http://cals.arizona.edu/futures/sce/scemain.html)

## Additional Websites

Institute for the Future – [iff.org](http://iff.org) Organization that came up with the approach of *Foresight to Insight to Action*. Their focus is the big picture with a particular interest in new approaches and concepts.

Global Business Network – [gbn.com](http://gbn.com) Consulting group that publishes useful material on website. One of the early and best in the scenario development process. Free newsletter.

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