

Thinking about the Future

Andy Hines & Peter Bishop (Editors.)

Social Technologies (2007), 231pp., \$19.99.

I was first attracted to this book by the authors' reputations. Andy Hines is one of the world's leading foresight professionals in the world, while Peter Bishop is one of the leading foresight academics. The prospect of their collaboration on a work describing foresight techniques placed it high on my list of books to read. There was also a third factor – the publisher. Social Technologies is a leading research and consulting firm in the process of establishing a global presence. When I bought the book, it felt as momentous as if I were buying the very first edition of McKinsey Quarterly or Windows V1.0. From a futurist perspective, I felt that I couldn't leave the book unpurchased. This review aims to look at whether or not the book has lived up to my expectations.

The intention of the book is to be practical. It describes itself as setting out guidelines for strategic foresight. I rather see it as a navigators' guide into the future. The book identifies 115 guidelines for undertaking strategic foresight activity, which are grouped into six sequential steps – Framing, Scanning, Forecasting, Visioning, Planning and Acting. This framework has been derived from a wide collaboration between 36 leading foresight practitioners and academics, which was also cross-referenced and synthesised by the Association of Professional Futurists' Professional Development team. The contributing team was global in its origins and cutting-edge in its approach.

Each guideline conforms to a standard presentational structure. There is a small piece to introduce the guideline, followed by the key steps to undertaking the activity described by the guideline. A brief statement of the benefits of undertaking the technique is followed by an example of the technique in action and a guide to further reading. The guidelines are written in a clear and practical style, and offer the reader the opportunity to make the most of the collective wisdom that has gone into describing the technique. More importantly, the editors avoid falling into the trap of simply providing a list of things to do. Readers need to engage with the technique, understand its purpose, and make their own list of things to do from that point.

As an example, I was immediately drawn to Section 3.5.7 – *Game the Future: Explore How the Rules Might Change*. This is an area dear to my heart and close to

my wallet, as we use gaming techniques to explore future possibilities and scenarios a lot in our work. The guideline starts with an assertion - that social systems can be thought of as a game – and moves on to deduce the implications of that assertion by describing the technique and then demonstrating how it might be undertaken. It reviews such questions as whether or not the game is co-operative or competitive, whether it is simple (linear) or complex (non-linear), and whether it is crisp ($1+1=2$) or fuzzy ($1+1=3$). All of this goes into the basic design of the game.

The description then goes on to explain how elements of all of these are present in each game. An example quoted is the question of who ought to receive a promotion (and a salary raise) on the back of an exemplary team performance. The team co-operated to generate the exemplary performance, but the members of the team, one would presume, compete to receive the individual promotion. The logical strategy for each team member to adopt would be to co-operate to utilise the best of their co-workers, but also to compete to ensure that their performance outshone that of the others. It is this playing out of various strategies that allows gaming to be used as a rehearsal for the future. The end results of these games are what we call scenarios.

The section ends by quoting Mutually Assured Destruction as one of the most successful gaming strategies in recent history. It was certainly one that had very profound results in that humanity didn't destroy itself. However, we all undertake this technique in our own small ways. Who hasn't engaged in daydreaming? *'If I were to win the Lottery, then ...'* This is a game in action, which will result in a scenario. Sadly for us, the scenario has an exceptionally low probability - but that doesn't stop us buying Lottery tickets.

There is much that I liked about the book. The clear presentational style helps to guide the reader into the issues, almost as if we had a good friend guiding us through some pretty complex matters. I particularly liked the bibliography at the end of each section. It helps the guidelines to have a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. However, it does then beg the question of how the book ought to be used. The Editors suggest that, for executives and analysts, it could be used in one or more of five ways – in the design of strategic foresight projects, to provide 'how-to' answers to specific tasks, as a reference guide, as a refresher for practitioners, and as providing an organisation with guidelines for excellence. I quite endorse the first four uses, but I am lukewarm about the fifth.

Essentially, the process outlined in the book (Framing, Scanning, Forecasting, Visioning, Planning, and Acting) can be taken as a bit subjective. For example, one could argue that the Visioning process ought to inform what it is that we are looking for in the Scanning process. Equally, we might argue that the Forecasting process ought to be much closer sequentially to the Planning process. Different companies engage in these processes in a different order, and may aggregate them in different ways.

At Shell, for example, the scenario process aggregates the Framing, Scanning and part of the Forecasting processes in its 'Research' phase, and then the remaining part of Forecasting, Visioning and part of Planning as its 'Scenario Building' phase. The remaining parts of Planning and part of the Acting processes make up its 'Application' phase, before the remaining parts of the Acting process are rolled out as its 'Dissemination' phase.

It is interesting to note that, although Shell would not have followed the model in the book as a blueprint of best practice, it would have undertaken many of the guidelines in undertaking its scenarios. One could argue that if we all end up at the same destination, it may not matter too much what route we have travelled. I am of the view that a process ought to be tailored to the audience: if so, the book does provide the basic material to construct such unique solutions.

The book would be, in my view, a much better resource if it had a combined bibliography at the end. The listing of references at the end of each technique is very useful - however, in the absence of taking copious notes, I found I was forgetting where I had previously come across various references. Of course, this could be a cultural issue peculiar to me – perhaps I am just used to having a bibliography at the end of a work?

I would also point out that, whereas the techniques are well written in a clear and concise style, the book could appear very episodic if one tried to read it from cover to cover. I don't think that would be the way to get the best from the book, and, if this was the objective, a different text might satisfy that need. It seems to me that the book is best used as an authority that one dips into from time to time – particularly when designing a strategic foresight project - and this may limit its market.

The authors target three groups of potential readers – executives, analysts and educators. From the perspective of an executive, I can't see the book fitting in as general 'airport reading'. However, for those executives involved in strategic

foresight and strategic planning, I feel it is one they could not do without. It has the concise precision of style, combined with the breadth and depth of knowledge that is needed for a general reference book. This also applies to the case of analysts and practitioners – particularly if they are working their way through uncharted territory. From the perspective of educators, the book does, as the editors claim, provide a general grounding for students of strategic foresight, and it may well end up on a number of MBA reading lists for this reason.

On the whole, I enjoyed the book. I believe that it will provide an important landmark in the literature of strategic foresight. It may not become a business best seller because it will appeal to a limited audience. However, I would thoroughly recommend it to those engaged in the areas of strategic foresight and strategic planning.

Stephen Aguilar-Millan, Director of Research, The European Futures Observatory
stephena@eufo.org