

Why Foresight? I Can Think of 316 Reasons!

The Futurist's Toolbox

By Andy Hines

Hines, A. (2007, September). Why foresight? I can think of 316 reasons. *Changewaves*, 1.

My colleague at the University of Houston, Peter Bishop, and I recently co-authored *Thinking about the Future: Guidelines for Strategic Foresight*, a book that culls the wisdom of three dozen leading futurists from around the globe. Our question to these futurists was: What are the best ways to do foresight? Their answers yielded 115 guidelines which we feel concisely capture how executives and analysts can successfully apply foresight.

We then organized the guidelines into six steps fundamental to application (see The Foresight Framework). Our goal was to provide a handy reference guide to what professionals should be thinking and doing to effectively apply foresight. We also asked our contributors to explain the key benefits of the 115 guidelines. This yielded 316 benefit statements, highlighting the multiple ways organizations can benefit from foresight.

Making the case: What's in it for me?

My next column will focus on how to apply foresight, but for this Premiere Issue of *Change)Waves* I will address the benefits of foresight. Something I like to call: "What's in it for me?" To illuminate this point I did a cluster analysis on the benefit statements—tying similar benefits together until themes emerged. (Yes, this took awhile!) Ultimately the process produced a dozen themes, which sorted nicely into the six steps of the foresight framework (see list below).

1. Framing: *Scoping the project*
2. Scanning: *Gathering relevant information*
3. Forecasting: *Describing most likely and alternative futures*
4. Visioning: *Choosing a preferred future*
5. Planning: *Organizing to achieve the vision*
6. Acting: *Implementing the plan*

I ask you: Who wouldn't want to do these things for their company?

What it all means

Space doesn't permit me to list all 316 benefit statements, so a few high-level observations are in order.

- What pops out is the high percentage of benefits attributed to the "bookends" of the foresight framework—Framing and Acting. Great news! From my experience in the field in the last 20 years, two common criticisms are that foresight is either too vague or not action-oriented enough. Clearly, the field has learned its lesson, prioritized, and delivered the goods.

- Similarly, we see less emphasis on Visioning and Planning. These activities were reengineered, or drastically reduced, in the 1980s and early 1990s. Again, foresight reinvented itself to serve the needs of today's organizations.
- This "reinvention" is amply demonstrated by the single highest-scored benefit: "More creative, broader, deeper insights." Organizations today see foresight as a vital approach to stretch their thinking—about consumer behavior, new product and service development, where technology is headed... in short, about what they need to do today to thrive tomorrow.

This brief analysis highlights the benefits of foresight and puts some data behind them. My hope is that every businessperson and analyst will take advantage of the opportunity that foresight, with its unique blend of rigor and creativity, offers to help make organizations more effective. So if anyone ever asks you: "Why should we think about the future?" you now have a dozen answers—or if you'd like, we can send you all 316!

The benefits of foresight

Foresight activity	Benefits
Framing (22%)	1. Thinking more diverse, open, balanced, and non-biased (9%) 2. Focusing on the right questions and problems more clearly (7%) 3. Being aware of, and influencing, assumptions and mental models (6%)
Scanning (16%)	4. Understanding the context, in all its complexity, through establishing frameworks (5%) 5. Anticipating change and avoiding surprise (10%)
Forecasting (22%)	6. Producing more creative, broader, and deeper insights (16%) 7. Identifying a wider range of opportunities and options (5%)
Visioning (10%)	8. Prioritizing and making better and more robust decisions (10%)
Planning (7%)	9. Constructing pathways from the present to the future that enable rehearsing the future (7%)
Acting (23%)	10. Catalyzing action and change (7%) 11. Building alignment, commitment, and confidence (14%) 12. Building a learning organization (2%)

Note: The number in parenthesis shows each item as a percentage of overall benefits. Thus, 22% of the benefits statements related to framing, 9% related to "Thinking more diverse...." etc.

About Andy Hines

Andy Hines is a leading organizational, academic, and consulting futurist. In 2006 he joined Social Technologies to manage the firm's custom projects and consulting practice. He also serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Houston MS Program in Futures Studies, a program from which he graduated in 1990. Andy has also been an organizational futurist for Kellogg and The Dow Chemical Company, and was a partner at Coates & Jarratt.