My Journey as a Futurist

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Abstract

How does one become a "futurist" – in one's own eyes and in the eyes of other people? What life experiences and professional experiences provide relevant learning for aspiring futurists; and for practising futurists who wish to develop their skills and their ability to deliver value to their employing organisations or consulting clients? Why do many futurists ignore the challenges involved in the personal journey that must be undertaken by leaders who wish to act on the insights that emerge from futures studies work in their organisations? Finally, why do there seem to be so few rich futurists? The author reflects on these and other questions in this article.

Keywords: futurist career path, investing and futures studies, self-renewing change.

Becoming a Futurist

I have worked as an independent consultant for 25 years but only in the last 6-7 years have I been billing myself as a "futurist". I am now retired and have been invited by this Journal to set down some of what I have learned about being a futurist in Australia.

My journey to becoming a futurist started in the professional functional area of my university qualifications (i.e. human resources and organisational behaviour). However, over the years that I consulted and taught in this field, I became increasingly interested in the possible future shape of HR policies and practices. I wanted to help leaders manage for tomorrow as well as for today. I saw this as important because so many of the challenges that seemed to be confronting organisations (and communities and nations - and individuals, including myself) appeared to be the reasonably predictable outcome of decisions and actions taken in the past that were justified at the time as being in the best interests of the organisation (or community, etc) concerned.

I also became very interested in the future of HR as a profession and addressed the Australian Human Resources Institute's national convention on "Life After HR" as far back as 1998.

As an organisational consultant to industry and government organisations, the kinds of questions I was most interested in during most of my career were:

- What kind of corporate culture will be needed to realise the corporate vision?
- What kind of organisational structure should we build to best position the organisation to compete and survive?
- What kind of leadership will be needed to navigate in tomorrow's competitive waters?
- What kind of workforce and stakeholder relationships will contribute most to corporate objectives, maximise corporate agility and minimise corporate risks?

...and perhaps most importantly (because I saw so few consultants or futurists dealing with it):

- What change strategy or pathway to the future will generate the greatest commitment from relevant powerful stakeholders and decision makers and maximise the likelihood of the organisation actually getting to its desired future given where it is starting from?

My transition to being a professional futurist started more than a dozen years ago when I met Charles Brass and Jan Lee Martin. Charles invited me to facilitate a public workshop on the future of work in Australia. I was subsequently involved in the formation of the Future of Work Foundation, an initiative driven by Charles. Around the same time, Jan Lee Martin was attempting to establish a community of futurists in Australia. I was involved in the many conversations that Jan convened that ultimately led to the establishment of the Futures Foundation. The Futures Foundation subsequently merged with the Future of Work Foundation. Recently, the Futures Foundation morphed again into the Australasian Futures and Foresight Association which has links to the international Association of Professional Futurists.

It took me several years of doing "futures" work before I felt comfortable adopting the label of "futurist". Being a futurist initially sounded to me as though one had to possess mystical powers that were much more than systematic ways of thinking about the future and much more than facilitation techniques designed to help others to engage deliberately and constructively with the future in the present – and to help everyone involved learn how to do these things better over time.

In the early stages of my transition from being an organisational change consultant to being a strategic planner and then a futurist, I consciously tried to build a bridge from my old profession to the new one by focussing on my potential contribution to futures studies projects through helping to shape the design of the decision-making and action taking pathways leading from the present to desired visions of the future that were developed in consulting projects where I worked with more experienced futurists. In fact, the final and most important steps in the initiation process of becoming a futurist were working with other recognised futurists (e.g. Sohail Inayatullah, Richard Neville, Gary Saliba, Tony Stevenson, Steve Bright). My new, emerging, professional identity was further strengthened when I had articles describing some of my work accepted for publication in futures journals; and when I was accepted as a member of Australian and international professional futurists associations.

When colleagues and clients started introducing me to others as a "futurist", I knew that I had made the transition from my pre-futurist career. This process had taken about 8 years - and I still knew that I had only just started to learn my new craft!

Why Are There So Few Rich Futurists?

As I came to meet other futurists, I began to wonder why there were (apparently) so few rich futurists. Surely if we are good at what we do then this should be manifest in our own lives. We should be healthier, happier and wealthier than people who do not think creatively and systematically about possible and desirable futures and about how we can act in the present to help bring our desired futures about. I believed that if more futurists (including myself) "became the change they seek in the world" then they would learn something of great professional significance about advising others to become the change they seek.

I also believed that, especially in a short-term oriented, materialistic city like Sydney, I would become more credible in pitching the value of futures studies to potential corporate clients if I could point to the financial benefits that I had gained by using these same techniques in my own life. So, I decided to devote increased energy to a learning process that I had begun in the mid 1980s; i.e. learning how to be a successful stock market investor. It has been a fascinating learning and personal development experience.

I believed that I would gain most reputational benefit as a futurist if I could successfully invest in small companies that I had assessed as being likely future success stories. This kind of "speculative" investing would most test my futurist skills and provide me with the most powerful stories to tell if and when I ever achieved success. It would also give me the greatest investment leverage as I had limited funds to play with. The journey to my desired future also promised to be one filled with more than a little adventure – and that appealed to my particular personality.

Some of the learning activities I immersed myself in as a novice investor were:

- subscribing to newsletters that explained how to pick good investment prospects and effectively manage your investable funds (vs those that simply did the stock picking for you); and newsletters that try to educate their readers about how to think about investing and what it means to be a "successful" investor
- trial and (mostly) error experimentation with investing in shares, options, managed funds, unlisted investments, etc.
- reading biographies of successful traders and investors
- reading theories of stock market behaviour; e.g. Elliott Wave Theory and Socionomics (e.g. see Frost & Prechter, 1999)
- documenting what I was learning as I moved along the path to becoming the investor I had envisaged in my desirable future; including learning from both successes and failures.

Over the many years I have been investing, I have learned a lot about my relationship to money; about managing the emotions of winning and losing; about the importance of having a strategy to hold to when times are tough or when future visibility is limited. I learned to recognise patterns of market behaviour so that I could better time buying and selling decisions (I became better at recognising and interpreting "weak signals" from the future). I also came to understand that investing is never an entirely rational process but inevitably engages the personalities and personal agendas of those

involved. For example, I soon discovered that many of my bad investment decisions were the result of my desire to be right or my desire to "buy/sell something" overwhelming my desire to be rich! I also came to realise that I was not interested in having others make money for me by simply putting my money in managed funds. I knew that I would learn very little about the investing process from doing this (and that the experience would be rather boring!).

My stockmarket experiences taught me much about the dynamics of working with corporate leaders as a futurist. For example, I came to better understand that decision making in conditions of uncertainty is a function of one's personality as much as it is a function of the data before one at the time of decision making. You have to be able to tell yourself (and perhaps other stakeholders such as your employees - or your wife and family) a credible story about why you decide to do X rather than Y; and different stories appeal to different decision makers and their different audiences. Some are influenced by financial and market analyses (the Warren Buffett school); others may be influenced by stock charts and theories about buy/sell patterns (the Elliott Wavers and Gann Chartists); others may simply be influenced by the promise of returns that seem too good to be true (the Bernie Madoff or Opes Prime school).

In order to be credible to others and to be able to sleep at night, you have to be able to explain to yourself why one risky course of action is preferable to another risky course of action – and how you will be able to live with the consequences if you happen to be wrong. It is the story (or strategy) that allows you to stick to your decision during those inevitable times on your journey to the future when it appears that you have chosen the wrong course of action. As Chris Noonan, maker of the very successful but improbable film "Babe" (a talking pig) has said: "We all fell in love with the story. Our faith in the strength of the story carried us through".

I came to understand something that I believe futurists should emphasise strongly with their clients; viz., if you take a 5-10 year perspective or longer, it can be a conservative course of action (especially in conditions of great uncertainty) to invest small amounts in small, high risk, new ventures with the potential for very high future payoffs; and it can be quite risky to make significant investments in (or retain large investments in) established ventures or ventures that are currently successful. For a start, the latter are likely to be expensive investments to buy into (but very profitable to sell) because others are bidding up the price; or they may be successful because of conditions that prevail today or in the past but may not have business models that are likely to remain profitable in one or more of the probable futures that are coming down the track.

The Personal Dimension of Futures Studies

Stock market investing helped me to see that traditional approaches to futures studies do not take enough account of the mental frameworks and expected/desired futures of the managers who must take decisions on the scenarios, visions, systems maps, etc that futurists help to develop: e.g.

- What personal journeys do managers see themselves making over the course of the futures timeframe – e.g. getting promoted; moving overseas; retiring; earn-

ing enough to pay for a new house, or private school education for their children; dying; etc?

- What do decision-makers anticipate will be the personal impact on them of moving along the paths to different futures? This will affect the perceived attractiveness of different possible futures.

This concern with the personal dimension of thinking about the future and acting to engage with it subsequently led me to understand why good futures work often fails to lead to positive and sustained action to get where people have decided they wish to be. Futurists who are familiar with Ken Wilber's work (e.g. Wilber, 2000) will be well aware of the importance of considering the personal dimension of possible futures but they may not always pay sufficient attention to the personal dimension of the journey to possible futures. Leaders' perceptions of the attractiveness of different transition journeys have a powerful impact on the decision to embark on any change from today's ways of doing things.

The Pathway to the Future

I am regularly puzzled by people who irrationally persist in behaving in the present in ways that do not contribute to the achievement of their stated goals; e.g. CEOs who state that "our people are our greatest asset" and yet invest so little in consulting with them or developing them; individuals who say that they wish to be healthy and happy but continue to smoke, drink too much, and work crazy hours that damage their relationships with people they say they love; or CEOs who are seeking government funds to prop up failed balance sheets who order new corporate jets and pay extravagant bonuses. I want to better understand what leads people to actually change the way they act in the present in ways that are more likely to get them to their desired future. I believe this is an under-researched area of organisational change and a key research gap in futures studies.

One technique I use for learning more about the process of self-renewing change is to observe how change and renewal happens in nature (of which humans are a part, even though much of our education and social conditioning tends to have us believe that we are a special case that is somehow outside nature). With other organic systems, we can all observe the cycle of birth, maturation (including procreation), decline, death and decomposition that provides the foundation for the next cycle of life.

I wondered what prevents this natural process from operating more efficiently in the social and corporate sectors of human activity. Why do we try so often to subvert the natural process of decline, death and re-birth? Why do we mark human life cycle transitions with markers or ceremonies that are unrelated to where individuals or groups actually are in their life cycle process; e.g. we all are deemed to become legally mature adults at 18 years of age (however, Australian Aboriginal communities traditionally initiated young people into adulthood when they were judged by responsible community elders to be ready); and until recently we deemed people over 60 or 65 to be in decline and therefore compulsorily retired them? Why do we reorganise or restructure organisations when a new leader is appointed or when a period of decline has not been acknowledged for so long that the natural life cycle has been horribly

distorted? Why do we need our first heart attack to start a healthy regime of diet and exercise (and even then many of us apparently do not persist with new behaviour that we know is saving our life)?

Until futurists understand the answers to these questions, then we may be simply putting enticing future carrots in front of our clients without helping them to manage the emotions, politics, traditions and structural roadblocks that make it unlikely that the carrot (desired future) will ever be reached. Power holders will continue to pursue their desired personal futures rather than stated organisational futures; or they will continue to give priority to the highly visible rewards and threats in the present rather than to the more nebulous potential rewards and threats that lie just over the horizon; or they will continue, by force of their personalities to enjoy the thrill of following their instincts in their decision making and simply "winging it" into the future.

I have attempted to outline one method (called a "decision impact matrix") that futurists might use to deal with some of these transition issues towards the end of an introductory paper on futures studies that I wrote for the Journal of Futures Studies some years ago (Saul, 2001).

My Wish for the Future of Futures Studies

Reflecting back on my limited experience as a futurist, I believe the profession would be well served by engaging in and fostering more of the following practices:

- Commissioning more research on, or linking with people in other disciplines who are already studying, the dynamics of human renewal and the decision making processes around transformational change. We must go beyond creating new future visions to showing people how they can get there from where they are.
- Mentoring budding futurists over lengthy periods of apprenticeship. You learn the complex art involved in this profession by observing others and questioning them about what they do and why they do it. The mentors may also learn from this process!
- Applying our skills and methods in our own lives and becoming great walking advertisements for the benefits of what we offer. We cannot credibly ask our clients to manage the risks and uncertainty of journeying into the future if we cannot master the risks, fears and inertia involved in taking this journey ourselves.

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