

# Ear to the ground



In an ever-shifting environment, good foresight builds resilience for what the future may bring. Rob Gray reports on the rise of foresight, why it means more than making predictions, and why people must be at the centre

**I**n 2011, philosopher Derek Parfit wrote: "We live during the hinge of history. Given the scientific and technological discoveries of the last two centuries, the world has never changed as fast." Parfit died on New Year's Day 2017, so did not witness the Covid-19 pandemic and a further acceleration in change that swept in with it.

The shock and dramatic upheavals of the pandemic led many businesses to realise they could no longer rely on looking to the past to plan. Today, in an uncertain world awash with new technologies and complex macro issues – such as high inflation, the cost-of-living crisis and the climate emergency – brands and organisations need to understand how the commercial and social landscapes are being redrawn, and take steps to minimise the risk of getting caught out by what may lie around the corner.

As a result, there has been an increased focus on foresight. New heads of foresight roles have sprung up across a wide array of organisations and more business leaders have begun to think of it as a tool not only to help with innovation, but also to embed resilience. Earlier this year, Jesper Brodin, chief executive of Ikea Retail's parent company, told the *Financial Times* that Ikea was taking a new approach. Instead of setting out specific goals for the year, the business has 'scenarios' acknowledging the possibility of substantially different outcomes. This, Brodin explained, is to give the business wiggle room if the picture changes and to build (without an allen key!) more agility into how it operates.

"Many clients are coming to us wanting to know more about what the future holds because of these crazy uncertain times," says Amy Concannon, practice director, foresight, at C Space. "They are trying to understand not only who today's consumers are, but also how to better plan for five-plus years' time. I think consumers are often lost in the foresight conversation, because it's easy to get carried away by all these cool, glamorous trend reports. I'm on a bit of a mission to figure out how we can work with consumers to help ground foresight strategies – make it less 'pie in the sky' and more practical for businesses."

C Space has worked with brands such as Ikea, Jaguar Land Rover and Allianz on foresight projects, and Concannon points to a series of trends driving a growth in interest. Five challenges that C Space has from clients are: data overwhelm – more data means more confusion; rapid change – the world is changing in unexpected ways; lazy trends – trends are malleable and you can make your own story with them; lack of focus and difficulty distinguishing between big macro forces that will disrupt the category versus short-term fads; and inaction – brands are firefighting and it's hard to get the business to act and care in the long term.

"We're trying to push our clients towards thinking more about what the opportunities could be," adds

**"Weaving together insights can better prepare us for what may come next, but we often forget that we also control the future. The future is not fixed nor predetermined"**

Concannon. "Often, foresight is seen as being about de-risking decisions and strategy. But if you spend all of your time doing that, you might end up like Blockbuster and not see what's happening outside of your category."

Matt Klein, head of global foresight at Reddit, takes the view that foresight is the responsibility of every department that will be affected by the future – which, ultimately, makes it everyone's concern. For insights teams, he suggests, it's worth viewing foresight not as another siloed practice, but as a perspective that runs horizontally. In other words, foresight or interrogating the status quo, and cleverly game-planning threats and opportunities, should not exist in isolation, but should be integrated across countless types of workstreams.

Foresight should never be thought of as 'predictions', Klein elaborates. "While it's absolutely impossible to predict anything for certain, we can prepare. Foresight is about understanding our current context, the past, and today's signals of change – all so we can, ultimately, act or not. Weaving together these insights can better prepare us for what may come next, but we often forget that we also control the future. The future is not fixed nor predetermined."

"With this in mind, large organisations can find themselves influencing what may come next. Consider it like a snake eating its own tail. Organisations create culture as much as they study it. For this reason, when thinking about our future, we must consider what ethical, diverse, equitable, sustainable, peaceful, exciting, or rewarding futures we want to see. Ultimately, organisations get to help author them."

## Cross-functional cohesion

Andrew Curry, director at the School of International Futures (SOIF) – a not-for-profit practice using strategic foresight to help policymakers and business leaders make change for the better – was previously director at Kantar Futures. In his experience, one big problem with foresight and futures work is that, when done well, it's interdisciplinary and needs to work across functions. As most organisations are highly functional, foresight work can easily fall through the cracks.

Broadly speaking, Curry says there are two ways to fix this. "The first is to give it to a director where it fits, and who is interested – chief marketing officer, chief strategy officer, chief growth officer – and ensure that, culturally, the rest of the SMT [senior management team] pays



attention. The other solution, which I saw working well in a big client organisation, is to have a small, but senior, team reporting directly to the chief executive. This also seems to get the attention of the rest of the senior management team."

In 2019, while still with Kantar, Curry – with Julie Kollman – co-wrote a report, published by MRS, on using ‘intelligence capital’ to drive business growth. As such, he has clear views on the interplay between foresight and insight. “You’re looking for signs of change and, obviously, good insight is part of that. In particular, good insight will pick up shifts in attitudes and values. It should also notice evidence of pain points and, as long as you’re looking beyond your customer data for insight, leading-edge behaviours that are expressions of values shifts and pain points. But the broader point here is that you’re looking for patterns. These consumer insights are almost always connected with other changes in the environment – and this is a good thing, because it gives you more confidence that the change you’re seeing isn’t just a data blip or a fad.”

Nick Chiarelli, UK practice lead, Ipsos Trends and Foresight, observes that he is old enough to recall a time before we had ‘insights’, or at least didn’t brand them as such: ‘the days when we were market researchers, pure and simple’. Then, Chiarelli notes: “We got rebadged to ‘consumer insights’. Nothing much really changed – lazy researchers, or those reacting to limited or

unimaginative briefs, provided raw numbers, but most were always looking for something more in the patterns. I worked in mainstream market research before getting my start in the world of trends, so, to me, this is all somewhat of a continuum.”

Chiarelli believes any good insight has some element of future thinking within it – meaning it shouldn’t just hold for today, but for some amount of time into the future, too. The distinction he makes is that insights attempt to provide some kind of truth, while foresights must recognise the inherent instability and unpredictability of the world of tomorrow. The further ahead a foresight seeks to look, the more unstable it becomes.

Trends are about taking the world of today and pushing it as far out as can be done before it starts to break down – looking ‘present-forward’, in Chiarelli’s words. How far it can be pushed depends on the kind of foresight. For example, foresights based on demographic trends are more solid and easier to push further. It’s harder to do this with those based on social change.

Ipsos tends to avoid positioning its work as being about making predictions, says Chiarelli. Yes, with short-term trends, its clients are concerned with how they can act over the next one, two or three years, so plenty of work is done on what trends might look like over that time – what kind of disruptions might pull the rug out from under these trends and how they might

subtly evolve over this timeframe. Yet, even within this timeframe, Chiarelli concedes the past few years have shown how fragile the ‘present’ is, and how easily assumptions and expectations can be undermined by disruptors such as a global pandemic.

“Of course, you will have seen no end of futurists saying they had been warning about a pandemic for years, but the kind of vague, general warnings they had been giving were all too easy to ignore, and this tells us a lot about what good foresight can and should look like,” says Chiarelli. “Few of those supposedly warning about the threat from pandemics had any idea of the specifics: what the pandemic would be, where it would strike, how it would spread, and so on. Likewise, I don’t recall seeing much that talked about the implications of a pandemic when it finally came: the fact we would be locked down, the impact on city centres, the near collapse of travel and tourism, the sudden growth of virtual solutions for learning, working and socialising.”

This highlights that the value of foresight is ‘not just in some headline prediction’, adds Chiarelli, but in making it as specific as possible in identifying potential implications, actions and reactions. “If we talk about trends as being ‘present-forward’, we also need to think about longer-term foresights as being ‘future-back’ – we need to recognise alternative possible futures and then work back from there to think about how businesses can be as resilient and as prepared as possible for whichever of those alternative futures comes closest to the ultimate reality.”

Global engineering and built environment firm Arup has a well-established in-house foresight team (part of its Arup University) and developed the concept of ‘foresight by design’, using design tools and techniques to bring new ideas to life and engage clients and stakeholders in conversations about change. Among its recent work is the report *It's Alive*, a conceptual vision for a ‘living’ socio-technological tall building in the year 2050 that imagines tall buildings fulfilling multiple roles in response to the changing needs of society and the planet.

## Parallel possibilities

Foresight Factory co-owner and chief executive Meabh Quoirin says businesses can go wrong by trying to look at the future as a straight line. Far better, she asserts, to consider all the possible ‘parallel universes’ and then build out predictions for every audience, as there is a need to become smarter about who predictions are for. One of her clients, she says, has worked with Foresight Factory on all of the contextual pieces that can go into the scenarios in the first place – for example, building a range of scenarios with, perhaps, four personas in each.

“It’s good to see people investing in taking the time to map those scenarios with a) different ingredients and

## How E.ON drives foresight

In electric utility multinational E.ON, the foresight function sits within corporate strategy. With analysis made centrally, the team delivers and ‘spars’ on related insights and recommendations with internal clients in innovation, business development, risk, procurement, human resources, the board, and the supervisory board.

“In our analysis, we always strive for understanding and insights,” says E.ON’s head of foresight, Thomas Boermans. “What and who is driving a topic? What are the different interests? Who has opportunities and the means to drive change? This results in anticipating developments, important crossroads and related signposts, and makes foresight actionable as the future unfolds, rather than predicting an endpoint that might come or not.”

The business carries out ‘portfolio workshops’, where a team’s set of innovation activities is compared with the foresight function’s view of the future (specifically, its Trend Radar and anticipated future customer drivers) and E.ON’s overall strategy. The result, according to Boermans, is ‘concrete possibilities’ to shift, adapt or enlarge the innovation portfolio – for example, defining new strategic search fields for innovation.

“We are regularly analysing and updating the future customer drivers we anticipate along the energy transition [for example, the need for resilience]. We do this in cooperation with researchers and futurists based on trends in society or technology,” says Boermans.

Results are used in the portfolio workshops and elsewhere. They describe what an innovation should look like – or deliver as value – in a specific field, to fit with future customer needs.

## The heart of future planning

**"Foresight is a practical capability used to make better decisions in the present. Good foresight depends on diversity of thought and perspective, so is most effective when it is a collaborative process, ultimately owned by everyone. The best teams or practitioners will be those that seek out a wide range of insights from different types of people internally and externally, rather than just looking where we feel comfortable. This helps to spot trends you may not have otherwise found or learn when a trend you're banking on is not going to bend."**

Strategic foresight is about expanding our vision away from assumed futures into alternative plausible futures that we might not have considered. Essentially, it's about thinking long range, with multiple futures in mind. Foresight tools such as scenario planning can be helpful for this, but if you don't have the capacity or internal expertise to do so, it can also be helpful to tweak decision-making practices and ask: "What assumptions are we making here – and what if we're wrong?"

At the British Heart Foundation (BHF), we have been increasingly investing in

foresight as a strategic practice, and produce an annual external diagnostic report to help inform planning.

We are currently working on a longer-range horizon-scan project, to better understand key uncertainties and their potential implications on the BHF. We are also using tools such as scenario planning to build our organisational capabilities and inform functional strategies."

● **Leila Varley, strategy manager, futures and foresight, the British Heart Foundation**

b) different outputs," says Quoirin. "But who will live these scenarios? Can we imagine what that's like? That requires different disciplines, different thinking, different toolkits – and that's interesting. But I do think it's making the work so much more robust."

Quoirin stresses that the human dimension is vital, arguing that people should be put into the scenario planning equation, both in terms of who designs it (rather than an over-relying on technology and straight lines), and who is going to experience the outcomes of it.

Jeff Roberts, partner, Dive Without Fear, has a succinct take on the rise of foresight work: "The most powerful businesses aren't those with the clearest plan, but those with the most places to jump. Effective foresights provide measured evaluations of emerging possibilities." Recognising and being prepared for what might come ensures the business knows where it can jump if needed.

Mintel, meanwhile, has been working with clients on what it calls foresight frameworks. Richard Cope, senior trends consultant at the company, observes that firms are increasingly open to being challenged and provoked with quite extreme scenarios that might threaten the status quo and their position. Consumers often hold the key, for although they might not be able to outline the future by answering research questions, their fundamental needs and desires – whether practical or emotional – remain constant, albeit, these grow at different rates because of the influence of macro forces.

"It's important to link foresight to consumer needs such as status, convenience, escapism or comfort," says Cope. "The voice of the consumer can also be a great way of bringing trends and foresight to life, by showing

their openness to future innovations or scenarios."

C Space's Concannon is also enthusiastic on this point. "You can get consumers to be creative and think about the future, but only in the right way," she says. "Things such as creative visualisation or painting a picture of what the future could look like, and getting them to think about that. Or bringing in example technologies for them to imagine what's possible, or creating videos around what might happen in five years' time – priming people to think, in a creative way, about the future, because it's quite hard to do that without stimulus."

Last year, C Space joined forces with Innovation Everywhere – essentially the Lego Group's in-house consultancy – to clarify Lego's strategic offering. Lego is big on looking to the future, and within the group's Creative Play Lab there is a dedicated foresight arm, known as the 'futurology team'. It is driven by the belief that, if the company is to build the future of play, it needs to understand future scenarios of children's lives and how play might unfold within these possibilities.

"We are very lucky because our work is grounded within these scenarios from the outset – rather than them being one of many inputs at a specific stage within a project," says Innovation Everywhere lead Lizzie Carr. "Often, a member of the futurology team becomes an integral part of the project team, thereby fusing foresight into thinking from day one. By placing the future and its scenarios at the forefront of our innovation challenges, we can actively shape the future of play, from a user and futures perspective, from the outset."

Various approaches and methods exist to help people think more critically about their assumptions about the future, notes SOIF's Curry, which helps get to better



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strategy and more profound innovation. Design futures, using images and objects, is one of them. Irrespective of approach, Curry asserts that success hinges on embedding it in organisational thinking and processes. Scenario planning, he claims, has become a bit old-fashioned because “its starting point on the ‘decision focus’ is reassuring to executives, but doesn’t help businesses deal with a world in which expectations and values are changing quickly”.

An example of SOIF’s work is a project on the future of food environments for a charity seeking to improve food outcomes for lower-income households. Working with Shift Design, SOIF combined a horizon scan of relevant trends and drivers with depth interviews with leading-edge consumers on food habits. Putting these data sets together generated a set of hypotheses about spaces where change is possible, which were tested with different stakeholders, including consumers. Food for thought – or, perhaps, food forethought?

In times of substantial change, looking ahead can be overwhelming. Perhaps owning the future is not about one team trying to predict what tomorrow will bring, but rather a collaborative effort involving close and careful listening to those who will live it.

## A practical guide to staying ahead in a fast-paced world

**Foresight is vital to business success, but it's easy to overlook and ignore. Why? People are wired to think in the short term; foresight is inherently hyper-conceptual and intangible, and an overwhelm of trends and data makes it hard to know what to pay attention to. To tackle these challenges, C Space has developed three foresight principles, with tips on how to run successful projects.**

### Principle 1: Create trajectories, not just destinations

Foresight is very hypothetical, but working backwards from future visions can provide clarity and focus. Map future scenarios by using expert insights, tools and machine learning, and identifying patterns in macro forces.

Discover emerging needs and behaviours from underserved consumers and extreme enthusiasts, and involve everyday consumers to identify which needs are here to stay.

### Principle 2: Focus on durable needs

It's crucial to view trends through the lens of human needs, as these are more fixed than the world surrounding them. But to bring consumers into a future-facing project, we must help them feel the future.

Create the right conditions and space and use future-sounding/looking stimuli.

Design fiction can help make the abstract and utopian gritty and grounded.

Overcome biases and tap into unconscious knowledge by using techniques such as creative visualisation, Lego serious play, and prediction markets.

Find out what really matters by forcing new behaviours, and blend research methodologies – such as longitudinal, observational and deliberative approaches – to capture changing views and behaviours over time.

### Principle 3: Get the business to care

Foresight can be vague, intangible, and out of reach, which is why many clients cite actionability as the main issue with future-focused projects. To get businesses to care and act:

- Embrace co-creation by putting stakeholders and consumers in the same room to shape solutions
- Help stakeholders visualise and experience the future through sensory campaigns, newsletters, podcasts and immersive spaces
- Ditch lengthy reports and say ‘hello’ to playbooks and toolkits that provide useful frameworks, resources and strategic direction.

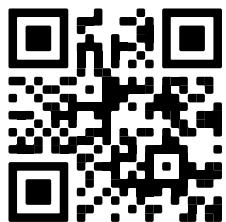
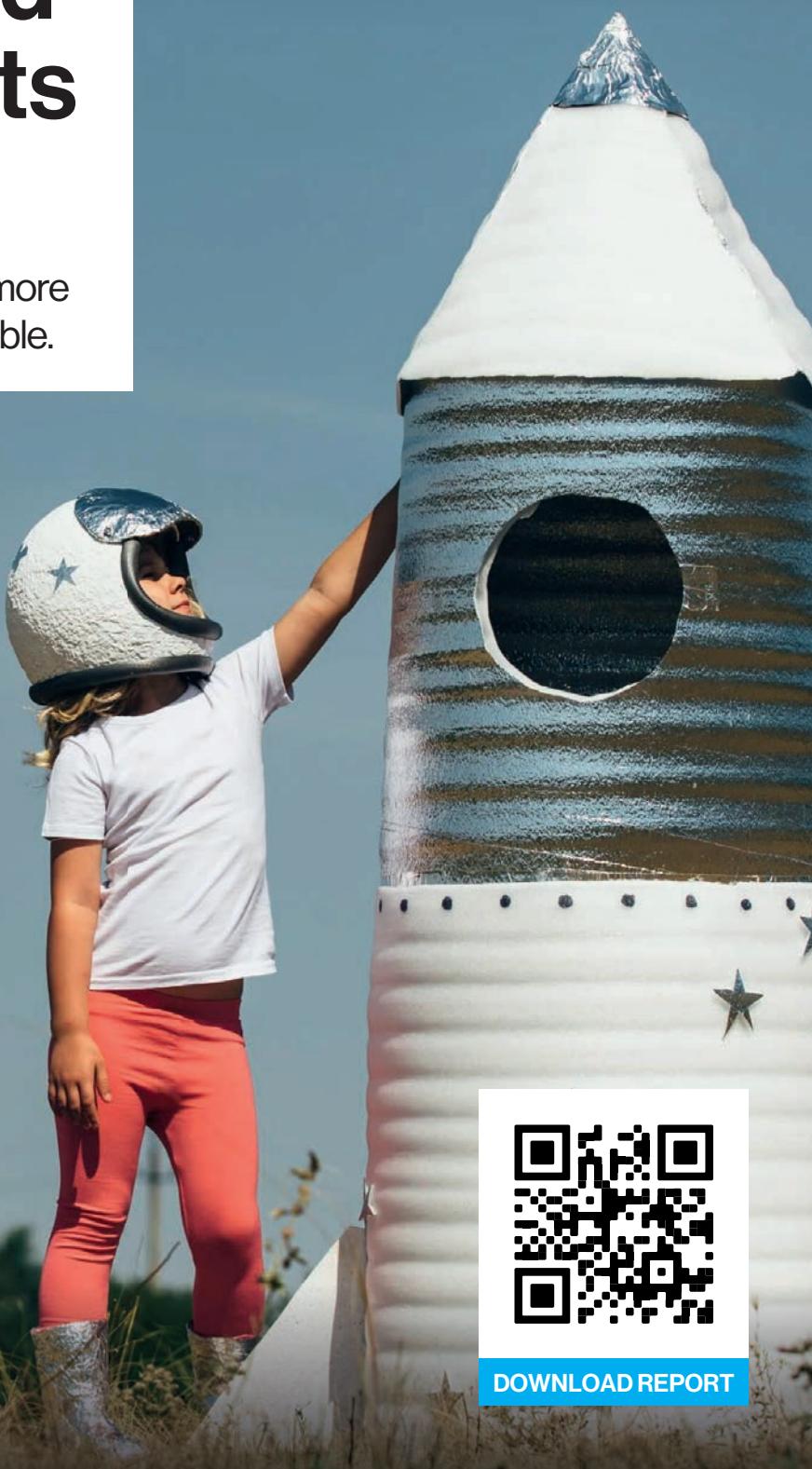
The ability to see around corners can be both exciting and daunting. By adopting a ‘yes, and’ mindset, however, and following our guiding principles, we believe these challenges can be reframed as possibilities.

● **Amy Concannon, practice director, foresight, at C Space**

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