FUTURES UPDATE

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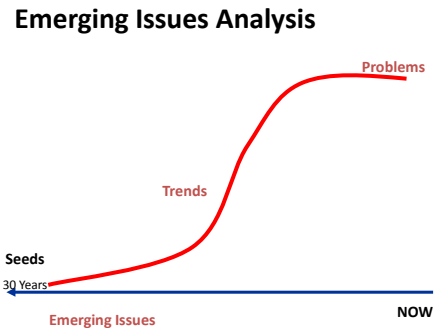
Future Update No. 3.



Anticipating the Future – Emerging Issues Analysis (EIA)

Once we have completed our mapping process what will be noticed is that there is really not a lot of new thinking that has emerged. What we find that is valuable, however, is that our thinking has been 'tidied' up in that we can now differentiate what we mean when we talk about the past, the present or the future. We also have our first glimpse at what our preferred future might look like. At this stage it is usually a plausible future that appears probable. We still need to do the work to make it stick as a preferred future.

It is at this step that we need to 'disturb' our thinking, searching for what we don't know and more importantly how to go about finding answers to what we don't know, even what we don't know we don' know! The method used for this step is called 'Emerging Issues Analysis (EIA)' which was developed by the futurist Graham Molitor. Essentially what we are looking for is data, particularly printed data.

When a new trend or major shift is just beginning it is referred to as a seed that is beginning to sprout. As such, there is very little data available. So the question is *"where do you start to look for seeds?"* The answer is in the arts, visual, dramatic, in fact any of the creative arts. Just think of what Leonardo Da Vinci came up. Or Jules Verne with his "Twenty thousand leagues under the sea" or H.G. Wells – even Dick Tracey with the beginnings of mobile phones!

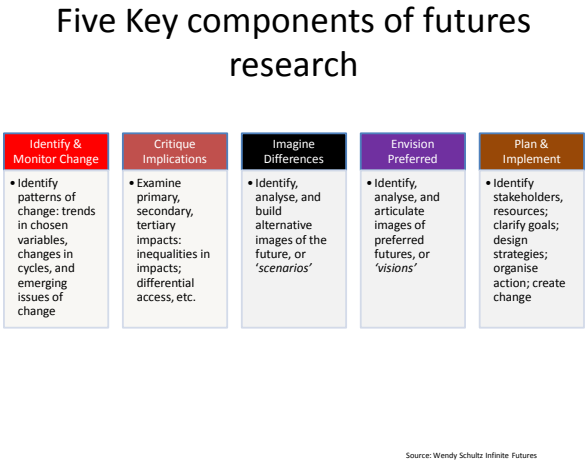
As a rule I usually monitor seeds if I see them reappearing three times in a short period of time – say a month. If the printed data starts to be produced at this rate it is worth keeping an eye on it. If a seed just pops up out of nowhere don't ignore it totally, but, rather than spend a great deal of energy making sense of it, wait until there is more data appearing to justify the effort in keeping track of it.

In Molitor's model the time between when a significant seed emerged and its real impact on the present was about 30 years. With the great speed of change in the digital and technical world then it is reasonable to conclude that this time span has been reduced significantly. However, I am not convinced this is so with social change. Take for example the digital age. It began about 60 years ago but it is only the last 10-15 years have we really witnessed its significant impact. This impact over time we tend to forget but it is the reason we do EIA in order to anticipate significant changes early on so as we don't have to react to the inevitable but rather prepare ourselves to change early enough on to thrive from it.

Once the data starts to increase we term this phase the trend phase. By this time we are pretty confident that the impact of the trend will be universally felt. At the trend stage it is usually the futurist and macrohistorians (Those who study patterns) who are writing about it. Organisations are well advised to take notice at this stage and put in place strategies that will ensure they do not suffer as a result of the impact of the trend.

Usually a trend becomes a problem because they are ignored and organisations and communities are forced to react to it. What we are trying to avoid is this reaction. What futurist are attempting to do is to encourage organisations and communities to be proactive and prepare well in advance of the trends impact, thus turning a potential problem into an opportunity.

Emerging Issues Analysis is really very effective futures and strategic planning which usually develops great outcomes because of its greater rigour in thinking and application. The following is five good steps to take in this research from Wendy Schultz of Infinite Futures, Oxford UK.



ACTION - Identify the key drivers of change

1. *Emerging Issues Analysis:* identify important external forces that are likely to impact on your organisation. Consider social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal and ethical factors (STEEPLE).
2. Look for linkages and/or patterns between the various emerging issues
3. What factors/trends seem to emerge as having the most likely impact?
4. Rank these drivers according to a) level of importance and b) level of uncertainty
5. Can these drivers provide the assumptions that will form the basis of the scenario?
6. What is valid from your current plans that you can use in constructing scenarios?