The Flare and Focus of Successful Futurists

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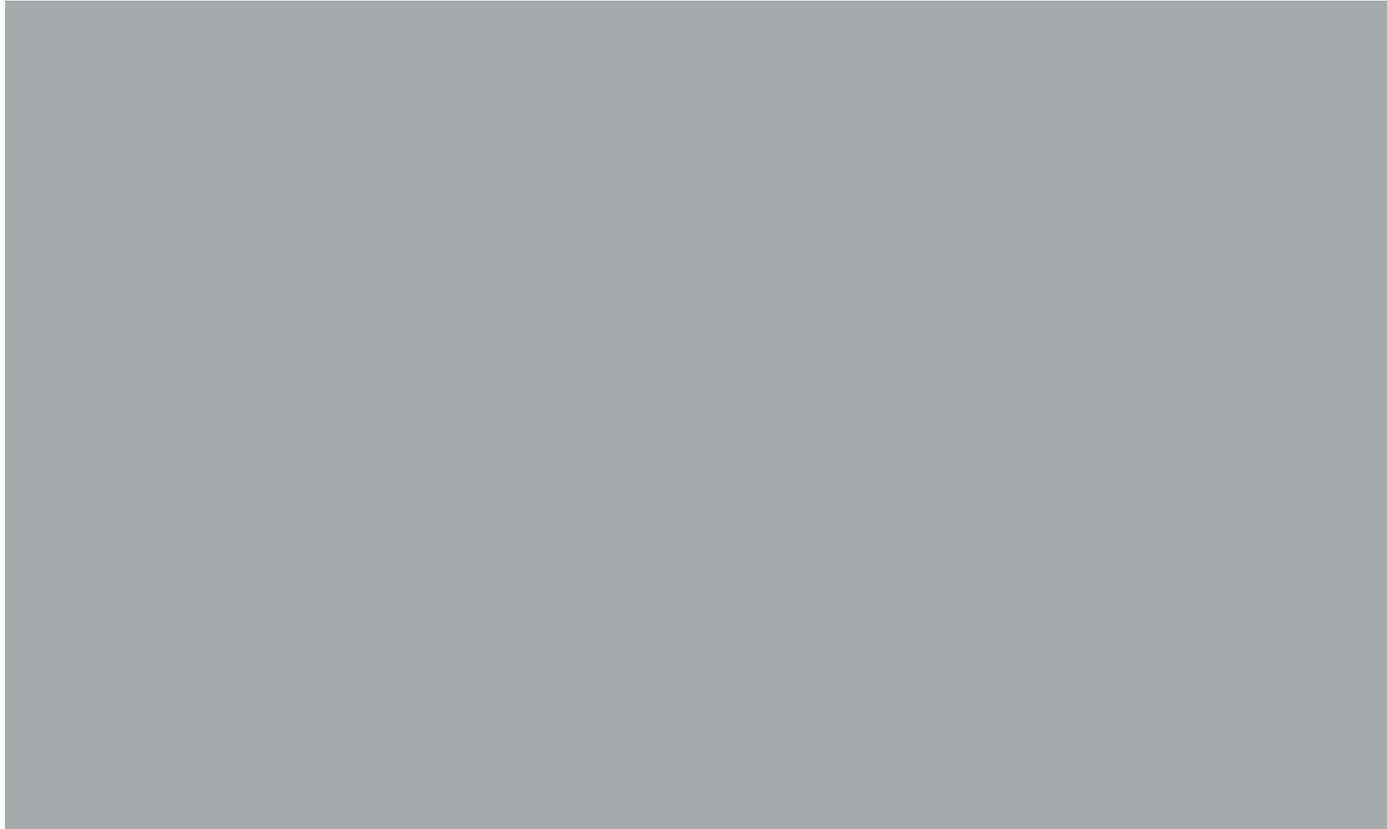
Amy Webb

The Flare and Focus of Successful Futurists

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BY AMY WEBB

? **THE LEADING QUESTION**
How can executives spot emerging trends early on?

FINDINGS

▶ Start by making observations at "the fringe" rather than in the mainstream.

▶ Look for contradictions, inflections, practices, hacks, extremes, and rarities.

▶ Harness the strengths of both creative- and logic-oriented members of your team.

FUTURISTS ARE SKILLED at listening to and interpreting signals, which are harbingers of what's to come. They look for early patterns — pretrends, if you will — as the scattered points on the fringe converge and begin moving toward the mainstream. The fringe is that place where hackers are experimenting, academics are testing their ideas, technologists are building new prototypes, and so on. Futurists know most patterns will come to nothing, so they watch and wait and test the patterns to find those few that will evolve into genuine trends. Each trend is a looking glass into the future, a way to see over time's horizon. This is the art of forecasting the future: simultaneously recognizing patterns in the present and thinking about how those changes will impact the future so that you can be actively engaged in building what happens next — or at least be less surprised by what others develop. Futures forecasting is a learnable skill, and a process any organization can master.

Joseph Voros, a theoretical physicist and senior lecturer in strategic foresight at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, offers my favorite explanation of futures forecasting, saying it informs strategy making by enhancing the "context within which strategy is developed, planned, and executed."[1] The advantage of forecasting the future in this way is obvious: Organizations that can see trends early can better prepare to take advantage of them. They can also help shape the broader context, with an understanding of how developments in seemingly unconnected industries will affect them. Most organizations that track emerging trends are adept at conversing and collaborating with those in other fields to plan ahead.

Although futures studies is an established academic discipline, few companies employ futurists. That's starting to change as more leaders become familiar with the work futurists do. Accenture, Ford, Google, IBM, Intel, Samsung, and UNESCO all have had futurists on staff, and their work is quite different from what happens within the traditional research and development (R&D) function.

The futurists at these organizations know that their tools are best used within a group — and that the group's composition matters tremendously to the outcomes they produce. Here's why. Within every organization are people whose dominant characteristic is either creativity or logic. If you've been on a team that included both groups and didn't have a great facilitator during your meetings, your team probably clashed. If it was an important project and there were strong personalities representing each side, the creative people felt as though their contributions were being discounted, while the logical thinkers — whose natural talents lie in managing processes, projecting budgets, or mitigating risk — felt undervalued because they weren't coming up with bold new ideas. Your team undoubtedly had a difficult time staying on track, or worse, you might

have spent hours meeting about how to have your next meeting. I call this the "duality dilemma."

The duality dilemma is responsible for a lack of forward thinking at many organizations. It contributed to the decline of BlackBerry Ltd.'s smartphone business; the company (formerly known as Research in Motion Ltd.) never had an executable plan to remake the phone's form factor and operating system in the age of the iPhone. Right-brained creatives wanted to make serious changes to the phone, while left-brained process thinkers were fixated on risk and maintaining BlackBerry's customer base.[2] The future of the business hinged on the company's ability to bring both forces together to forecast trends and plan for the future.

BlackBerry's experience suggests that forecasting the future of a product, company, or industry should neither be relegated to inventive visionaries nor mapped entirely by left-brain thinkers. Futures forecasting is meant to unite opposing forces, harnessing both wild imagination and pragmatism.

Turning a Dilemma Into a Dynamic

Overcoming the duality dilemma — and getting full use of both your creative- and logic-oriented team members — in order to track emerging trends and forecast the future is possible. But counterintuitively, it's a matter of highlighting — rather than discouraging or downplaying — the strengths of each side. Stanford University's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (also known as the d.school) teaches a brainstorming technique that addresses the duality dilemma and illuminates how an organization can harness both strengths in equal measure by alternately broadening ("flaring") and narrowing ("focusing") its thinking.[3]

When a team is flaring, it is finding inspiration, making lists of ideas, mapping out new possibilities, getting feedback, and thinking big. When it is focusing, those ideas must be investigated, vetted, and

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decided upon. Flaring asks questions such as: What if? Who could it be? Why might this matter? What might be the implications of our actions? Focusing asks: Which option is best? What is our next action? How do we move forward?

The forecasting method I have developed — one, of course, influenced by other futurists but different in analysis and scope — is a six-step process that I have refined during the past decade as part of my work at the Future Today Institute. The first four steps involve finding a trend, while the last two steps inform what action you should then take. (See "A Six-Step Forecasting Methodology.")

The dynamic of flare and focus is woven through this forecasting methodology. The six steps require teams to alternate between flaring and focusing, harnessing the dominant qualities of the right brain and the left brain. With each step, you are able to understand the likely future of the topic you're examining more clearly as you define a trend, determine the best action to take, and create and test your strategy. When you both flare and focus, you are able to overcome the duality dilemma.
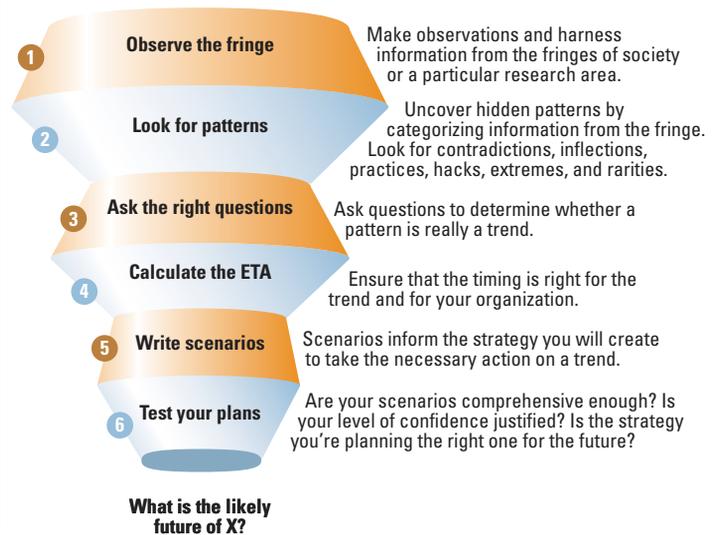
Here's how to use these complementary ways of thinking:

1. First, flare at the fringe. Keep an open mind as you cast a wide enough net and gather information without judgment. This involves creating a map of what you observe at the fringe. This map should show nodes — or key concepts, companies, places, and people — and the relationships between them. Think of it as rounding up the "unusual suspects." You're brainstorming, making a fringe map, forcing yourself to think outside the box and consider radically different points of view.

2. Focus to spot patterns. You must narrow your research from the fringe and uncover the patterns hidden in your sketch to spot possible trends. To categorize what we have observed, we use a framework called CIPHER, which is an acronym that stands for *contradictions*, *inflections*, *practices*, *hacks*, *extremes*, and *rarities*. Look for surprising contradictions; inflection points that signal an acceleration of some change in progress; new practices that upset established norms (for example, when people altered the long-established norm of watching television programming only on TVs); hacks and adjustments that users are making to a product or technology to make it work better for

them; extremes that push boundaries to break new ground; and rarities.[4]

3. Flare to ask the right questions. Determine whether a pattern really is a trend or merely a trendy flash in the pan. You will be tempted to stop looking once you've spotted a pattern; most forecasters never force themselves to poke holes into every single assumption and assertion they make. But you will soon learn that creating counterarguments is an essential part of the forecasting process.

4. Focus to calculate timing. Interpret the trend, and ensure that the timing is right. This isn't just about finding the typical S-curve that managers rely on to describe adoptions of a new innovation or technology; such an S-curve can show a new technology's adoption, but it does not offer a full picture of how external effects (such as a change in government leadership or a natural disaster) could affect its development. As technology trends move along their trajectories, two forces are in play — internal developments within tech companies, and external developments within the government, adjacent businesses, and the like — and both must be considered.

5. Flare to create scenarios and strategies. First, build scenarios to create probable, plausible, and possible futures; then create strategies to accompany them. Probable scenarios represent the most likely outcomes if there are no unexpected major changes in circumstances, while plausible scenarios allow for

A SIX-STEP FORECASTING METHODOLOGY

The six steps in this forecasting methodology require teams to alternate between broadening (that is, "flaring") and narrowing (that is, "focusing") their thinking.

1 Observe the fringe — Make observations and harness information from the fringes of society or a particular research area.

2 Look for patterns — Uncover hidden patterns by categorizing information from the fringe. Look for contradictions, inflections, practices, hacks, extremes, and rarities.

3 Ask the right questions — Ask questions to determine whether a pattern is really a trend.

4 Calculate the ETA — Ensure that the timing is right for the trend and for your organization.

5 Write scenarios — Scenarios inform the strategy you will create to take the necessary action on a trend.

6 Test your plans — Are your scenarios comprehensive enough? Is your level of confidence justified? Is the strategy you're planning the right one for the future?

What is the likely future of X?

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many facets of daily life — some that we might not be able to imagine now — to change dramatically. Meanwhile, possible scenarios assume that nothing is set in stone — and that life as we know it could look radically different than it does today.

This step requires thinking about both the timeline of a technology's development and your emotional reactions to all the possible outcomes. What necessary strategies and ways of thinking will govern how your organization will respond to the trend? Score each scenario with an estimated likelihood of occurrence and, on the basis of your analysis, create a corresponding strategy for action. A score of less than 40% suggests either you haven't analyzed enough data or it is too early in the timeline to act; a score of more than 70% indicates that you've likely waited too long and should respond quickly.

6. Focus to test your plans. But what if the action you choose to take in response to a trend is the wrong one? In this final step, you must try to test whether the strategy you create to address a trend will deliver the desired outcome, and that requires asking difficult questions about both the present and the future. These questions should confirm that (1) your organization has confidence in the strategy and will support it; (2) the strategy offers your customers a unique value proposition; (3) you can track the developing trend and measure your outcomes; (4) the strategy communicates a sense of urgency to your staff and to your intended audience; (5) you have the resources needed to recalibrate the strategy if and when needed; and (6) the strategy is robust enough to easily accommodate change.

Duality in Action

Any organization intent on surviving and thriving into the future must practice both flaring and focusing in whatever methodology it uses to spot trends, so it is of paramount importance that every team charged with watching and acting on trends include both creative and logical types. Organizations that learn how to

balance each hemisphere of the human brain are uniquely positioned to forecast trends and develop strategies that work.

And as you analyze emerging trends, remember: There are never any completely new technologies invented out of whole cloth. Our technology trends, their adoption for use in business, and the cultural, political, educational, and economic shifts that happen concurrently are all interwoven. Our tapestry of invention is part of a continuum over time. The tools may change — from hands, to weavers, to industrial machines, to algorithms and robots, to self-generating synthetic organics — but the previous corpus of research always becomes the basis for fresh thinking at the fringe.

The future is something we are creating now, in the present tense. You have the ability not only to forecast what's to come but also to help create your own preferred future. Don't wait.

Amy Webb is the CEO of the Future Today Institute, which provides futures forecasting for business, government, and nonprofit clients, and the author of The Signals Are Talking: Why Today's Fringe Is Tomorrow's Mainstream *(PublicAffairs, 2016). This article is adapted from that book. Comment on this article at http://sloanreview.mit.edu/x/58412, or contact the author at smrfeedback@mit.edu.*

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3. See, for example, the d.school's necktie model of flare and focus: T. Winograd, "Design Process Diagrams," n.d., http://hci.stanford.edu.

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