



The future is often unclear for businesses, writes **Ray Algar**, but how hard are we trying to look into it? He reports on his findings from a recent conference

## Welcome to the Future

'My flight to Copenhagen has just been cancelled; the SAS cabin crew are striking'. The well-dressed business traveller placed his phone back in his top pocket, shrugged his shoulders and drifted away. My attendance at the Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies' annual conference: *Dontstop02*, was looking shaky. Fortunately, the strike was in its first few hours and some flights, mine included, were still departing from Gatwick. The trip back however, was a whole new adventure. Of course, the really good futurists would have anticipated the strike and travelled by sea. The term 'futurist' is really a misnomer. They don't look into glass balls and make predictions; instead they study life and create plausible perspectives about how life may change. If I were a futurist, I would cross this term out and put 'Opportunity Finder' on my business card.

During the flight, I was thinking about the conference theme: 'Don't stop thinking about tomorrow', and the background of delegates. Was the conference going to be filled with several hundred practising 'futurists', or senior executives seeking a better understanding of applying the principles of 'foresight' to their organisations? Refreshingly, it was the latter. Breakfast was spent with a Danish animal fur broker. 'How's business?', I asked, expecting her to lament its terminal decline. 'Never been better', came the upbeat reply as it transpired that they were the world's largest fur skin house and could not keep up with demand from China. She went on to explain that the vociferous UK animal rights movement was far-removed from Danish sentiment, where fur skins represented a major part of Denmark's GDP. Sensing that conversation was now pretty well exhausted, I found a seat among the 240 delegates and awaited the opening remarks from Johan Peter Paludan, director of the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies.

### Don't stop thinking about tomorrow

Don't stop thinking about tomorrow was the conference title, but the key message from Johan was clear. The future is somewhere for companies to travel to, not just something to think about. Companies need to pro-actively claim a stake of the future now. What will they need? A compelling vision, an ambitious strategy and a robust action plan.

### Look out for megatrends

A key motivation for me to jump on a plane to Denmark was to hear what John Naisbitt, often referred to as the global philosopher among futurists, and one of the world's most sought after business speakers, had to say about the future. A 'social forecaster' rather than a futurist is how he would like to be known. Naisbitt coined the phrase, Megatrends, which became the title for his seminal book, that has now sold more than nine million copies. Naisbitt, has a unique presentation style. He relaxes into a sofa and under the light of a small candle, deliv-



Eyes forward: Naisbitt (left) addresses delegates at the 2007 Dontstop 02 conference in Copenhagen.

### The future is somewhere for companies to travel to, not just something for them to think about

ers bolts of wisdom, drawn from his 45 years of advising former US presidents and studying life – there is not a whiff of technology in site. This is a technology-free experience, where you feel you are in the company of a sage. This delivery style aligns with one of his messages; we are becoming too dependent on technology and losing the capacity to emotionally engage, to have fun, to be happy. 'Whatever the future holds, it will be worth nothing if there is no joy', he argues.

He challenges business to look inside their organisations and see if they are filled with 'problem solvers' or 'opportunity seekers'. Problem solvers look to the past; opportunity seekers, to the future. Surely, an effective organisation requires both, I was thinking. However, he is probably right if you take a snapshot of the prevailing outlook within many organisations. Naisbitt leans forward and whispers: 'you get results through creating opportunities, not by solving problems'. How does this thinking apply to the leisure industry? Well, we have a smoking ban in England on the 1st July 2007 and leisure operators are disposing of outlets (problem solved). Fast forward to 1st July 2008 and let's take a look at how the opportunity seekers have transformed those problems.

### The trap of sequence

'What is the next number in this sequence?', he asks the audience: 4, 14, 23, 34, 42. Answer to follow. Naisbitt believes that many organisations think the future is going to be much like it is today, with slight differences. It is this form of 'marketing myopia' that allows corporate upstarts to come along and steel an incumbent's thunder. Young entrepreneurs are very good at this (think Chad Hurley at YouTube and James Murray Wells at Glasses Direct) because they completely disregard the existing industry rules. Naisbitt implores business to look at the world as a picture puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle. 'Nothing sequen-

tial here. If you look sequentially, you won't make connections'. You can stop thinking about the next number in the sequence. The answer is 50 and represents stations on the New York subway. Stop thinking about sequence and start making connections. The key message that I took from Naisbitt is that organisations need to stay in consumers' field of vision. 'Don't get so far ahead of the parade that people don't know you're in it', is how he describes this. This captures the need for companies to stay in touch. They need to be inquisitive and innovate, but stay on purpose and remain relevant to consumers. Television on mobile devices could fall into this category. Yes, it's technically feasible, but do sufficient numbers of us really want to watch a blockbuster on a two-inch screen? Futurists can tend to enthuse a little too much about the future: How will cinemas look in 2027? It makes for a fascinating piece of theoretical work, but does not really help the chief executive who needs to ensure the company has a great 2008.

### How do we embed the future into your present organisation?

That's easy. You go and listen to Andy Hines, an American Futurist from Social Technologies ([www.socialtechnologies.com](http://www.socialtechnologies.com)) who has several tools and systems for embedding future studies or foresight into organisations. He comes from the perspective that scanning the environment and general trend spotting is only one part, albeit important, of an organisation's foresight activities.

The challenge is then to embed this into the organisation through informing strategy and cascading down into tactical activities. This is achieved through 'workshopping' the insight into the organisation. 'We need your help to generate five new product or service ideas' is a typical request that companies can make to a futurist. This enables foresight to have a practical and immediate role in organisations of any size, not just NASA and the World Bank. So, who is the environmental scanning expert within your organisation? Who is reading the more unconventional sources of information to enlighten your organisation's thinking? Imagine what harnessing this internal insight could deliver.

### The vision thing

'Who knows their company's long-term vision?' was the question posed. "That's very typical, when I ask that question", said Hines as two from 120 individuals put their hands up. Perhaps, more people would enthusiastically follow the leader, if someone would just tell them where they were going. Maybe, future studies have a great deal of relevance to organisations after all.

### Are you a frog or a vulture?

If neither a frog or a vulture appeals, then you can choose to be a lemming or a laggard. Hines uses these typologies to describe the personalities he finds within organisations that either support or hinder a systematic study of the future. Frogs and lemmings get it and are real advocates (Lemmings are a little too enthusiastic), while vultures believe that futures studies is an activity undertaken by long-bearded fellows in cardigans. Laggards tend not to have a view. I have frog tendencies. The important point he makes, is that sometimes it is futile trying to get everyone behind a cause. Perhaps, the 80:20 rule applies here.

### What is the implication of this trend?

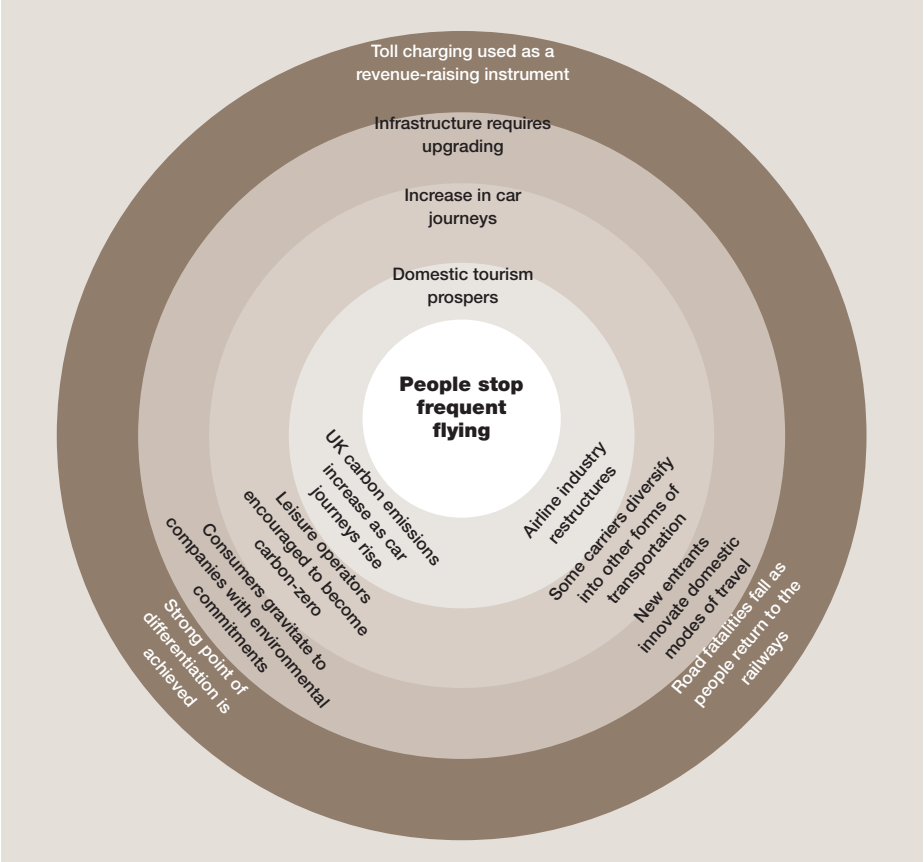
I discovered how to understand the implication of a particular trend or business issue by using a 'futures wheel'. This is a simple, but effective tool that illuminates the first to fourth order implications (or deeper). Have a look at this futures wheel (see right), which shows the implications if the frequent flying trend recedes. Why not customise this for your sector and see the interesting scenarios it throws up? It may illuminate an interesting opportunity or threat.

From America, I moved onto Australia and listened to the fast-talking Richard Watson. Richard is a Sydney-based foresight specialist ([www.now-andnext.com](http://www.now-andnext.com)) who spends half his life on airplanes talking to companies about our changing world. What I took from Richard's presentation is that trends fundamentally do not change very much. Companies need to be cognisant of megatrends such as well-being, individual and corporate social responsibility, connectivity, global population aging etc and ensure their companies are appropriately aligned. For example, I would not like to be operating in the low-quality, fast-food sector, when consumers are demanding to know that no animal was harmed in the making of their hamburger, that lettuce has not travelled more than 30 miles, and the outlet is carbon-neutral. Slightly facetious, but alignment with changing consumer sentiment really matters.

I also liked listening to Richard's ideas on some present barriers to real creative thinking. Several themes emerged such as lack of deep sleep, information overload, the emphasis on the urgent, but unimportant tasks that consume our day and the

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### Futures Wheel: Implications if the frequent flying trend recedes



**Link what you do today with the future you want for your organisation tomorrow, then plan how to get there**

constant interruption that seems a feature of working life. This leads many of us to be in a state of constant partial attention.

How can this environment possibly breed great ideas? Did you know that sleep deprivation can lead to deterioration of short-term memory, headaches, dizziness, irritability and slurred speech. Perhaps, the next time your company wants to run a two-day innovation workshop, the first day is spent in bed? A 2007 Travelodge sleep survey found that company directors were getting less than six hours sleep per night, with 8% surviving on four hours. If you are expecting some deep and meaningful new insights from your team, you may have to install a New York style Metro nap booth ([www.metronaps.com](http://www.metronaps.com)) first.

It was now late in the day and my head and notebook were brimming with wise words. A few weeks after the conference, the key points I take away are:

- Creating a forward-looking organisation will stimulate new opportunities and alert you to threats in sufficient time to act. How forward-thinking do you believe your company is?

- Opportunities will materialise from seeing the future more as a mosaic than a single road. Block-

busting ideas often come from the most unexpected places. Post-it Notes™ were invented when a 3M scientist produced glue that did not stick!

- Many companies are probably practicing unstructured foresight already. It simply may need to be communicated differently to effectively inform the company's strategy.

- Any employee with a strong sense of curiosity can become a foresight expert for your company. Find one, nurture them and be surprised by their new perspective.

Conference over, a good night's sleep and then back to the airport. However, by now, the SAS strike had escalated, and I joined 60,000 stranded passengers at Copenhagen airport.

I eventually dragged myself through my front door after a two and half-day delay. Richard Watson, who, as you now know, works in the foresight business, was also flying with SAS from Copenhagen on the same day. Was he delayed? Absolutely not, which shows that studying the future is very useful indeed.

### About the author

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