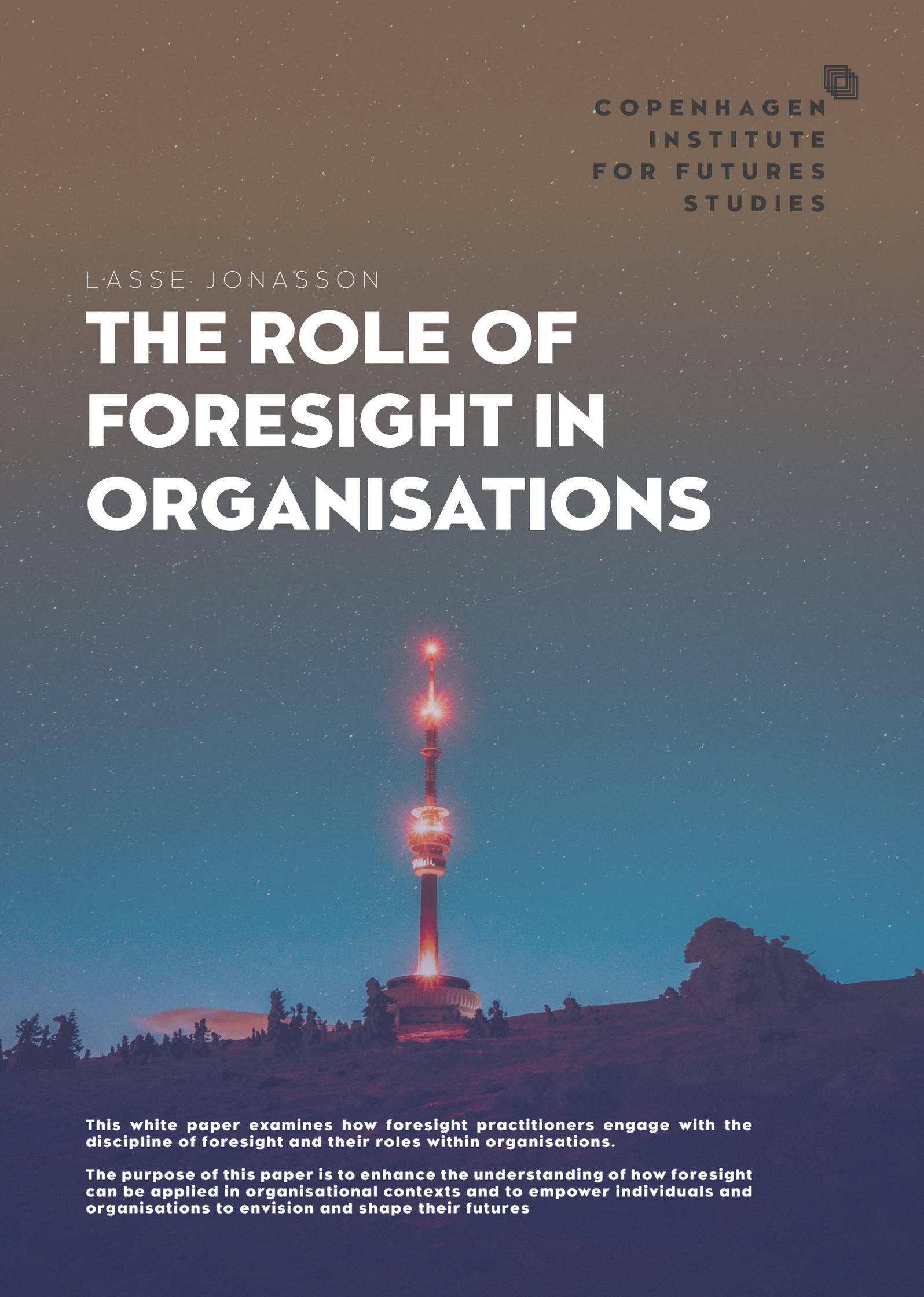




COPENHAGEN
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STUDIES

LASSE JONASSON

THE ROLE OF FORESIGHT IN ORGANISATIONS



This white paper examines how foresight practitioners engage with the discipline of foresight and their roles within organisations.

The purpose of this paper is to enhance the understanding of how foresight can be applied in organisational contexts and to empower individuals and organisations to envision and shape their futures

About Us

The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies is an independent, non-profit think tank established in 1969, on the initiative by former Danish Minister and OECD Secretary-General Professor Thorkil Kristensen.

Our purpose is to help people and organisations imagine, work with, and shape their future.

Never in recent history has it been more important for people and organisations to better navigate uncertainty, build futures optimism and create meaningful change. By building the capabilities necessary to address potential futures we help create a society fit to meet the challenges and grasp the opportunities we face. Essentially, we empower you with the skills to act on the future.

We do this by applying our unique approach to futures studies and foresight, combined with more than 50 years of global experience and contributions to the field, working with organisations across the public, private, academic, and civic sectors, as well as with the general public. Being independent of commercial and political interests enables an objective approach and allows for all profits to go exclusively to fund further research and non-profit initiatives.

The future belongs to no one, yet to everyone. Our vision is a futures literate world where everyone has the right and mandate to engage with the future, participate, and visualise change, so they can create the best possible future for themselves, society, and the planet. We firmly believe this will help build a more prosperous, equal, and safe future.

We support the United Nations' Common Agenda, which identifies foresight (a futures capability) as part of their Quintet of Change, and we are committed to the Common Principles for Future Generations.

All of the Institute's profits are allocated to further futures studies and to realising our purpose.

Since 2018, Daria "Dasha" Krivonos has been our CEO.

Authored by The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies

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We extend our deepest gratitude to all the foresight practitioners that contributed to this paper as well as the team members behind for their invaluable contributions to every aspect of this paper.

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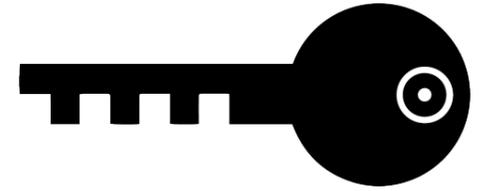
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KEY TAKEAWAYS



At the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, we experience a growing emphasis on foresight within the organisations we engage with, accompanied by a notable shift towards formalising this discipline.

To gain a better understanding of how organisations are successfully working with foresight, we have conducted a series of qualitative interviews with foresight-practitioners from eight different organisations. This paper summarises the key takeaways from these interviews and is complemented by our practical experience in advising organisations on the topic. We would like to express our gratitude to the participants for sharing their experiences which have contributed significantly to the development of this paper. This initiative aligns with our commitment to advancing the practice of foresight and we are grateful for their valuable insights.

Foresight as an organisational activity can take different forms and there are many pathways to its implementation. Sometimes foresight lies with a small team or even a single individual. Other organisations might have a more distributed setup, and some may even have dedicated foresight functions.

Engaging others in shaping views of the future and understanding potential outcomes is essential for the adoption and application of futures thinking. By including individuals from different areas of the business, we can achieve a more comprehensive perspective on what the future may entail.

– Maria Åkerlund, Strategic Foresight leader, Inter IKEA Group

We recognise that foresight practitioners come from a variety of professional backgrounds, bringing unique perspectives to their roles. This diversity serves to expand the practice and ensure innovation. However, it also poses challenges in establishing a shared comprehension of foresight among both practitioners and individuals engaged in related disciplines which require coordination across foresight functions. These disciplines include strategy, risk management, innovation, design, and more.

While foresight is increasingly recognised for its strategic value, its full potential, as well as how it integrates with other functions and decision-making outside of the foresight functions, remains underexplored.

The interviewed practitioners placed strong emphasis on the necessity for businesses to view foresight as an iterative and collaborative process, which is crucial for making it adaptable to future shifts and uncertainties in the operating environment. Embracing this approach can significantly enhance an organisation's ability to prepare for and react to potential future scenarios in a timely manner.

“Strategic foresight is not about predicting the future; it’s about preparing for it. It is about positioning your organisation to use uncertainty as a feature rather than a bug”

– Daria Krivonos, CEO, Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies

We conclude that foresight should serve as a means to shift mindsets rather than a prescriptive manual. This is true for any organisation that uses foresight, be they businesses, political entities, or NGOs. The goal of organisational foresight is not to be prepared for every eventuality; rather, it is about being prepared for anything. It is about exploring rather than predicting. The value of foresight predominantly resides in the change of culture it induces, rather than just its analytical outcome.

Consequently, the primary responsibility of foresight professionals extends beyond executing foresight activities. It requires a deep understanding of key stakeholders, their operational contexts, and the strategic domains where foresight can provide significant advantages.

INTRO

Foresight has gained significant traction among decision makers in recent years. Organisations have become more focused on allocating resources to develop a structured approach to understanding potential futures, explore novelty, and prepare for contingency.

The discipline of foresight, from my perspective, appears to be gaining prevalence within more and more organisations, and its practice seems to be becoming increasingly professionalised.”

– Björn Theis, Vice President & Head of Foresight at Evonik

We believe that the reason for the growing recognition of foresight’s strengths are twofold. The first reason is that it offers a competitive advantage in the long run and that its strengths are within environments where there is a need for radical as opposed to incremental changes (a need to move in new directions rather than moving faster). These are the exact needs that emerge in highly complex and changing environments.

The second reason for the growing realisation of the importance of foresight is that many organisations have been caught by surprise by the unforeseen yet impactful developments and events of the past years. These include the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, supply chain shocks, and the current conflict in the Middle East. Moreover, rapid advancements in technologies like generative AI, coupled with the ongoing climate crisis, are intensifying rates of change and adding to the complexity facing organisations. As a result, while the need for a more proactive approach to future developments is now more widely recognised by decision makers¹, the path to change seems unclear.

To understand an organisation’s future environment and how foresight can help as a tool for decision making, understanding the difference between acceleration and complexity is important. Most of the decision makers we engage with in our work perceive an acceleration of change. However, we tend to perceive recent changes as being quicker because we have experienced them firsthand and in detail. In contrast, our knowledge of past changes is often more summarised and less granular. This difference in perspective creates the illusion that change is accelerating more now than in the past, when in reality, every era has experienced its own significant shifts and transformations, albeit viewed differently by those living through them. And though social change is dynamic and ever-unfolding, fundamental human experiences have remained consistent over time.

However, it is difficult to argue against an increased level of complexity today. Advancements in technology build upon their predecessors, and our interconnected society and vast access to information have led us to specialise in increasingly narrower fields. The ability to understand the holistic picture is a privilege for the few – if any at all. It was arguably far easier to understand the technologies and processes of a large organisation 30 years ago than today. To cope with this complexity, we see an increasing buzz around systems thinking and an increasing focus on terms such as “wicked problems”.

¹ E.g. in our own study “A Clearer Role for the Board” <https://scenario.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/A-Clearer-Role-for-the-Board.pdf>

The key characteristic of foresight is that it encompasses holistic thinking across domains and across time horizons. This is the very core of the discipline and cannot be changed without limiting its advantages. This is also what makes it very difficult to apply foresight in organisations, because it often requires a very broad involvement of stakeholders.

Another challenge to applying foresight is that people are often busy delivering on day-to-day tasks – dealing with matters that are urgent in the here and now, though not necessarily particularly important for the long term. This is very well expressed by the following quote:

“How do you get people to stop and reflect on something very intangible when they feel they are mid-way through a 100-meter sprint?”

– Laurie Smith, Head of Foresight Research at Nesta

This, more than any other question, is what we are most often asked when advising organisations on how to begin their foresight journey.

To find answers, we interviewed a group of leading foresight practitioners from global organisations, including a renowned home retailer, a leading automobile manufacturer, a major social media platform, a chemical group, a national nonprofit, and a sports gear giant. Additionally, to gain insights into how this challenge looks in a non-corporate setting, we interviewed a foresight practitioner in a governmental body. We conducted semi-structured interviews to understand how these practitioners work with the discipline of foresight, how their role is positioned in their organisations, which areas they are focusing on, what tools they apply, how they relate to other functions across the organisation, where they are being successful, as well as what keeps them up at night.

This paper summarises the key takeaways from the qualitative interviews, divided into six themes corresponding with the questions we asked our participants – **ORGANISATIONAL SETUP, METHODS, STRUGGLES, PURPOSE & GOALS, EXPECTATIONS**, and **BACKGROUND**. Each summary of the interviewee’s replies is supplemented by our own comments and observations based on our experience doing foresight work across various organisational types, sectors, and industries

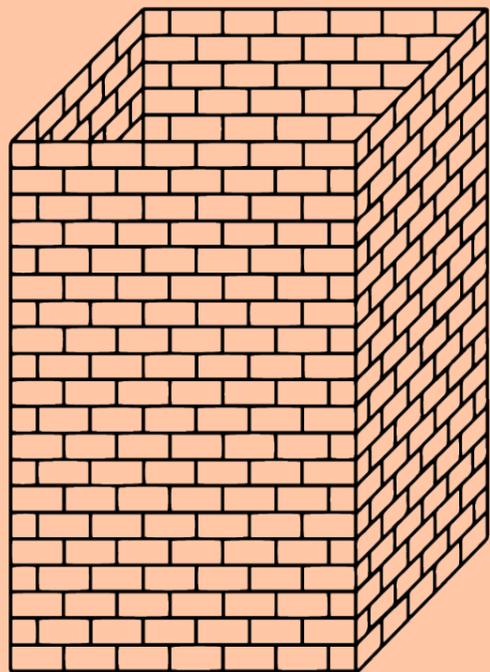
The following participants has agreed to appear with their name and quotes:

- **Beth Espinalt** i Capdevila, Director of Foresight Analysis, Catalanian Government
- **Matt Klein**, Head of Foresight at Reddit
- **Laurie Smith**, Head of Foresight Research at Nesta
- **Maria Åkerlund**, Strategic Foresight leader, Inter IKEA Group
- **Björn Theis**, Vice President & Head of Foresight at Evonik

We extend our heartfelt thanks to every participant, named and anonymous, for generously dedicating your valuable time and sharing your insights with us. Your willingness to let us tap into your knowledge and experience is deeply appreciated!

**Pls. note that the participants do not necessarily sign up to all the conclusions of the document.*

ORGANISATIONAL SETUP



In the interview's first set of questions, the participants were asked to discuss where the foresight function is placed within the organisation.

Common themes were that although timelines obviously vary from place to place, the idea of foresight as a function to which an organisation should allocate staff and money is still rather novel. There were, however, exceptions to this, and some of the interviewees were part of established foresight functions that have existed for over 10 years. When it comes to the playing field, few of the interviewees' work is supposed to cater to immediate go-to-market agendas. One of the interviewees engages in foresight efforts that are both for internal operations as well as for commercial b2b-consulting. Nonetheless, what they sell is not for immediate use in a traditional sense, but rather to inform outsiders about future related insights.

Regarding at what level of the organisation foresight operates, most foresight professionals replied that they are present at C-Suite meetings at least occasionally, although not all saw this as an aspiration.

There were also some standout observations. In a few cases, foresight functions are embedded into the innovation arm of the organisation or anchored within political functions, research functions and marketing/sales divisions.



Foresight is an emerging practice, which is gradually gaining prominence across various industries and organisational sizes. While the implementation of foresight varies in terms of timing, application, and purpose, a common trend is the growing autonomy and significance of foresight practitioners within organisations. Initially seen as a “nice to have“-function, these practitioners are now carving out their own space, significantly contributing to key areas such as strategy, innovation, market intelligence and risk management. This shift underscores the evolving role of foresight in enhancing organisational capabilities.

Although our experience is that the ideal placement of the foresight function within an organisation is dependent on many factors, it is crucial to understand how foresight connects to other futures-oriented functions and to ensure coordination between these. We see a typical path related to maturity in organisations, with foresight starting as a

“In the past, foresight work was predominantly done by the foresight teams. Nowadays, it is increasingly carried out by the business itself, albeit with the support and, at times, facilitation of the foresight team.”

– Björn Theis, Vice President & Head of Foresight at Evonik

more isolated task carried out by the foresight team, and with time becoming more integrated into the business units and into existing processes.

Another factor to ensure is that foresight is integrated into the formal governance structure, for example through the annual wheel of the board of directors or by integrating foresight analysis into the project approval procedures.

THEME 2

METHODS

In the second set of questions, our interviewees were asked to discuss **how and by what means foresight practitioners conduct their work.**

Some commonalities across the interviews included observations related to 'data eclecticism'; **all interviewees rely on a diversified palette of agents and competences to gather intel.** This includes an interdisciplinary cast of team members and/or externally operating informants who perform different types of research (e.g., eth-/netnography).

"Foresight units should work as a curator: remaining constantly vigilant for news and developments in relevant areas for the organisation is essential.

– Beth Espinalt i Capdevila, Director of Foresight Analysis, Catalanian Government

Most interviewees also agree that **foresight work is less about pinpointing specific trends and their implications, and more about the assessment of bigger, cultural signals and their strategic gravity for years to come.** Their elaboration, however, is typically devoted to a particular area of interest which are industry, stakeholder, or client specific.

Method-attuned or not, **all interviewees have exhibited or expressed a proneness to trial-and-error.** Every practitioner attests to foresight work's implementation being a work of creativity, and not just a predetermined step-by-step process.

In a few areas the interviewees differ in their outlook. When it comes to the timespan on which foresight work operates, some concentrate on a scope that hardly spans more than five years into the future, whereas others seek to explore futures 10+ years from now. Regarding use of resources, some functions focus primarily on incorporating contributions from the inside (internal surveys, co-creation workshops, input from department representatives, etc.), whereas others appear to be more outward-oriented in their data collection processes. The interviewees also differ with regards to methodological obedience. Some functions find inspiration in established methodologies but apply them rather liberally to tailor their needs. Others seem more invested in aligning with concrete concept templates to streamline their content. Most articulate that their approaches were under constant evolution, and only one stated to have evolved to the point of having perfected an own procedure.

"I really like to approach foresight in a method agnostic way as long as it helps people to embrace thinking about possible futures and possible future implications and not get stuck in one "right" or "wrong" answer.

– Maria Åkerlund, Strategic Foresight leader, Inter IKEA Group



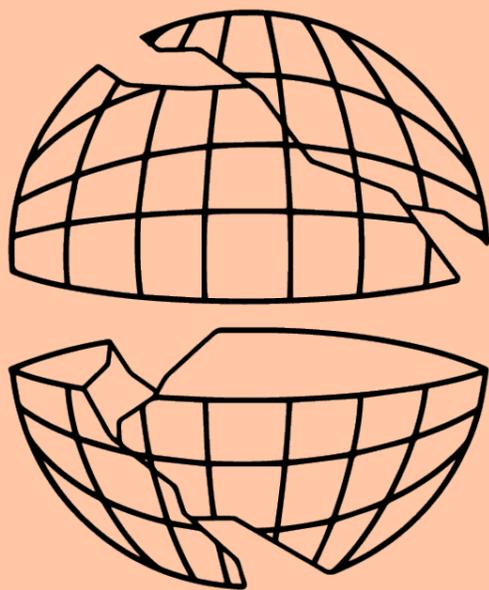
The sophistication of foresight practices varies among the interviewed practitioners, ranging from nascent to mature stages. While some practice focus on specific frameworks to guide and interpret their outputs, others adopt a more flexible approach. Satisfaction levels with their achievements also differ. A key insight is the rejection of a 'one-size-fits-all' methodology. Despite some practitioners advocating for an integrated approach, our findings indicate that rigid, formulaic methods are not essential for success. Instead, methodologies serve as starting points for initiatives aimed at shaping future strategies.

Our experience at CIFS is that all organisations work with the future in one way or another, although the structure and sophistication of that work varies. Understanding the formal as well as informal ways that foresight is conducted across an organisation is key to determining which methodologies to apply. And of course, understanding the context matters too, both with regards to the area that is being analysed and the relevant stakeholders. Drawing from a palette of different methodologies and understanding their pros and cons will enable the foresight practitioner to work in a way that is relevant to the organisation and the context it operates in.

"A rigidity in process can deny the opportunity for insight to appear. Methodologies should be rigorous, but as fluid and contextual as culture itself."

– Matt Klein, Head of Foresight at Reddit

STRUGGLES



In the third set of questions, participants were asked to discuss **what they saw as the key challenges in their work with foresight.**

Many interviewees aligned when it came to questions of transferability. Despite their experiences, **all were focused on continuously optimizing their operations and ensuring an understanding of their value-add within the organisation.** This underscores the need for experienced practitioners to facilitate smooth integration and translation of foresight into actionable insights.

What makes foresight so unique as a practice is that your work is often only as good as it's understood, embraced and integrated."

– Matt Klein, Head of Foresight at Reddit

We also took note of a **consensus on the necessity for foresight outputs to be user-friendly and understandable for the intended audience.** This, participants believe, involves transitioning from extensive reports to more intuitive and directly applicable formats.

Except for a few, **interviewees highlighted ongoing challenges in refining foresight processes and effectively communicating these insights and making the value-added visible to other internal stakeholders,** which is also a significant barrier for the foresight function when claiming internal legitimacy.

A major challenge to capture the full value of foresight is its relatively immature status as a critical organisational function, or discipline. Despite not being a new discipline, there is a widespread confusion about its purpose and application among people not operating in the field. A common struggle for practitioners is articulating their objectives in a clear yet adaptable way in different contexts. Whether aimed at boosting sales, shaping policies, or driving innovation, foresight needs holistic and clear communication to be effectively understood and utilised

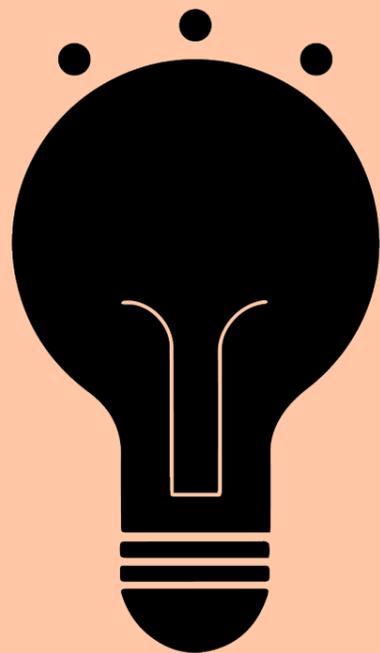


Recognizing the paradox of dealing with a complex topic in a simple way, we believe that communication of foresight in clear teams is one of the most important elements to avoid resistance. Additionally, communicating with stakeholders from the perspective of where they are rather than where they should be is essential. As expressed by Matt Klein, Head of Foresight at Reddit: "Sometimes the best way to communicate foresight work is to not use the word 'foresight'."

As most business units are fed up with tasks that are urgent (rather than important), the future often gets lower priority. Understanding the incentive structures and the way decisions are taken (and in which situations), is key for establishing a culture where long-term thinking is prioritised.

THEME 4

PURPOSE & GOALS



In this set of questions, participants were asked to discuss what they saw as the purpose of their foresight function.

In general, the interviewees shared a recognition that foresight is about analysing both the positive and negative factors that could impact an organisation's future.

Assisting colleagues in anticipating forthcoming changes, utilizing foresight techniques to drive innovation in designing new services or solutions, and ensuring that current decisions address previously identified future challenges, all contribute significantly to the organization and the value it offers to society.

– Beth Espinalt i Capdevila, Director of Foresight Analysis, Catalanian Government

The aim of the foresight work, however, differs from organisation to organisation. For some, the point of foresight is to apply 'foresight culture' to business decisions, and to distil the noise for what is important to the target. Others are committed to early detection of possible shifts and their impacts, how to respond to them, and educate on how to navigate vaster time horizons. Others still use foresight to work toward sustainability and societal betterment. Some apply it to understand consumer futures, and others see foresight as an investment into shared knowledge and innovation of business models. Finally, there are those that wish it to become influential in the governance of their organisation, relating not only to sales strategies but also to grander, socio-climatic changes, risk preparation, and internal cross-disciplinary cooperation.



Each interviewee had unique reasons for engaging in foresight, but a common theme emerged: foresight is about analysing both the positive and negative factors that could impact a business's future. Foresight is essentially about leveraging understanding to shape the future direction of the organisation.

“Foresight is not about prediction. And it's more than preparation. It's about recognizing choice... It's a death wish to be an organization on auto-pilot or entirely reactionary. Foresight helps expose the peripheral and beyond the horizon, allowing organizations to become more empowered in its choices.”

– Matt Klein, Head of Foresight at Reddit

EXPECTATIONS

In this set of questions, our participants were asked to discuss what the **expectations of foresight are from colleagues across their organisation.**

The discussions revealed that all **foresight teams are, by colleagues, expected to pick up on trends in the external environment and develop theses on how these are to possibly affect the organisation at large.** This is surely part of their work, but not the only thing they do. Most practitioners struggle with guidance on how analyses of potential long-term consequences can add value to the decisions made today. In other words, the question of **how the long-term future connects with the short-term seems crucial.**

There also seems to be a consensus that **foresight work needs to be practical.** There's no point in doing this work if it is not utilised actively, collaboratively, and taken seriously. Otherwise, it remains a purely theoretical exercise. The participants agreed that foresight is about stretching an organisation's thinking, although the ultimate aim (as discussed above) varies.

A standout among the interviewees, **the foresight team of one participant has solidified its position within the organisation;** what was once the subject of a punchline à la "first ones to get fired", is now one of the safest units in the organisation. Most of the other interviewees are still in the process of figuring out how to get there.

The bandwidth of how far into the future each of the foresight teams wants/needs to research – and thus their own definition of what foresight is to achieve – varies. **Some are very comfortable debating what might happen a decade from now, whereas others primarily apply their foresight techniques to more immediate timeframes.** Scopes clearly depend on the nature of business.

Understanding the limitations inherent in using foresight techniques to provide value, the methodology, and shed light on a topic remains invaluable. However, it's crucial to avoid the misconception that foresight should provide all the answers for our organization.

– Beth Espinalt i Capdevila, Director of Foresight Analysis, Catalanian Government



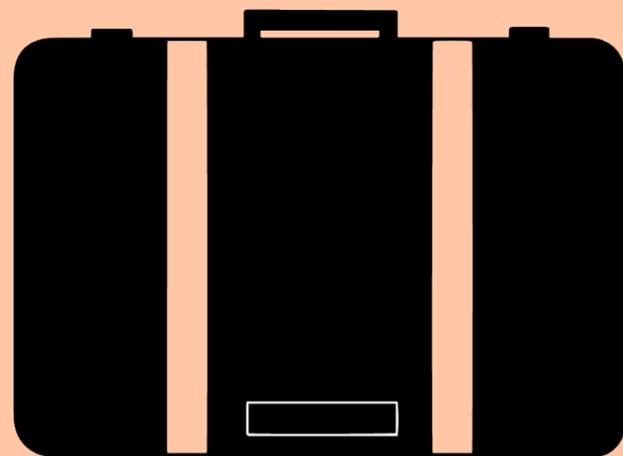
Foresight is primarily advisory in nature, though its influence varies among practitioners. Some have more significant roles in the decision-making of their organisation, while others are confined to specific areas, either by assignment or choice. **Despite differing day-to-day activities, all practitioners agree on their core function: to identify and interpret global trends and signals and integrate them into their organisation's strategy.** There is, however, a spectrum of how deeply they believe foresight should be involved in strategic management decisions, versus being an inspirational tool serving to widen the horizon.

The value of foresight predominantly resides in the change of mindset it induces. Consequently, the primary responsibility of foresight professionals extends beyond executing foresight activities. It entails a profound comprehension of their main stakeholders, their operational realities, and the areas where foresight can be advantageous.

Leveraging this insight is crucial to fostering a future-oriented perspective among key decision-makers. Grasping the character and potential impact of upcoming changes is fundamental in discerning how foresight can contribute value. The need for foresight varies significantly across domains; in sectors where the organisation can swiftly adapt, the demand is different compared to areas where a proactive stance is critical to maintain market relevance. This is also true for domains necessitating irreversible decisions.

Ideally, ensuring a subtle understanding of potential (long-term) uncertainties and how they can influence decisions taken today would allow decision makers to understand where they can focus on creating value here and now, and where there is a need for a more nuanced balance between the short-term perspective and the long-term perspective. In simple terms – an understanding of when the focus should be on running faster, and when it should be more concerned with running in the right direction.

BACKGROUND



In the last set of questions, our participants were asked to discuss their own professional history and how it led them to the foresight field.

All participants had one thing in common: None of them have a background relating to futures studies or foresight specifically. Most of them have grown to their position from within the organisation.

“Today, most practitioners, especially those in leadership roles, may not have formal education in foresight. However, this trend appears to be changing, not least because of the increase in formal educational programs in foresight that have emerged over the past decade.”

– Björn Theis, Vice President & Head of Foresight at Evonik

The backgrounds of the participants varied greatly and included journalism, marketing and insight, mechanical engineering, service design, and academia – specifically relating to mobility, biochemistry, physiology, and social sciences.



Becoming a foresight practitioner doesn't require specific educational qualifications. The key prerequisites are an interest in the field, and the ability to adapt one's thinking and creativity to relevant context. It's about possessing a mindset that enables one to navigate and interpret complex and evolving scenarios, rather than having a particular degree or formal training.

The value of networking is highly recognised among foresight practitioners – both to keep updated on approaches and methodologies, but also to discuss the big questions about potential futures. In spite of this, we see an underutilised potential for collaboration across foresight practitioners. Although the practitioners are often involved in analysis that leads to sensitive strategic decisions, the analyses themselves are usually on such a universal level that they can easily be shared – at least across non-direct competitors.



“Generative AI, a transformative force in all white-collar sectors, is also expected to significantly influence foresight. It could democratise access to complex analyses, making foresight essential for strategic decisions and shifting it from a luxury to a more universally accessible resource.”

– Laurie Smith, Head of Foresight Research at Nesta

OUTRO

Increasing complexity is a key characteristic of the changes we currently experience at individual, organisational, and societal levels, and leaders are increasingly aware of their limitations in comprehending changes affecting their organisations. Modern management theory advocates that understanding these changes shouldn't be confined to top leaders; decision-making must involve a broad spectrum of the organisation.

Consequently, we anticipate a broader integration of foresight across various industries and regions, as well as its fusion with related disciplines like innovation, design, market intelligence, risk management, leadership, and financial planning. Educational initiatives are also likely to incorporate foresight principles.

Drawing parallels from the evolution of Design Thinking, which simplified design principles for a wider audience leading to its widespread adoption, we foresee a similar trajectory for foresight. The theoretical and methodological foundations have already been laid, and we expect the spread of the foresight discipline to be driven more by effective communicators than by deep thinkers in the field. As foresight practitioners, our role is to prevent oversimplification and maintain the discipline's depth, integrity, and value.

At the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, our mission as a non-profit, independent think tank is to empower individuals and organisations to envision and shape their futures. We focus on building capabilities to navigate potential futures, contributing to a society prepared for upcoming challenges and opportunities. This mission aligns with our role in the joint UNESCO chair with Aarhus University, where we explore Anticipatory Leadership and Futures Capabilities

We invite you, as a foresight practitioner, to actively engage with us by sharing your valuable insights. You can participate in our new network dedicated to enhancing and evolving the foresight function or explore opportunities to join our partnership program. Join us in shaping the future of foresight!

The future belongs to no one, yet to everyone!

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