

If it Works, Use it: Symposium Response by Graham Molitor

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Expressing adverse attitudes towards "fact finding" games such as scenarios, I never anticipated that my comments would engender ire among fellow practitioners. After all, everybody has their own style. I hasten to reassert that creative-minded futurists may find this approach a useful technique. An inveterate researcher and dedicated futurist, my best recommendation is: "If it works, use it."

For "pick and shovel" type researchers (such as me) there's nothing like "discussing" targets of concern or interest with as large (and useful) a group of on-point experts. The collective inputs and perspectives from knowledgeable participants, more often than not, yield sound judgment and surmise about impending developments.

Now, let me acknowledge that engaging experts face-to-face is easy to recommend and encourage. Rarely, however, is it directly available to most researchers. "Conversations" with inaccessible experts don't have to be (indeed, rarely are) face-to-face. There are other ways of tapping expert opinion. Secondary sources representing expert inputs are readily available. A vast range of scientific and technical literature – not infrequently to be found in limited circulation and obscure journals – chronicle countless expert thoughts and ruminations of things yet to come. Such input suffices for face-to-face or other personal exchanges between information-seeker and information-giver.

Beyond expert opinion are many undercurrents and patterns of change revealing and reinforcing the trend, direction and timing of impending developments. Coalescing such "change-driving trendlines" reveals numerous forces of change that reveal and corroborate impending developments. The forecasting model I pieced together, element by element over nearly 50 years of research, entails some 22-35 different quantitative trendlines. Plotting and overlaying these trendlines reveal impending pressures that prompt outcomes decades or even longer into the future.

That model, based on countless research projects, revealed and reinforced that matters "on the brink of 'imminent' change" actually tend to develop and emerge over very long periods of time. Advances in every discrete element in the array of forces driving change unfold incrementally over time. As a result, combinations of select timelines that pressure and prompt ongoing development prove effective in projecting change.

In pursuit of futures studies, I relied upon my 25,000 volume library of books on or about the future and a roomful of filing cabinets packed with previous papers, lectures and clipped articles.

The problem with such a massive resource was mining it. It simply took time to recall which author(s) to consult, let alone where exactly to find the passage(s) or material(s) being sought. That approach represents the old way of tackling forecasting research. It still works.

Fortunately, research methods and capabilities have drastically changed for the better. Currently, researchers have access to a global data base of overwhelmingly voluminous materials. Answers to anything and everything are easily accessible. Global perspectives in all its dimensions and directions are at a researcher's fingertips and keyboard. Efficiently and swiftly accessing and mining this data involves "search engines" that can screen and almost instantaneously pinpoint specifics. Modern communications technologies enormously enhance and speed up research of any kind. Torrents of data can be quickly assembled to sate inquiries.

Researchers, it goes without saying, must be confident and comfortable using methods they find useful. Practitioners simply vary in their approaches to anticipating ongoing and oncoming futures. My comments were not inveighed to discourage relying upon scenario techniques to fill out the voids or probe vital potentials. Decades of experience shared here simply reveal the soul of this researcher. In the scale of evaluating techniques and methodologies, some work better than others. My pessimistic outlook regarding scenarios shouldn't jade or deter those who find that particular technique useful. Many thanks for the fruitful commentaries. On balance, I feel that this dialogue adds to full and fair consideration of a useful forecasting method – precisely the object of professional journals.

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