

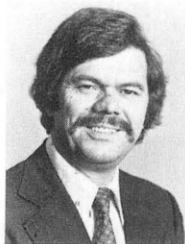
# On the future of human organizations: an overview

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The visible world  
is no longer a reality  
and the unseen world  
is no longer a dream.

W.B. Yeats



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### 1. Introduction

The internal aspects of the process of conceiving and managing an organization have traditionally been the focus of most writings on the future of the organization and its management. For example, one finds considerable interest among management scholars and practitioners alike in the organizational structure of an enterprise and the way of living and working within such an organization. The usual questions raised and answered by management writers read something like: "Would the internal organizational structure be more hierarchical (bureaucratic) or would it be less hierarchical and more egalitarian?" "Would work in the factory and the office become more automated to the extent that more meaningful work will be done by R2D2's and 3CPO's or would things reverse back to more jobs for humans and fewer for machines?"

This focus on the internal workings of the organization stems from the conviction that an organization which is well-organized internally should be able to withstand any external disturbance. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that successes and failures in the corporate world are more often than not attributed to drastic changes in the external environment and the organization's ability or inability to change its structure and functions to accommodate and to prosper or to profit from the change rather than being destroyed by it. Thus, it appears that it is more appropriate to focus on the possible state of the external environment for the foreseeable future and

then to attempt to relate these possible developments to the changes in managerial philosophies and practices which will secure a smooth and profitable transition of the organization into the future world.

## 2. Futurology: origins and developments

People have always been interested in the future. This interest was not merely idle curiosity about the unknown but also stemmed from a sincere desire to plan for contingencies which might upset otherwise sound plans. Thinking about the future is something that one does not only because of Thomas Jefferson's "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past", but also because of practical reasons. In the history of futuristic thinking one can sense two rather distinct schools of thought, so to speak, or two rather well-identifiable streams of thinking. One might be termed 'the determinists', those who believe that the future is in our hands and therefore we can make whatever we desire out of it; the other, 'futilists', those who believe that there is no way of knowing what the future is going to bring and therefore we shouldn't even try to prepare for it.

Human history is replete with examples of incidents exemplifying these two assumptions about the future. During the long period of civilizations's existence, there have been both individuals and/or nations that have had a rather fixed idea of what the future ought to be and have accordingly devised some rather bizarre schemes to direct civilization toward that future. Although the 'bad' examples of this kind of futuristic policy making are popularized, one should not forget for example, that Adam Smith, Henry Ford, or J.D. Rockefeller, 'knew' that the future of the Western world would be resting upon specialization, free economic activity, the automobile, and an energy system powered primarily by burning petroleum. The so-called free enterprise system, the automobile, and the super-automated oil refinery all stand as testimonials to the actions these individuals took to ensure the realization of their visions of a future world.

Today, there is a well-defined and respected discipline which deals exclusively with the study of the future. This discipline is known as Futurology or Futurism, which may be defined as the *study of the possibilities of tomorrow and the efforts to convert these possibilities into preferred probabilities*. It should be noted that futurology is concerned both

with

(a) dreaming up some future possibilities or worlds and

(b) with a set of societal and politico-economic changes which are necessary for converting these desirable possibilities into preferred possibilities.

To that extent contemporary futurisms represents an *active* human involvement rather than passive dreaming about the future along the lines of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984*. In both of the latter cases, the writers conceived of a future world which was much different from their contemporary world but they themselves did nothing to directly influence their political and economic or business leaders to bring about their described worlds.

The World Future Society (WFS) is one of the best-organized and most popular movements of contemporary futurism. The World Future Society is an international organization of futurists all over the world with some 24 000 members in 80 countries. The aims of the World Future Society are described as follows:

The Society is an association of people interested in future social and technological developments. The purpose of the World Future Society is to serve as an unbiased forum and clearing house for scientific and scholarly forecasts, investigations and intellectual explorations of the future. The Society's objectives, as stated in its charter, are as follows:

(1) To contribute to a reasoned awareness of the future and the importance of its study, without advocating particular ideologies or engaging in political activities.

(2) To advance responsible and serious investigation of the future.

(3) To promote the development and improvement of methodologies for the study of the future.

(4) To increase public understanding of future-oriented activities and studies.

(5) To facilitate communication and cooperation among organizations and individuals interested in studying or planning for the future.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Futurology in education and politics

The influence of the WFS on the U.S.A. and world educational, political and business systems as well as

<sup>1</sup> From the WFS advertisement in its main publication *The Futurist: A Journal of Forecasts, Trends and Ideas about the Future* (Washington, DC).

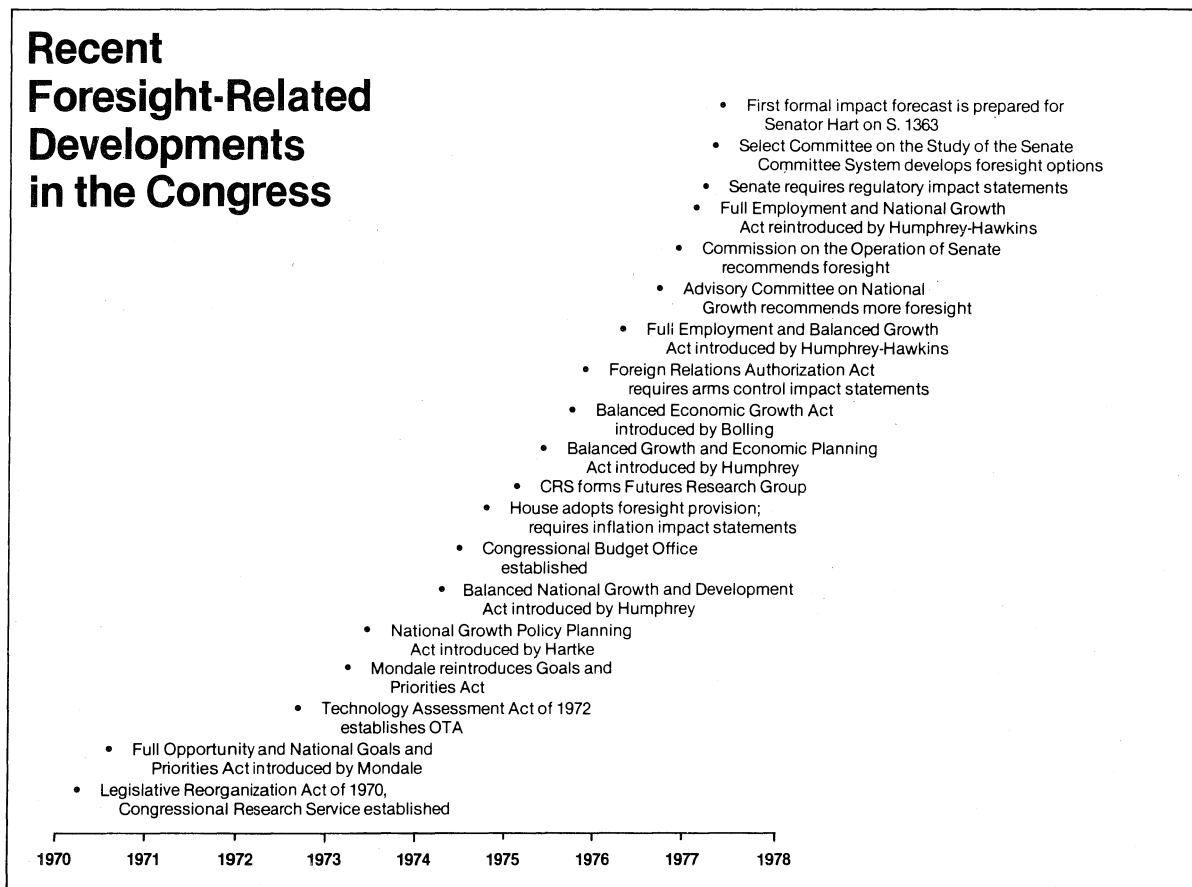


Fig. 1.

on life in general has been profound. In addition to the so-called 'future orientation' of many curricula in high school and higher education there are universities which offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in Future Studies <sup>2</sup>.

In the political arena, political leaders the world over are developing a tremendous interest in the future. The U.S. Congress has recently increased its efforts to identify emerging issues and pinpoint the potential long-term consequences of legislation. To help provide this 'foresight', Congress has established several new organizations and given additional responsibilities to some old ones.

From modest beginnings in the mid-1960s, foresight is becoming a significant component of the legislative process in the U.S. Congress and is still gather-

ign momentum (see Fig. 1). In recent years, the House of Representatives and the Senate have expanded their 'foresight organizations' and have required more foresight of their own committees. In addition, both houses have studied and developed proposals for more foresight, including a Congressional Foresight Office and have formed the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future. The public statements of both President Jimmy Carter and Chief Justice Warren Burger also have reflected an interest in the use of futures information, indicating that 'foresight' may spread through the executive and judicial branches, following the early lead of the Congress [9,32].

#### 4. Futurology in the corporate world

The business community is slowly but steadily moving towards enhancing the sense of futurity in the

<sup>2</sup> For example, the University of Houston at Clear Lake City, among other schools, offers a Master of Science in Studies of the Future.

corporate world by encouraging executive decision-makers to *relate their present actions to future consequences*. Wayne Boucher, Secretary of The Futures Group, a research and consulting firm in Glastonbury, CT, believes that more and more companies will be hiring futurists to prevent or at least to predict and adequately prepare for the crises that have been catching them off guard in recent years – the energy shortage, wage and price controls, and the environmental outcry. “Times are perilous”, Mr. Moucher says. “It’s a crisis with a capital C (for industry). And the changes will accelerate.” [15].

Corporate planning departments of old are far from adequate today. Using economic data, marketing statistics and a smattering of demographic information, they merely estimated the profit potential of new products over a future of no more than five years. As Mr. Boucher puts it [15]: “They looked at birth rates without considering birth-control pills.” Futurists, on the other hand, try to peer as far as 30 years into the future and bring a host of social and political factors to bear on a number of corporate problems. Usually trained as economists or market researchers, they are apt to be voracious readers who have an ability to develop contacts and to spot trends. Their function, though not yet formally named in many companies, is beginning to be called ‘social and political forecasting’, ‘environmental scanning’ or ‘early warning systems’.”<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Managerial futurity

Several years ago I gave a talk at an Executive Development Program on the subject of the future. A month or so later one of the participants sent me a plaque with the inscription:

The trouble with our time  
is that the future is not  
what it used to be.

Paul Valery

<sup>3</sup> Jay Mendell, an independent consultant, has for the last two or three years been organizing seminars on Early Warning signals for the AMA; he also does a series on *Business Tomorrow* for the WFS. Interestingly enough, the *Conference Board* – an organization for business and economic research – has recently established an Emerging Issues Systems program in its Management Research Division. (See also Conference Board *The Future Role of Business in Society*, 1977.) Similarly, the AMA has run a survey on ‘The Future of Business’ [30].

This inscription epitomizes the difficulty most managers have when they contemplate the future. The future used to be rather simple for them. In general the manager whose job was to do long-range planning (e.g., financial and marketing forecasting), ‘knew’ that the next few years would be more like the past few years with perhaps a few changes here and there. Overall, however, next year’s sales would be equal to last year’s sales plus a certain percentage increasing depending upon the increase of the population, customers’ income, etc. The future, in other words, belonged to the manager; he or she could do whatever was deemed desirable.

By the middle of the Sixties, it began to become increasingly obvious that the future was not what it used to be. Because, as was pointed out earlier, population statistics were compiled and extrapolated without taking into account the birth control pill and societal attitude changes towards reproduction [29, p. 8]; “some 79 million hypothetical Americans and a hypothetical \$ 177 billion in yearly Gross National Product appears simply to have vanished from America of the year 2000.” What actually did happen? No natural or man-made disaster has occurred. Was it a calculation error? Of course not. What actually happened is that the ‘methods’ of both thinking about and forecasting the future were inadequate.

How does the contemporary manager go about developing what William James referred to as a sense of futurity? In other words, *how do today’s managers relate their today’s actions to their future consequences*? We do not subscribe to the popular philosophy that unless every manager becomes a trained futurist organizations will collapse. What we adhere to is a philosophy which espouses the doctrine that since managerial actions have planned and unplanned immediate and future consequences it behooves every modern manager to attempt to carefully think about the future consequences as much as he or she does about the immediate results of managerial actions.

It must be said at the outset that before deciding what approach to use managers must clarify for themselves their general viewpoint toward the future. For example, one must show alliance with or disassociate from the following statements:

- (a) I saw the future and it’s rosy!
- (b) I saw the future and it doesn’t work!
- (c) Posterity be damned! What has it done for me lately?
- (d) Let’s enjoy the here and now.

(e) The future is in my hands — as it always has been.

(f) I never saw the future so I can't do anything about it.

(g) Well, by then I'll be long gone!

As a general rule the manager must remember what the Greek philosopher Epicurus said about the future some 2300 years ago around 300 B.C.:

Remember that the future is neither ours nor wholly not ours, so that we may neither count on it as sure to come, nor abandon hope of it as certain not to be.

This might indeed be the mandate of a group of Human Systems Management members and readers: to provide an arena for the exchange of ideas, and the description of trends and technologies (both concrete and conceptual) pertinent to the design and management of human organizations. This writer's immediate interest is with the corporate world (business enterprises) but in this age of true interdependence, narrowing one's interest that much would prove the truth of L.L. White's aphorism that "the trouble with our society is our total preoccupation with partial ideas."

Human Systems Management is an organization whose members are convinced that conventional methods of approaching the study of today's exceedingly complex and interlocking organizations which dominate this perplexed world of ours have outlived their usefulness. Although most practitioners of conventional wisdom see nothing serious in most of the recent organizational collapses (e.g., Penn Central, Franklin National Bank, New York City, the hundreds of small private colleges that have closed their doors, the chaotic governments of Italy . . . ad infinitum) which they erroneously consider normal, unrelated and temporary malfunctions of an otherwise perfectly healthy system, there should be no doubt in anyone's mind that there is something generically wrong.

We may have to wait until the historians of these twilight years of the 20th century make all this clear. However, we might then be too late and we might have too little opportunity to do anything about it since most of the consequences of these organizational collapses might be irreversible. On the other hand, we may choose to pay heed to the weak signals and interpret them as miners used to interpret the death of their canaries. There are numerous spec-

ulative interpretations of these early warning signals ranging from the simplistic view which attributes everything to governmental intervention to the extreme liberal and radical view of the evil, incompetent 'organization man'. The present author strongly believes that there appears to be a mounting groundswell of suspicion that humankind is beginning to rapidly approach some limits to its organizational abilities.

Although convincing theories and empirical investigations are not easy to be found, there appears to be enough support for the supposition that we face a human dilemma (paradox) of a scarcity of organizational talent in an organization dominated world. In other words, although there appears to be a tremendous demand for more organizations (i.e., institutions which are supposed to satisfy humankind's needs which the human alone, as an individual, cannot satisfy) there exists a huge lack of talent for planning, designing and managing organizations in such a way as to enable them to perform well.

It is hoped that HSM members will begin thinking about conceptualizing, designing and managing complex organizations from a futuristic viewpoint. Until now the problem of the creation of an organization resembled that of undifferentiated growth: a 'successful' organization has been used as the main model for a *new* and *different* organization while the successful model remaining pretty much the same. The trouble with that approach however, was long ago identified by Cicero: "He remained the same except the same was no longer fitting."

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