

Why you need the news!

By Jenni Murphy-Scanlon

Thinking strategically inherently involves thinking about the future. Strategic thinkers can make linkages between decisions today and the future impacts. If you are unable to envisage how the future may be different to the present, then you are unlikely to understand how to start changing products, services and processes to be successful over time. But envisaging how the future may be different can be difficult. Luckily, there are plenty of others applying their minds to the issue. You can start being more strategic just by reading the news differently.

It seems to be commonly accepted that we live in a world of information overload. The difficult side of that is in identifying the information that is accurate and useful. The useful side is that it's possible to find out about anything – including what the future is likely to look like. So here are some tips about good sources to find information about the future, and how to spot more reliable information.

Look for trends in news sources: Lots of people read the newspaper or an on-line news source everyday and are certainly not strategic thinkers. The trick is in how you view the information. Strategic thinkers look for concepts, trends and practices that are likely to change some aspect of the future and then consider what that might mean for their organization. It's also useful to have reliable information. Reading just one newspaper or on-line source is unlikely to be very reliable unless that editor happens to have amazing insight. Reading a variety of newspapers and/or on-line sources and watching for trends is likely to be more reliable. It may seem obvious to keep up with business trends, but this is not the only useful information. Look for articles about technology, demographics and lifestyle trends. Think about your organization and customers and what impacts on your product or service. Look out for information about those elements.

Notice the less topical news: Editors tend to focus us in on what they think is newsworthy and topical at the time. Sometimes relevant and 'trend' information can be missed while some other high profile event is occurring and getting most of the coverage. Take note of the small updates and not just the 'big' stories. Find other sources of news that might cause impacts on your industry. These are likely to be specialist magazines and journals, and more in-depth news publications. The reliability of this information is also likely to be greater than in daily news sources because journalists spend longer researching and there is greater credibility at stake.

IT people know more than they realise: A huge impact on how we do things is the progress of technology. The people planning for technology and involved in the IT world usually take an interest in what is being developed years ahead of its release to the market. When I was in a corporate role I worked hard to have contacts in IT so I could get my hands on the 5-year IT plan - it was the most useful plan in the organization! In my experience IT people will happily talk for hours about all the future technology we are likely to have, even though they may not make the strategic linkages to processes, people and products/services. Look for credible sources. Ask your IT experts which on-line sites they use to get information. IT industry magazines are a good source also, and you will find websites references in them. Some of these will allow you to sign up for updates. Public libraries usually stock magazines that can be read on site free of charge, or if you're lucky your local café may have some.

Government Departments have information: The information that is useful will differ depending on your industry and which countries your market covers. It's possible to search and obtain some generic data free of charge online. Most agencies must plan ahead to provide resources for their communities and have already analysed a range of demographic and other information. Enter the agency topic and the country you wish to learn about into your search engine. When you find a site that is useful to your industry, have a look for a sign-up button that allows you to get updates direct to your mailbox or e-device. If it is offered, sign up. You can always unsubscribe later if it turns out not to be as useful as you thought. Set up a rule to send messages from this address into a specific folder. This is an easy way to collect information over time. You can read it at regular intervals to look for trends.

Futurists do some of the work for you: If you are not too keen to process trends and think about consequences of technology, demography and other elements on the future, never fear. There are people out there who love making future predictions and have made a profession of it – they are called Futurists. Of course, like economists and scientists, all the futurists do not always agree. If you're interested, check out some well-known futurists by searching futurists on Wikipedia.

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