



SEE THE WORLD ANEW

"One of the main purposes for doing this was to allow more unconventional thinking to take place, to encourage people to think outside the box and consider not just what is known but what could be"



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SEE THE WORLD ANEW

Futures encourage us to think in a different way by challenging our assumptions and mind-sets. This is crucial if we are to uncover more breakthrough sustainability solutions that move on from eco-efficiency and compliance measures. Without searching for new ways to think, efforts to focus on the future will likely reinforce current logic and business as usual.

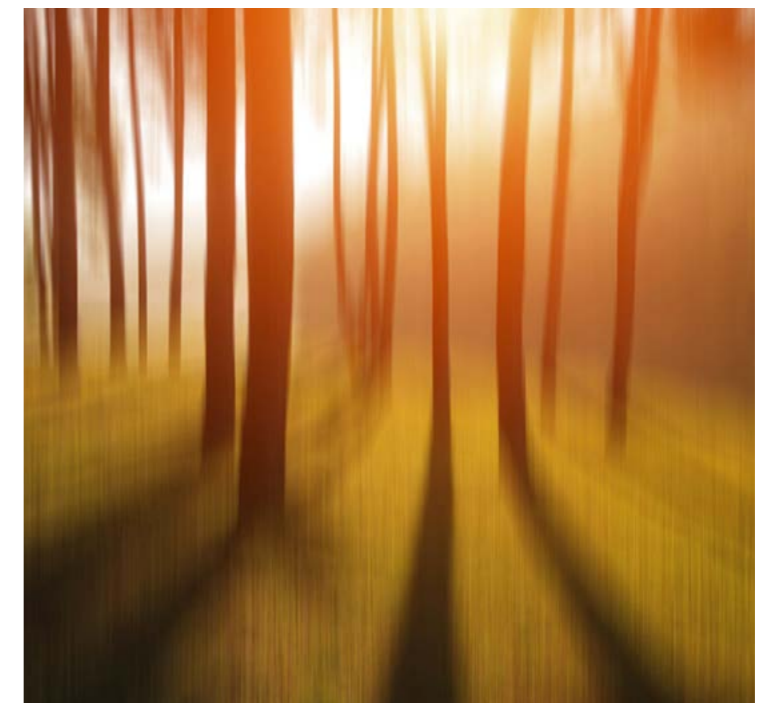
Thinking beyond existing concepts is difficult: some companies are exploring different exercises within their futures work, particularly scenarios, to help trigger such shifts in thinking patterns. An example would be the use of lateral thinking exercises, where instead of building on existing ideas, we disrupt mental pathways from a different angle to create new perspectives on a problem (see [Edward de Bono's Lateral Thinking](#) work for an example of this). The companies that participated in this report described some of the ways we can assist employees to think differently and facilitate these mental 'prison breaks' in the context of sustainability challenges.

IMMERSION

Immersion activities attempt to displace and absorb participants into an imaginary future world created by descriptive or normative scenarios. During workshops, activities such as role-playing future characters of various stakeholders aim to activate the imagination and see the world from a different vantage point. Placing oneself in the shoes of a different person can build empathy and eliminate or modify existing assumptions: essentially, being part of something fictional helps to alter one's reality. These activities offer unthreatening opportunities to enable individuals across the organization, particularly decision-makers, to open their minds to the "inconceivable" or explore topics traditionally considered "taboo" or "out of bounds". They should be fun, creative and free, offering the opportunity to play around, exploring life.

It is important to have an experienced facilitator to guide the activities, help people feel comfortable and assist the process through games and stimuli.

For example, in some workshops Shell scenarios teams try to think about the daily routine of an end-consumer in a given environment to more deeply ask what does their life actually look like? During this sort of immersion activity the group might try to consider questions such as, what do they eat for breakfast, how do they get to work, what will it be like in a supermarket, what sorts of issues will they care about? Imagining mundane everyday tasks can help to highlight and contrast the differences in future or alternative lifestyles with those of today ([here's a good example of such a narrative](#)).



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VISUALIZATION

Visualization and re-creation of future scenarios can take immersion activities a step further, attempting to bring the futures to life and ‘off the page’ for decision makers. By providing a more physical outlet, futures can be made more tangible, stimulating the imagination.

BT has its own set of customer showrooms based on emerging or imagined rooms of the future. Covering different life situations (for example a hospital room, a shop, a bank branch) the rooms serve as a trigger to discover the sorts of future experiences or challenges customers might face, providing a base for discussion around potential solutions. By reconstructing the future and making it ‘real’, the conversation between clients and account managers can be enriched and lead to more appropriate, preferable and potentially transformative solutions. The rooms also create the chance to demonstrate new technologies and test out how they work and are used.

To create a more vivid impression of the future, Deutsche Post DHL created short video clips representing their own set of [2050 scenarios](#). They worked to understand, concretely, the ways people might live, how they would go about their daily lives – thinking about the future from the perspective of the individual and what this would mean for society and business as a whole.

⁴ Collier, P. (2009) Wars, Guns & Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places. London, Vintage Books. p.59

ABOUT THE VIDEO:

How... would you imagine the world in 2050? DHL created a video depicting their own set of 2050 scenarios to understand how people would go about their daily lives and the consequences for DHL.

“Once you put yourself into the shoes of people you can see some things much more clearly”, Deutsche Post DHL.

VIDEO FROM: <https://goo.gl/yEVBbi>

TAKE PEOPLE OUTSIDE THEIR EVERYDAY CONTEXT

Recreating a future world can require a lot of resources: similar benefits can be achieved by taking people out of their everyday environment and immersing them in a different real world situation. For example, Procter & Gamble took a team to Kenya for a week to demonstrate the real impact their technologies can have. As a result of that one trip, four ideas were processed through the innovation pipeline, demonstrating how successful a fresh perspective and context can be. Inspiration need not only come from the exotic; “it can also be taking the team to a landfill, so less sexy but as effective in terms of: ‘is this the legacy we want to have?’” Similarly, ERM mentioned away-weekends as a crucial opportunity to enable senior management to remove themselves from a narrower view that their everyday work environment can sometimes reinforce. Taking a step back can enable the company to consider the future with a new outlook.

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS

Providing new contexts and new combinations of ideas can also be achieved by asking people to work together who do not usually do so. Novozymes believes that “innovation is all about creating opportunities and then seeing opportunities where there are none to be seen today. To have that creative approach to things you need a different atmosphere, a different culture”. Doing something as simple as placing people with different nationalities and different cultural backgrounds in a project team can help to gain perspectives on futures and sustainability challenges that would be impossible to obtain through the eyes of a team from a single nationality or corporate function only. The benefits of diversity have been empirically researched – for instance by the economist Paul Collier in his work examining economic stability and growth at the bottom of the pyramid. Ethnic diversity ‘raises the productivity of a team because it increases the range of skills, knowledge and perspectives, and these help problem solving.’⁴



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Many companies' futures remain on a relatively close timeframe, largely covering the next 10-15 years, or even sooner. Extending futures out to a more distant point encourages more creative, imaginative thinking, but more importantly, discontinuity with today's mind-sets. Shell has even performed exercises thinking out to 2100, which obviously leads to a very different future view. One need only consider the changes that have occurred in the last century. Although this timeline is perhaps not appropriate for all organizations, thinking, for example, to 2050 opens a broader window of options helping to see the bigger shifts required. At times, close futures are too aligned with current trends, and therefore have the tendency to encourage ideas that build within these trends incrementally rather than disrupting them completely.

DIFFERENTIAL THINKING

Some companies may understandably struggle to engage with futures. The Confederation of Indian Industry's ITC Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Development (CESD) addressed this through a 'differential thinking' approach. This helps companies to develop ideas for transformative solutions by thinking differently about the business they are in and challenging their incumbent perspective.

Companies often define their business by the products they make and sell, which, over time, can limit the ability to explore beyond these portfolios. Differential thinking is about stepping outside of the business and instead asking 'what problem am I actually trying to solve'? So, for example, is it, how to make a better car or how better to move people from one place to another? Taking a problem-solution approach rather than a problem-product approach can identify less obvious business opportunities.

In contexts of extremely rapid change, the CESD suggests that scenario planning can lag behind the pace of change. Consider the cement industry: cement manufacturers have achieved reductions in their environmental footprints through advancements in mining and production technology, but construction, particularly in developing parts of the world, continues at an incredible pace. Forecasting and scenario-planning would confirm the on-going development requirement, and therefore the need for cement products. This would provide the cement industry with significant confidence but whether we should be constructing with 20th century infrastructure may not be so easily considered. Differential thinking challenges whether the construction sector needs to base its growth on the use of cement: can it be decoupled? What is the problem that cement companies are solving for society?

Encouraging companies to think beyond their industry's current value proposition and consider the implications of 'unthinkable' future developments, can reveal totally different and potentially transformative business opportunities.

AN ETERNAL FUTURE?

The Finnish, when investigating the consequences of establishing a site to store their nuclear waste, had to think out as far as 100,000 years into the future, exploring how they could prepare a site so that it would not be disturbed for the hazardous life of the radioactive spent fuel. No structure in human history has stayed standing for such a period, let alone a society lasted for anything close to that long. They couldn't even be sure if language as we know it would still exist. This complex scenario exercise, involving a diverse group from physicists to faith leaders, was brought to life in the film, [Into Eternity](#) and is a example of how far futures can be pushed.



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