

Crowdsourcing the Future: The Foresight Process at Finpro

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I am interested in the processes of how various companies and organisations develop and execute their foresight work. In my opinion, the process of foresight is at least as important, if not more, than the results foresight generates. In many companies, the mysterious curtain of secrecy can hide the process of how foresight is carried out. Of course, we cannot expect companies to disclose proprietary processes, but some indication of validating the results or establishing reliability remains absent. However, there are exceptions. Royal Dutch Shell has published a workbook of scenario processes (which can be located on their internet pages). Plus, public organisations generally tend to be more open with their foresight activities and encouragement of discussion.

As a futurist with extensive experience of working in and with various public organisations and companies, I have seen many ways of implementing foresight. I am astonished about the wide gap between professional and ad hoc foresight work. Disappointment may even be used to describe some of the low level foresight efforts that I have observed. In this article, I will share my experience of organisational foresight work and present the idea of using crowdsourcing as a new method for foresight. I will provide a list of experience-based Dos and Don'ts in foresight as a future guide to those seeking to enhance or initiate their own foresight efforts. As a case study, I will describe the foresight process at Finpro, an organisation that has a new view of organisational foresight: foresight activities are crowdsourced. Foresight is everybody's business at Finpro, and everyone contributes.

Wisdom of Crowds as a Tool for Anticipating the Future

When an organisational foresight process is linked to the strategy process, foresight becomes a serious asset. The advantage of this approach is the fact that top management is both committed to and an active participant in the process unifying, positioning and directing the organisation towards growth. However, there are disadvantages too. Foresight activities that are only limited to the interest of top management can isolate the management and the valuable information of the employees is thereby potentially prevented from being injected into the foresight process. When this occurs, the process is undermined.

It is my opinion, that employees interfacing with clients see more indicators and weak signals of change than top management (who are often busy with their daily duties). It is for this reason

alone that everyone in the organisation should be connected to the foresight activities and internal and intra-organisational communications and signal collection, and sense making must become viral.

The wisdom of crowds is a concept that has become more popular in public discussion because of a couple of bestselling books: the *Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki and *Wikinomics - How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* by Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams. The idea behind the wisdom of crowds is that a crowd of people, without knowing each other's opinions, make better choices than selected experts. According to Surowiecki (2004: XVII) "[if] you put together a big enough and diverse enough group of people and ask them to 'make decisions affecting matters of general interest', that group's decision will, over time, be 'intellectually [superior] to the isolated individual', no matter how smart or well-informed he is."

The idea of wisdom of crowds is already recognised by various companies and organisations. Tapscott and Williams (2006) listed examples of usage of the wisdom of crowds: Linus Torvalds, who created Linux, an open source operating system, Canadian Goldcorp Inc. who managed to find gold by the "open source" exploration approach and Procter & Gamble whose target was to secure 50% of their new product and service ideas outside of the company via their Connect and Development internet platform. The use of the crowd's wisdom does have some prerequisites to make it to work. According to Tapscott and Williams' *Wikinomics* (similar to the wisdom of crowds) this is based on four ideas: openness, peering, sharing and acting globally. Surowiecki further emphasises that diversity, independence and decentralisation are needed to achieve the wisdom of crowds.

Using the wisdom of crowds is not that far from foresight activities. There are some tools and applications where the wisdom of crowds has been used: prediction markets and the Delphi method. Prediction markets sites, like Belfair, Intrude and Iowa Electronic Markets are, in the words of Mansk: "...future markets in which prices are used to predict future events." Futurists usually avoid predicting, and instead use a tool more familiar to them, that specifically uses the principle of the wisdom of crowds: the Delphi method, where the opinions on certain developments in the future of a group of experts are asked for.

There is also a third way to use the wisdom of crowds in foresight practices: to collect weak signals or future information by crowdsourcing. In practice, this is happening already in some internet based trend services like springwise.com and trendhunter.com. Springwise, for example, states on their website they have 8,000+ registered spotters around the world. These spotters send in their observations about new businesses from all around the world and earn rewards for good spottings. However, to my knowledge, this kind of approach is not commonly used inside organisations. Finpro is a pioneering exception in this area who is adopting a crowdsourcing approach to its foresight process.

Foresight at Finpro

Finpro, formerly the Finnish Export Council and Finnish Foreign Trade Association, was founded by Finnish companies in 1919 with the purposes of promot-

ing Finnish exports. Today, Finpro's objective is to successfully grow and commercialise Finnish companies and technologies globally. While Finpro partners with all Finnish companies, much of its energies are targeted at small and medium sized companies (SMEs). Finpro's activities are funded in part by the Finnish government, and partly through fee-for-services and membership fees. Despite its size: 375 experts working in 40 trade centres in over 53 countries, Finpro's genes are very global. Currently, foresight activities have been elevated to strategy level, and are one of the most important activities at Finpro. The fact that success comes from understanding the forthcoming changes in various markets and how to translate these signals into "phenomena" has been incorporated into both Finpro's strategy and client methodology.

Finpro is one of the few organisations, to my knowledge, that uses crowdsourcing as a mainstay of its foresight activities. The organisation uses a weak signal crowdsourcing tool called TrendWiki, offered by the Finnish software company Data Rangers, where I was one of the co-developers of the idea and the initial tool foundation. With this tool, it is easy to crowdsource signals of change and to cluster signals into phenomena. The tool includes a simple-to-use "report signal" button that has been installed on Finpro's e-Internet browser. By clicking this button, log on is automatic and sending a signal is easy. A signal is anything new that catches the sender's attention. It can be as simple as reporting a new fact, for example reporting of an interesting blog post about a new innovation, an interesting point heard at a conference, or even just the fact that one noticed a change in how traffic patterns are shifting. All of these are then added to the TrendWiki database inside Finpro where the cumulative results are shared, commented upon, refined or expanded and then converted to patterns and phenomena, (See Figure 1).

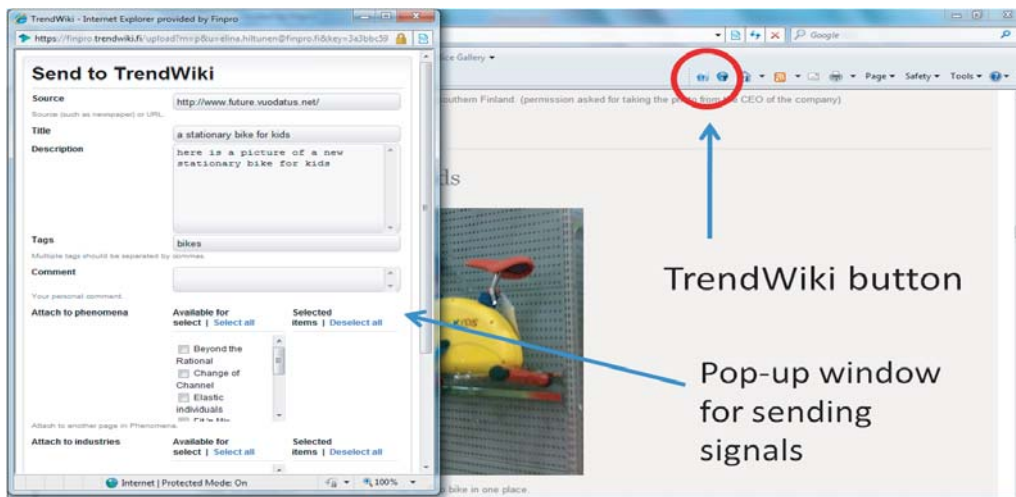


Figure 1. Every Finproner has a TrendWiki button on their internet browser. On clicking this button, a pop-up window appears and a signal can easily be recorded and sent to the TrendWiki database.

Finpro's TrendWiki signal database includes signals sent by Finproners from all over the world. This database is open to all employees, which means, in practice, that all the Finproners have the possibility of adding, commenting on and editing signals and further refining and enhancing the database. In 2010, over 7,000 signals were collected by Finpro's global network. The high amount of signals is explained by two facts: (1) all Finproners are committed to collecting and interacting with signals and (2) all Finpro employees have come to recognise the value of collecting signals and transforming them to phenomena for Finpro and for using them in their client work. In fact, the goal is to collect a defined target number of weak signals each month, in order to maintain the accuracy and critical mass of TrendWiki. It is anticipated that this process will become intuitive for all Finproners in 2011.

While the collection of signals is an ongoing process, Finpro's foresight team currently meet twice a year for workshops to cluster the signals (see figure 2), the aim of the workshops is to identify interesting phenomena and enter them into public discussion in Finland. This material is also used when working with clients - Finnish companies who hire Finpro to either grow their business or commercialise their technologies. This particular foresight service is called TrendPulse, which is an advanced and interactive signal processing method. In TrendPulse, Finpro works with clients to address specific issues or concerns that result in strategic problem solving or anew positioning for their company.

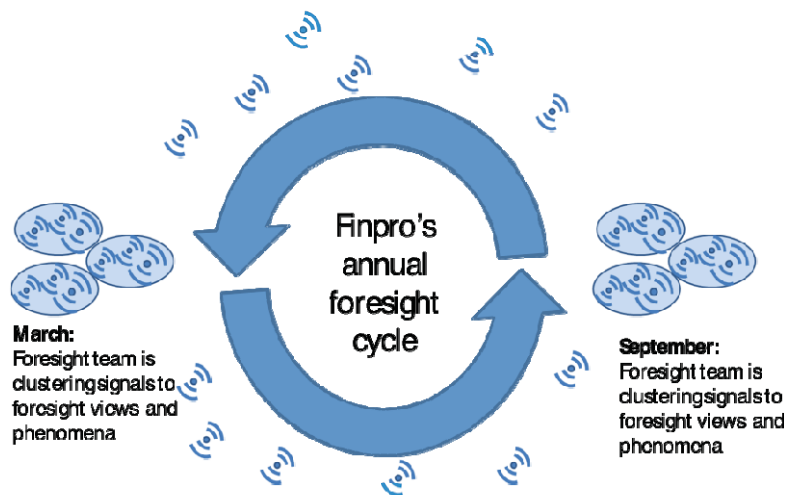


Figure 2. Finpro's foresight process: All Finproners collect signals throughout the year, which are analysed and clustered into phenomena.

Challenges for Crowdsourcing Future Information

There are both challenges and advantages when crowdsourcing weak signals and future information in organisations. These are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Challenges in crowdsourcing the future in organisational context and ways in which Finpro is coping with these challenges.*

Challenges in Crowdsourcing the future	Challenge solved at Finpro
The tool	-The tool, TrendWiki, has an easy user interface. Also, people are trained to use the tool
Motivating people	-Foresight is a way to get more client projects. -Foresight is one of Finpro's strategic cornerstones
Training people to crowdsourcing signals	-Practical training for signal spotting and to use the tool
Feedback	-The name of the spotter of the signal is shown to everybody -All employees have access to the signals and the opportunity to give feedback and comments -The signals sent by the employees are used by the Foresight team in customer work

The most important challenge is motivating people. In many organisations, people are very busy with their daily work, and having a new task such as being a signal spotter may not be fully understood or appreciated at first; so there could be either resistance, rejection or both. In my opinion, motivation can be increased by anticipating all possible reactions and being prepared for them with counter measures. Clarifying the importance of foresight in the organisation and highlighting it as a task that will influence the future of the entire business is the first step. For example, in Finpro foresight is a mainstay of the corporate strategy and mission, which helps signify its importance.

Another important element of crowdsourcing is the simplicity of user interface of the tool. It must be easy and attractive to use. If it is too complex, nobody will use it. In Finpro, this is solved by using TrendWiki, which has some automatic functions for easy signal reporting.

Training is the third important component in crowdsourcing. Without proper and on-going training, no foresight thinking can occur. Therefore, there can be no successful results in crowdsourcing without training. In Finpro, every employee is trained to not only understand the foresight process but is encouraged to use TrendWiki for sending signals and discussing signals with their clients, which both strengthens the relationship and opens a new avenue for partnership.

The fourth important thing in crowdsourcing is feedback. If employees do not get any feedback regarding the signals they enter, they will not do it for long. Finpro's TrendWiki was designed with a discussion platform built into the software. The discussion forum allows anyone to comment, refine, reframe or even challenge a signal. Often, the outcome of the discussions is not only the acceptance of the signal, but

more importantly, a way to apply it. At a minimum, people can simply vote on signals and determine their relative strength and value.

Dos and Don'ts in Corporate and Organisational Foresight

Using personal experience and observations as both an active futurist and a consultant within organizations, I here list some items that are the basis for, what I call, the *low (don't) or high value (dos) foresight processes*.

Low value foresight process I have characterised as having too a strong internal focus, with little or no external applications. This can and will lead to foresight outcomes that do not question the organisation's existing belief system. In the low value foresight process there is no methodology, and signal collections are done in a very *ad hoc* manner, for example, a week before a strategy meeting versus over a longer period of time. The raw material (of the process) is not evidence based and is dependent on the assumptions of those managing the task. The outcome of the process is not utilised widely, in fact, it is barely used by anyone in the management team. Furthermore, the outcomes are not communicated throughout the organisation, but are kept secret.

Foresight that has *high value* for organisations uses effectively all people in the organization. They become key people in the spotting of forthcoming changes. They are the lifeblood of success. Thus the process is both open and crowdsourced, which means that employees' observations are included with those of industry experts (and other people) outside of the organisation.

Foresight activities are an ongoing process: they are a constant discussion and observation of changes. They use various methods, or at least one method, and measure success and adapt to the needs of the organisation. Disseminating of the foresight information is open to all levels of the organisation and to outside stakeholders too. This is done to obtain feedback about the process and outcome. The outcome of the foresight process is used for various purposes like strategy work and innovation activities and most importantly to challenge the organisational mental model.

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