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## **Craig McIvor: What's coming next for your business? Try asking a crowd**

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In these uncertain times, businesses are thinking about what strategies they can employ to give them the best chance to grow, or even survive.

Good strategy, however, cannot be developed just by looking at what is happening now. It must be developed by considering the future and what opportunities and risks it will provide.

For many business executives, the future is too big, too murky – and surely from a rational perspective it is something that is not to be "known". Executives feel more comfortable with the historical trend and what they know now.

So can we know the future?

The answer is a resounding "yes", but you need to know how to go about it. Once you have determined what the future is going to look like, the strategy has a way of becoming self-evident.

Businesses can and should afford the time to predict the future, as the benefits are potentially very large. How much would you pay to know the future? Surely it would be worthwhile to find out what the next big fad would be – like the iPod.

Determining the future is not as complicated or costly as you might think. It just takes the right process and the right application of some everyday commonsense.

The best way to know the future is to use collective wisdom to come to a consensus about it. Groups of diverse people are incredibly accurate at predicting the future. A good book to read on the subject is *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki, who gives all sorts of examples of how a crowd is infinitely wiser than an individual – and highly predictive.

This approach may not be as widely used as possible, probably because senior managers think they have a monopoly on new ideas and want to control the strategic planning process. It is very disconcerting for some managers to give up planning to others, within organisations and outside, who "don't understand our market".

Such thinking stifles new ideas and growth and only ensures the future will be similar to what you are experiencing now.

To garner collective wisdom, you need to collect information in the same way pollsters do. You do not need to ask everyone, but you need a representative sample. The more diverse the group, the more accurate the predictions will be.

Having some outsiders' opinions will add currency and texture to your picture of the future.

It is best to involve all stakeholders, including your own customers and potentially even non-customers. Remember this: two people who think exactly the same on issues are in fact only one person. Even asking your janitor to participate would be better than adding someone who suffers from groupthink. The trick is in asking the right questions and in the right format. You can use questionnaires or interviews, or a combination of both. Participants should fill out the questionnaires on their own and interviews are preferably a one-on-one affair. It is akin to brainstorming alone.

Later, when all of the information is collated, group brainstorming will be used to interpret that



information.

It is very difficult to get many participants to think about what things will be like in five years – especially when most of them don't know what they will be doing next week. Questions have to guide them to a place where they can take off the day-to-day grind mentality and think with the right hand (creative) side of their minds.

Questions need to take them away from long-held perceptions. The future is about what companies and consumers can imagine. Some simple scenarios will assist. Ask what the company could do with unlimited resources. Another scenario could be that the company is looking to start afresh in the same market and wants to be sustainable over the next 10 years – what would the services and company look like?

A trained facilitator can assist in making sure the questions will get the outcome you require.

Once all the respondents have replied, this information needs to be collated, consolidating similar answers and adding new concepts. The result of such a simple process is quite astounding. In front of you will be a potential future and possibly one that you did not expect.

Now that you have a view of the future, you can incorporate other tools such as an inventory of current resources and skills, a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and an understanding of the current environment to begin crafting your strategy. Together, these allow any team that is about to create a strategic plan to brainstorm as a group to produce best practice outcomes.

This process, if successfully actioned, allows companies to engage in creating self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, let's say your process finds that there is going to be a market for a universal device that replaces all phones, credit cards and keys. Your company decides that it should start making one of these devices now. So it does. Now the possibility that this device will become a reality is no longer fiction. The future has been created.

Even though the world seems highly chaotic, we can still find long-term trends about how the future is likely to pan out. We can use resources that are close at hand to help us.

So if your company is serious about strategic planning then look to the future first – it will assist in providing better outcomes and allow the company to start creating its own future.

#### **SEEING THE FUTURE**

- \* Enlist the power of collective wisdom.
- \* Ask a diverse group of people for their views.
- \* Remember that senior management don't have a monopoly on good ideas.
- \* Ask questions that encourage people to think about how things could be done – not the way they're done now.

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