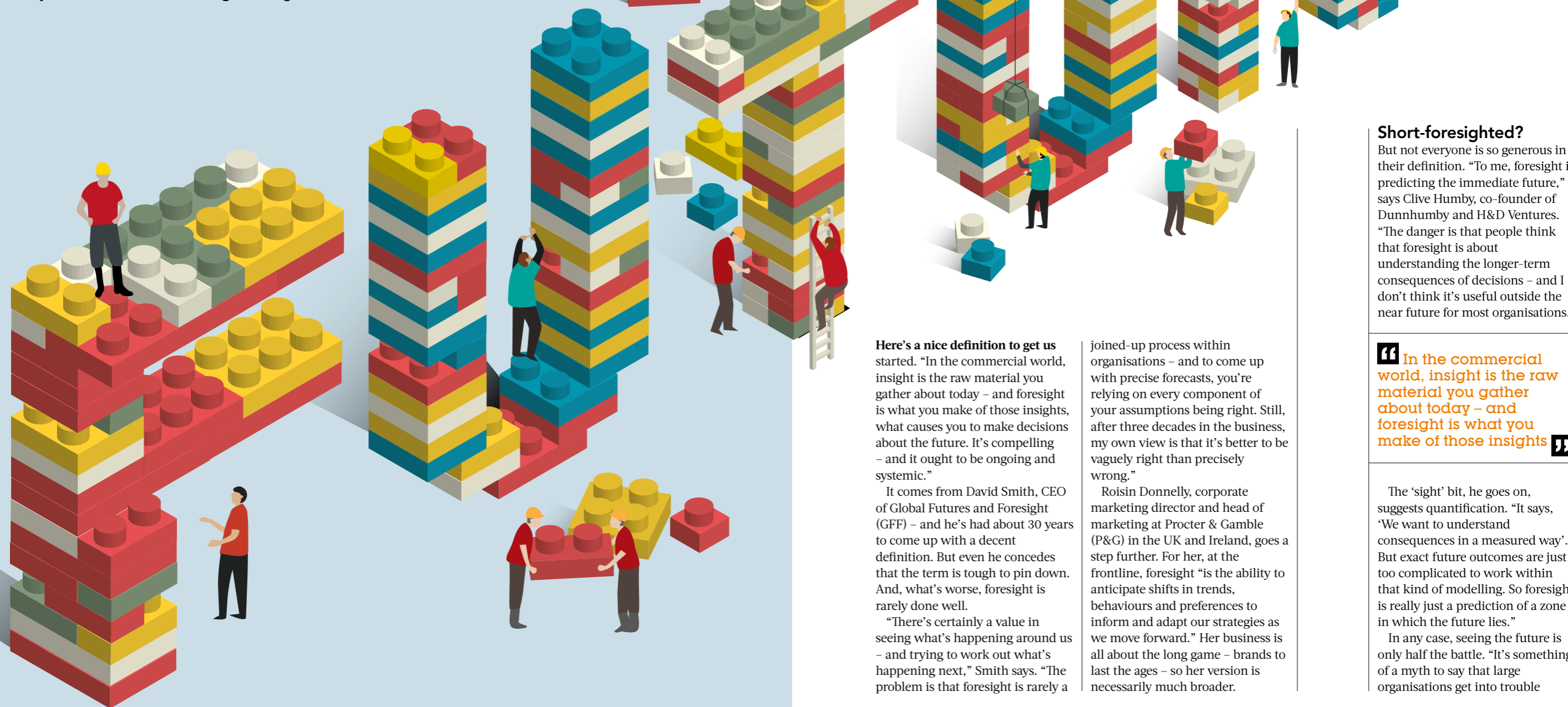


Building the

It's all very well knowing what's happening now. But for decision-makers in any organisation, there's a real premium in knowing what's coming next. Can we really use today's insights to piece together an accurate picture of tomorrow? Or is foresight a load of crystal balls? **Richard Young** investigates



Here's a nice definition to get us started. "In the commercial world, insight is the raw material you gather about today – and foresight is what you make of those insights, what causes you to make decisions about the future. It's compelling – and it ought to be ongoing and systemic."

It comes from David Smith, CEO of Global Futures and Foresight (GFF) – and he's had about 30 years to come up with a decent definition. But even he concedes that the term is tough to pin down. And, what's worse, foresight is rarely done well.

"There's certainly a value in seeing what's happening around us – and trying to work out what's happening next," Smith says. "The problem is that foresight is rarely a

joined-up process within organisations – and to come up with precise forecasts, you're relying on every component of your assumptions being right. Still, after three decades in the business, my own view is that it's better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong."

Roisin Donnelly, corporate marketing director and head of marketing at Procter & Gamble (P&G) in the UK and Ireland, goes a step further. For her, at the frontline, foresight "is the ability to anticipate shifts in trends, behaviours and preferences to inform and adapt our strategies as we move forward." Her business is all about the long game – brands to last the ages – so her version is necessarily much broader.

Short-foresighted?

But not everyone is so generous in their definition. "To me, foresight is predicting the immediate future," says Clive Humby, co-founder of Dunnhumby and H&D Ventures. "The danger is that people think that foresight is about understanding the longer-term consequences of decisions – and I don't think it's useful outside the near future for most organisations."

“In the commercial world, insight is the raw material you gather about today – and foresight is what you make of those insights”

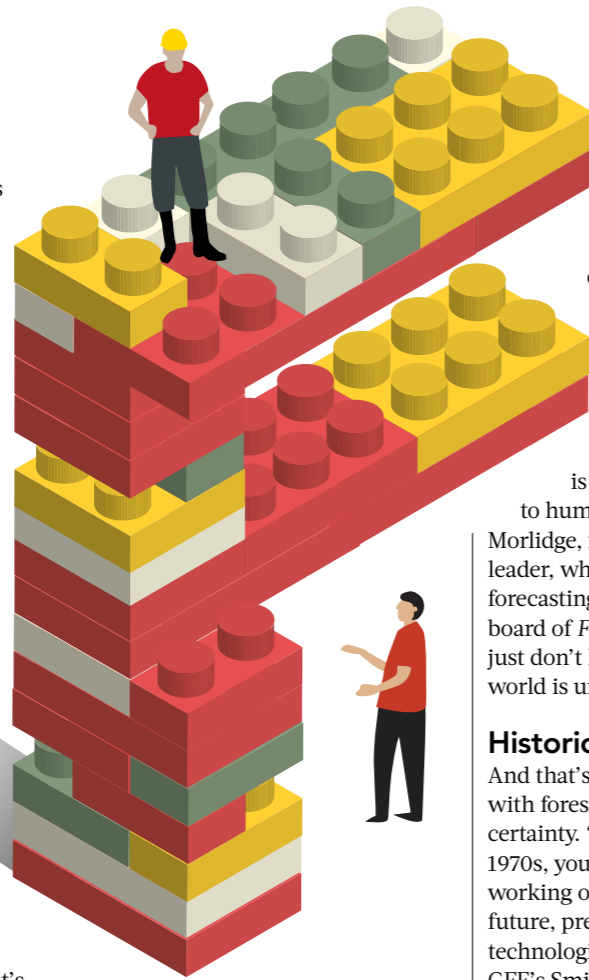
The 'sight' bit, he goes on, suggests quantification. "It says, 'We want to understand consequences in a measured way'. But exact future outcomes are just too complicated to work within that kind of modelling. So foresight is really just a prediction of a zone in which the future lies."

In any case, seeing the future is only half the battle. "It's something of a myth to say that large organisations get into trouble

thanks to ‘unforeseen’ trends or events,” says Patrick Barwise, professor of management and marketing at London Business School. “I don’t think that’s often the case. For example, Kodak could see digital photography coming a long way off. Foresight wasn’t the problem – it was how the company responded to it.”

The two can come together. P&G’s approach, for instance, is clearly rooted in action. “Foresight is not an end in itself but needs to be integrated into planning business strategies,” says Donnelly. And it takes different forms – although they all feed through the company’s Consumer and Market Knowledge Team into the board.

“In Beauty and Fragrance, it’s important to understand fashion and lifestyle, so we work with a range of experts and scouts globally,” she explains. “In Fabric and Home we are working with our suppliers and appliance manufacturers to create a total



shoppers online and in stores.”

But outside those clear and practical aims, our ability to use foresight is often clouded by basic insecurity. “The very idea that we might understand the future is fundamentally attractive to human beings,” says Steve

Morlidge, former Unilever finance leader, who now specialises in forecasting and sits on the editorial board of *Foresight* magazine. “We just don’t like the idea that the world is unpredictable.”

Historical foresight

And that’s the nub of the problem with foresight. People want certainty. “Between the 1950s and 1970s, you had a lot of people working on macro views of the future, predicting big trends and technological developments,” says GFF’s Smith. “Futureshock, published by Alvin Toffler in 1970, is a good example. Sometimes the predictions about technology were right – but the social impact was misread, so the context for the impact of the technology was wrong.”

experience to better meet consumer needs. Corporately, we are working with environmental experts to design more sustainable products. We are also working with our retailers to innovate for our

FORESIGHT IN A NUTSHELL

Based on the views of our expert panel, we’ve come up with some dos and don’ts for those keen to offer foresight.

DON’T claim to be able to predict the future precisely. Even in simple or contained systems, there’s too much that can go wrong.

DO offer ranges for any forecasts. They might still be wrong, but they force decision-makers to accept uncertainty.

DO offer evidence – data, insights and trends – that will help people understand today’s context for decisions affecting tomorrow’s outcomes.

DON’T get carried away with Black Swans and chaos theory. The concept of discontinuity is important, but the whole point of unknown unknowns is you can’t see them coming.

DO help construct credible scenarios.

Evidence matters to decision-makers and they’re more likely to spend time thinking about a future they think is believable.

DON’T allow foresight to take precedence over agility. It’s better to react fast than see problems early.

DON’T get swept up by big data and high-level analytics. They’re useful tools, but we still need human interpreters for their findings.

That post-war period has a lot to answer for. As well as developing a passion for gazing into the future, many thinkers wanted to nail down what we now know are fairly nebulous aspects of business.

“People who were trying to turn management into a science placed excessive faith in quantitative models about the world, and would rely on them for decision-making,” says Barwise. “But I’m not sure that’s really credible today. The financial crisis has reminded us why that’s dangerous. So really, we should be more cautious about modelling complex systems in pursuit of predictions.”

Bound to be wrong?

As Morlidge points out, even the best statistical models demand the application of risk factors and confidence intervals. And that’s before you even get to the “unknown unknowns”. “The world’s trajectory isn’t smooth,” he says. “Discontinuities emerge and, in any system, small changes to the initial conditions can result in enormous changes in behaviour. They make the system unstable.”

That’s one reason Smith has turned away from one type of foresight entirely. Industry analysts’

predictions, he reckons, are bunk. “They’ll sell you lines that go up and lines that go down – all worked out very rigorously based on data and trends,” he says. “But everyone gets the same stuff – so there’s no comparative advantage. And there are no discontinuities. The real opportunities – and risks – are in the inflection points, which, by definition, aren’t going to emerge out of the historical data.”

“The idea that we might understand the future is attractive to human beings. We just don’t like the idea that the world is unpredictable”

The problem is that organisations are rarely confident enough to abandon these kinds of extrapolations. “It’s more rational to offer a range of potential outcomes,” says Bridget Rosewell, former chief economic adviser to the Greater London Authority and currently non-exec at Ulster Bank and Network Rail. “But that’s a more difficult process. You need a story for each potential outcome, and that’s demanding. That’s why it’s much easier to deliver a single number.” Easier – but almost certainly wrong.

Start at the beginning

Setting unrealistic objectives for the outputs of foresight isn’t the only problem. The most basic is not having a strong foundation for your predictions. “Too many companies develop this vaguely positive view of their situation and just drift along,” explains Doug Ross, CEO of strategic consultancy Squarepeg International.

Roisin Donnelly is corporate marketing director and head of marketing at Procter & Gamble in the UK and Ireland



A note from our sponsor

Big data will change the market research industry – that we can be sure. But contrary to those who think this spells the death of MR agencies, we at e-Rewards believe that it will instead upgrade market research, making it more relevant for the customer and more real-time.

Agencies will have to learn and develop tools to manage this dynamic flow of information and to have the ability to crunch and analyse it to generate valuable insights.

In the last four years we have been evolving our business in order to get closer to consumers and all their digital touchpoints. Our recent partnership with Experian Marketing Services and the acquisition of mobile research specialist IPinion and social research expert Conversation, will help us to achieve this. We are moving strongly to be an enabler for collecting permission-based digital data.

By combining our quality panel solutions with strong data sources (both internal and external) and adding analysis and visualisation capabilities, we believe that we are in a strong position to develop a single view of the customer. This will be priceless for companies who will be able to understand their customers much better and to create highly specific segmentations and to tailor products and services precisely to meet those needs.

To summarise, we are on a quest to understand consumers much better and how that behaviour changes hourly, not monthly.

Asaf Levy is vice-president of innovation strategy at e-Rewards, parent company of Research Now



Patrick Barwise is a London Business School professor



“So the first stage in addressing the future is to get a fix on the truth now. That’s why we like working with market researchers. They’re experts at uncovering this kind of truth – multiple truths, in fact. But leaders often don’t want to know, so these implications languish in the ‘nice to know’ category and aren’t acted upon.”

Result? Poor initial assumptions deliver projections that are plain wrong. However, being wrong is not always a disaster – if you accept from the start that it’s likely you will be.

“Part of being a venture capitalist [VC] is knowing that there are simply too many factors at work to have any degree of confidence in any one outcome,” says Alex van Someren, managing partner at Amadeus Capital’s seed investment funds. His job is spotting and backing tech start-ups. Predicting the future – or rather, “futures” – is his meat and drink. “That’s why we

use portfolio theory for investments. We want a range of potentially disruptive technologies, different markets, diverse teams – combinations of all three. If you get the right mixture, you defray the risks collectively; you’re looking for one or two to be so successful that you can continue to back the right mix.”

But while portfolio theory works fine for VCs, other disciplines aren’t so lucky. Where a range of inputs has a single output – a sales figure, say, or a net promoter score – rather than multiple, if aggregated, outcomes, it gets tougher.

Step 1: admit you have a problem

So take a leaf out of van Someren’s book and admit you’re probably wrong. “On the economy, the record of predicting what will happen is pretty poor,” says Paul Ormerod, one of the founders of the Henley Centre for Forecasting and author of books including *Why Things Fail*. “The problem is that you can hardly ever predict the key turning points. The reason? Unlike,

say, engineering or physics, the data you’re looking at is driven by so many factors that at the aggregation level, it’s much harder to sift out the noise – your statistical model is bound to be incomplete.”

Add in discontinuities and innovations, and you can see why so many professional forecasters treat foresights with caution. But for many (less technical) decision-makers, even those obvious factors won’t convince them not to rely on forecasts.

Worse, they often retrofit unexpected discontinuities onto their existing worldview. “After the event, they often seem quite obvious,” says Morlidge. “So people start to think they can predict discontinuities. And, if enough people are predicting outcomes, after a major discontinuity some will look like they were right before the event. But that doesn’t mean they were necessarily supernaturally perceptive. Quite often, they were just lucky.”

Morlidge thinks organisations should concentrate on measuring forecast accuracy to beat this tendency. Meanwhile, layering in more rigour to forecasting itself can simply compound the problem.

TWITTER PREDICTS

Social media buzz has become a crucial part of the marcomms mix. Twitter and Facebook monitoring can give brands real insights into consumer sentiment and alert them to service problems or PR trouble building up.

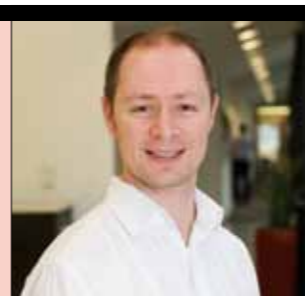
But can that buzz be converted into foresight? Sitaram Asur and Bernardo Huberman, researchers at HP Labs, wrote a paper in 2010 claiming it can. They used Twitter to accurately predict box-office revenues for movies. But it’s not all plain sailing. Despite the academic rigour of the early studies, later experiments have proved less conclusive. A Princeton study in 2012 (Why

Watching Movie Tweets Won’t Tell the Whole Story), for example, pointed out that Twitter users were too unusual to be a barometer for movie takings. They tended to be too positive.

In the financial markets – where foresight has long been sought from almost mystical number crunching techniques such as chart analysis – Twitter prediction has garnered more attention. In 2010 Johan Bollen at Indiana University and his team produced an algorithm to analyse Twitter mood states that proved 87.6% accurate at forecasting the movement of a stock index over one day.

Sounds great. “But the problem is that even if these kinds of predictions work for a brief period, if everyone starts to use the algorithms to direct their decision-making – making trades, for example – then the prediction itself becomes skewed,” says Harvard PR digital lead Lance Concannon.

That didn’t stop Derwent Capital Markets (DCM) from launching a £25m hedge fund trading on predictions from Bollen’s Twitter algorithms. Announced in late 2010, it didn’t begin trading until the summer of 2011 – and then was closed after just one month, claiming a return of 1.85% against average hedge fund gains of 0.76%. Boss Paul Hawtin saw more potential in



Lance Concannon is digital lead for Harvard PR

selling apps and sentiment analysis to third parties. But then in February 2013, he put the entire business up for sale – and DCM’s own website says the final bid for the company was just £120,000.

“The risk of developing ever more disciplined approaches to foresight is that it can lead you into believing your own forecasts,” says GFF’s David Smith. “It’s better to have as wide as possible a network of disparate contributors fuelling the process of looking forward. For example, P&G built a network of millions of people, from design school students to retired employees, to advise them. They looked outside the business to get a better picture of how the product set might look in the future.”

Narrowing your scope can also help. “If you know, say, three or four factors within your own control, you can start to get more confidence over, maybe, a year,” says Ormerod. “You still have to factor in externalities, such as the

decisions of competitors. If you have a decent understanding of that – perhaps using game theory or psychology – you should be able to come up with a decent short-term forecast.”

Complexity kills

But longer-term? Better foresight might be the wrong talent to develop. “The key trait organisations need to develop is adaptiveness,” argues Barwise. “Take the Black Swan theory – the emergence of unknown unknowns. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who popularised the theory, was working in financial markets. One of the transferable lessons from his work is that the over-quantification of complex systems is often what causes the real problems.”

In addition, decisions made on the basis of any prediction actually shift the underlying assumptions for that same forecast. “It’s incredibly easy to have certainty in what’s going to happen if there’s no innovation,” explains Bridget Rosewell. “Economic growth is contingent on it – even though most economic models don’t have any innovation built into them at all. But if you’re going to thrive over the long term, you need to expect, and be able to cope with, change.”

It’s a moving target, then. And it gets worse. “A key point people miss is that complex doesn’t always mean complicated,” says Ormerod. “You can have a very simple system where foresight is hard to deliver because of social interactions. As social influence becomes more important in every market, thanks to communication tools and greater transparency, there’s a need to look at other disciplines.”

Behavioural economics is a another question altogether, of course. But before we touch on the psychological aspects affecting foresight, what about the hard facts?

Data and deception

The traditional methods for predicting the future are almost all based around data. Extrapolation is a field of expertise in its own right. But over the past few years, two new factors have come into play: complex analytical tools; and the technology to interrogate big datasets. The problem is, neither necessarily offers much foresight.

“There’s a lot of discussion about big data and its power to create new insights into markets and customers,” Barwise says. “The

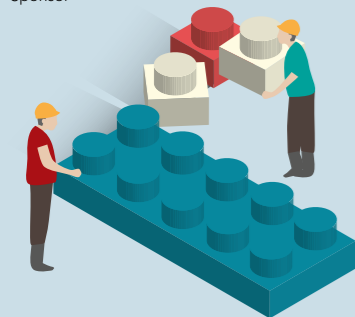
“If enough people are predicting outcomes, some will be right. Quite often, they are just lucky – not supernaturally perceptive”

reality is that what really makes a difference is a lot of small, incremental benefits that accumulate. And having lots of data about customer behaviour creates a relentless pressure to examine what’s happening, which makes it harder to step back.”

One man who should know all about that is Clive Humby, of course – father of the Tesco Clubcard. He argues that big data doesn’t just distract from attempts to see the strategic picture – it can fundamentally disguise it.

“When you have that much information, it’s always possible to construct a story that supports your hypothesis by cutting the data in the way you need to,” he says. “That’s one of the good things about traditional market research. The samples are usually small enough to tell relatively few stories – but they’re all credible. When you have millions of consumer records, any story can emerge.”

Steve Morlidge agrees. “It doesn’t help you cope with the big stuff, the strategy and the business



tactics,” he says. “That’s why I’m also nervous about this term ‘actionable insight’. If you can act on it immediately, almost by definition it’s trivial or short term. A better question, for insight and for foresight, is ‘Is it useful?’.”

That’s something P&G’s Roisin Donnelly would endorse. She stresses the importance of the human touch. “We have more data, generated faster, than ever before,” she says. “But when you’re dealing with the future, you’re always making judgments – based on different data sources, yes, but combined with experience of the past and intuition.”

That need for nuance applies whether you’re planning tomorrow’s BOGOF offer or considering consumer behaviour in 2018. And that’s why Humby sees one of his greatest achievements as using data to dispel the notion of the “average” shopper.

“Foresight is about understanding the different groups you serve and gaining some visibility into the

consequences of your decisions on them,” says Humby. “It’s not a mechanical measurement of events designed to direct decisions.”

That softer view of data also helps organisations to react early to trends they’re seeing. “For example, we saw increasing numbers of ‘shopping for tonight’ type baskets in Clubcard data. That lead to the development of the Tesco Express format. But bear in mind: once you respond to that emerging trend with a product, you also accelerate it. It changed the way people shopped as much as it met their needs.”

Motivating actions

So the secret to foresight is properly laid out, realistic objectives. “It offers real value in two areas,” Barwise says. “First, in setting ambitions – not silly ones, but neither should it just be business-as-usual with a few incremental improvements.” Second, organisations should be taken outside of their comfort zones, he says. “That means being open minded – listening to the dissidents inside your

Paul Ormerod (bottom left) is an economist

Alex van Someren (bottom right) is a venture capitalist

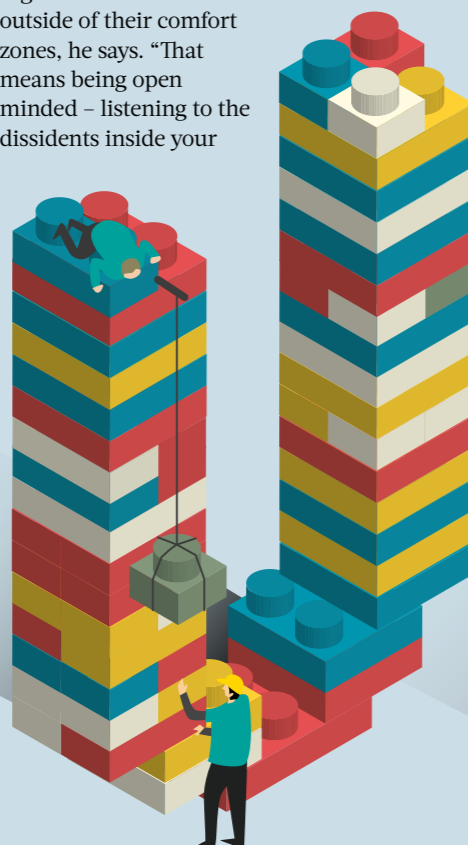
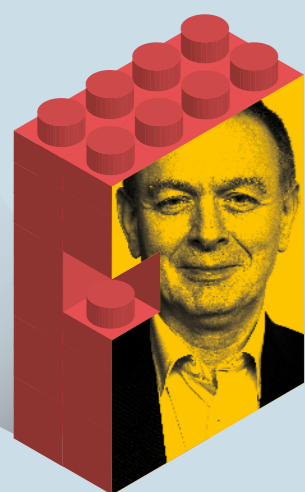
business and your customers; and questioning your industry’s models, looking for ways to streamline things or offer radical improvements.” Innovation is risky in the short term, of course; but not innovating is risky in the long term, if you’re exposed to structural change.

To Morlidge, foresight serves as a form of preparation. “There are two very important ways it can help,” he says. “First, what happens if there’s a disequilibrium – how might the system change? And second, how will we deal with discontinuities?”

“The first is all about predicting within confidence limits what might happen. But the limits are pretty narrow. The second requires organisations and decision-makers to engage in a bit of scenario planning. The mere act of thinking about a possible outcome both helps you identify it when it starts to happen; and makes it more likely you’ll act when it does.”

When thinking about the future (or futures), Alex van Someren says it is important to draw on a range of perspectives. “There’s no one place we go to seek information or even one type of data we’re looking for,” he says. “The market is changing all the time, so we need to find new places to look and engage; new reference points.”

Squarepeg’s Doug Ross adds ➤



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that for foresight to be taken seriously at the highest levels, the company board has to adopt the same willingness to take a different view. “Sometimes the answers that come from foresight are common sense – but sometimes they’re not what leaders want to hear,” he says.

“That’s why market research ought to be at the board table – and why it needs to be more integrated with the business. Because it’s not just data or statistics or trends or even behavioural intelligence that sell it – it’s the stories that blend all of those together in ways that are relevant to the business.”

Budging the budget

Paradoxically, the foresight that’s most relied upon – and forms the foundation for most organisational decision-making – is the one with perhaps the weakest connection to reality: budgeting. It’s still incredibly rare to find a finance function that doesn’t assemble a corporate plan and go through an annual budgeting round to allocate resources and set targets.

“Financial forecasting is usually terrible,” admits Morlidge. “If the company finance function’s forecasts are treated with any reverence, it’s not because they’re any good – it’s because they’re important. Basically, if you screw it up, you could lose your job.” (Morlidge adds, betraying his own accountancy roots, that the only thing worse than a financial forecast is a sales forecast.)

Of course, sometimes the forecast is right. Glance through the City news pages and you’ll see plenty of examples where a company’s profit forecast came in bang on. The thing is, says Morlidge, in many cases that might be a problem.

“If it does seem to be right, it’s often because people are steering to the forecasts – they’re attempting to make them true,” he says. “The problem is budgets. People routinely take action to make the

future like the budget they created.”

Either that, or they game the process from the outset. “Too often, when managers see uncertainty ahead, they build in cushions to the budgeting process – whether that’s soft targets or cash hidden away – so the whole discussion is removed

They have long lead times in key parts of their supply chain, and setting budgets and making forecasts helps them feel better about managing those future commitments.

“Then there’s a ritualistic component to it,” Morlidge adds. “The famous systems thinker Russell Ackoff used to say it’s like a rain dance. People wanted him to come in to ‘help change the

weather’ – the way they ran the business. But more often than not, what they were really looking for was a better rain dance. Forecasting and budgeting are psychological responses to uncertainty – they’re a corporate ritual.”

Creating scenarios

If formal budgeting and forecasting are too rigid to be valuable foresight, what’s left? According to many of our commentators, the real value is in scenarios. “Scenario planning is much more compelling,” says

Barwise. “By asking the ‘supposing...?’ questions, you encourage decision-makers to be more alert to change and more agile.”

The best scenarios must be plausible and have some degree of granularity, he explains. “Managers are both rational and emotional. You need to work with both of those traits if you’re to ensure that insights are translated into actions. Market research has tended to focus on the rational side, to place a huge value on having reliable data. But to fuel the emotional side, techniques like scenarios, ethnography and video interviews are all very powerful.”

That takes us back to the power of stories. “At the GLA, there’s a

from the truth,” says Ross.

“The best organisations address that by taking a different approach, such as a quarterly rolling forecast looking three years out. If you want some foresight into the business, it’s not a good idea to gather all the numbers in one big bang every year and wrap it into the process for allocating resources the next year.”

So why does it persist? Simply put, most people fear the future.

London Plan – a 20-year framework for development,” says Bridget Rosewell. “Some people would look sector by sector and try to create a bottom-up forecast of how employment patterns might change. I think that’s nonsense.

“Having done long-range forecasting for ten years – and been broadly right, though precisely

“Sometimes the answers that come from foresight are common sense – but sometimes they’re not what leaders want to hear”

wrong – I think it’s more valuable to create simple stories than hard statistics. If you construct them at a level of data aggregation that’s manageable, you can get some insight into the future.”

The good news is that evidence matters in these stories. “We’re very sensitive to the plausibility of a story,” says Morlidge. “It’s the key to helping people act decisively in complex environments.”

So how does all this come together in scenarios? “First, you look at the factors affecting your business today that are relatively predictable,” says Ross. “Second, ask yourself, ‘Over three years what are the unpredictables that might affect us, the things that are outside our control?’

“The problem is that quite a lot of predictable things are never properly tackled,” he continues. “We worked with one business where the senior workforce was getting older. We could see a retirement bubble was building up, you could even identify when it would burst. But nothing had been done. So don’t even worry about the unpredictables until you get those kinds of issues sorted out.”

Rosewell also stresses that you need to be clear in your

assumptions and in the kind of data or modelling that underpin the scenario. That way, if the user disagrees, they’re forced to ask, “Why do I think these assumptions are wrong?”. But they can never simply discard the vision you’re laying out.

Prepare for change – don’t forecast it

Ultimately, this all boils down to insights that force decision-makers to confront the fact that things change.

“That’s not to be fatalist about it,” says Barwise. “The premium here is on preparing for the future, not predicting it. That’s why insight has a big role, particularly in helping organisations become more open to the outside world and to market signals. It’s particularly valuable in highlighting signals that decision-makers don’t want to hear – and in making them more open to both evidence and options being generated internally. Ultimately, insights only have a value if they’re acted on.”

That’s certainly true of the work Nicola Millard is involved with at BT (see box, right). Her fear is that by accusing foresight of being precisely wrong, organisations

FUTUROLOGY IN ACTION



Nicola Millard is the customer experience futurologist for BT Global Services. She not only has to gaze into the future – her predictions inform the corporate response to it, too.

Is it worth predicting the future?

NM: Foresight within a five year boundary is probably worth doing – that’s the kind of timescale where you might be able to predict things with a reasonable level of reliability. Once you start trying to look 20 years ahead, say, things get much harder.

Does foresight need to be driven by today’s insights?

NM: I like the more rigorous academic side, with cold hard facts in my possession – as well as some of the more speculative stuff. My own approach is to observe heavily in an attempt to see consumer behaviour, then extrapolate.

Does that include market research techniques?

NM: Foresight brings together all sorts of methodologies. I do the people bit – and ethnography and consumer research play a huge part. That gives me data that we can apply to technologies, then operationalise it and make it real.

We use hot-housing techniques – splitting people into teams and having them work together, but in isolation from other distractions. We have ground rules – they have to share information between teams, for example – and a group of senior managers acts as a judging panel to decide which team delivers the best approach to dealing with the problem we’ve set. The winning team then gets to take the idea forward as a bounded experiment.

Our experiments have clear success criteria and a time-scale. We’re aiming to learn quite specific things about what’s going to work – and a properly bounded experiment can teach you plenty, even if it is a failure.

So it’s pretty rigorous.

NM: Senior managers tend to be data driven, which is why it’s so valuable to experiment and to have a well-reasoned case for your predictions.

Bridget Rosewell is an economist



stop trying. "It's a bit depressing when you hear companies complain that they can't afford to do foresight," she says. "I think they can't afford not to."

"And it's not as if it demands massive resources. All you need is people confident and open-minded enough to conceive of experiments and give them a try. Technology is empowering that. Cloud services, for example, mean that any business that thinks it's spotted a trend or data that's suggesting a shift in consumer behaviour can try out a new approach without ploughing in massive investment."

The other way of looking at it? "It's better to shorten your lead times than to get better at forecasting," says Morlidge. "Do you develop faster reflexes? Or do you develop more confidence

in your assumptions about the future?" Given the explicitly unpredictable nature of the future, he thinks it's a no brainer – even while he stresses that failure to spend at least some time

weighing up the future is equally foolhardy.

And if you're looking to influence decision-making, Bridget Rosewell has a simple message. "The problem is that a lot of market research doesn't come to any conclusions," she says. "It has to turn those tables into something people can use to make a judgement. The clarity of the assumptions is there – but it needs that narrative. And the thing about pontification is that credibility often comes from the confidence in making it – even if it's consistently wrong." ■

Doug Ross
(top) is a
business
consultant

Clive
Humby
(centre) is a
data expert

Steve
Morlidge
(bottom)
advises on
forecasting

BEST AND WORST PREDICTIONS

Told you so!

Foresight: "It will soon be possible for a businessman in New York to dictate instructions and have them appear in type in London or elsewhere." Nikola Tesla's vision in 1909 was informed both by his scientific genius – and his understanding of human needs.

Reality: Tesla's "inexpensive instrument no bigger than a watch" seems uncannily close to smartphones and email.

Foresight: "Personal computers are available in a wide range of sizes and shapes, and are commonly embedded in clothing and jewellery such as wristwatches... high-resolution visual interfaces range... up to the size of a thin book." Futurist Ray Kurzweil looked at 1999's beige boxes and saw a better way.

Reality: Yep, we had smartphones, tablets and e-readers by 2009. Google Glass promises to add that wearable factor soon.

Foresight: "Ready-cooked meals will be bought from establishments similar to our bakeries of today." US civil engineer John Elfreth Watkins made this bold consumer food forecast in 1900.

Reality: The global market for ready meals will be \$81bn by 2015, according to Global Industry Analysts. Horsemeat permitting.

Did I say that?

Foresight: "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." Ken Olsen, founder of DEC, said this in 1977 – when the home computer was already a reality. **Reality:** A quarter of homes

globally now have wi-fi, let alone some kind of computer.

Foresight: "I see no good reasons why the views given in this volume should shock the religious sensibilities of anyone." Charles Darwin's view of *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859. **Reality:** Modern creationists still vilify Darwin. A 2009 reprint sent to US schools had a 50-page argument in favour of intelligent design.

Foresight: "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" HM Warner, one of the Warner Brothers of studio fame, poo-pooed the talkies in 1927. **Reality:** Despite *The Artist* – a silent film – winning five Oscars in 2012, it's safe to say people want to hear their movies. Whether they want 3D is open to question...



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