

The History and Development of the Association of Professional Futurists

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Richard Slaughter, Knowledge Base of Futures Studies. CD-ROM Professional Edition. (2004). Order at <http://www.foresightinternational.com.au>

Introduction

The roots of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) are in the oft-expressed need of practitioners for a forum for networking, best practices, and mutual support. These needs were the topic of many a conversation in the corridors of several of the World Future Society (WFS) annual conferences over the last decade. In these hallway conversations, a frustration emerged that the need of professional futurists were not being met by the current organisations in the field. This is not now, or was not then, a *carte blanche* attack on existing organisations; rather it was a sense that their priorities lay elsewhere and attention to the needs of the working professional – the backbone of any field – was lacking.

The hallway discussions were characterised by a mix of enthusiasm for professional networking and lamentation about its infrequency. It was great to hear what other people were doing, what they had tried, what worked and what didn't, what plans they had, and the like. There was also a comfort and mutual support in sharing the often difficult experiences we have in trying to bring a new way of thinking to those not always receptive to it.

True, the World Future Society had and has a professional members section that meets for a day following the general conference each year. But there are no criteria for professional membership, other than paying some extra money when you sign up. Thus, the professional members' session often consisted largely of participants who were not professionals, but simply those interested in attending and willing to pay a few extra dollars for the privilege. One can't blame the non-professional for taking advantage of the opportunity to mix with the professionals. But for the professionals, the opportunity to focus on their particular needs was watered down. In essence these meetings simply became an additional day of the general conference with a smaller group and a different format.

Feelings of isolation

From experience in consulting with Coates and Jarratt in the 1990s, this author can attest to the occasional feelings of isolation one feels in this realm. Isolation despite the foundation role this company has played over a number of years for futures thinking and content. It can also be difficult to network with other consultants and exchange best practices for competitive reasons. And a suitable forum for such meetings to take place was lacking. Professional exchanges need to be carefully managed or participation will

either stop or not be meaningful. If too much is shared, competitive issues surface: if too little, interest wanes.

From experience as an organisational futurist, this author can further attest to a perhaps ever greater feeling of isolation in being the lone futurist. One learns over time that one has more in common with organisational futurists from other companies than with their non-futurist colleagues inside their own company. There is tremendous value from interactions with fellow futurists both for professional development and in directly applying lessons learned to your organisation. This value proposition may sometimes be difficult to prove to a suspicious supervisor in the process of approving a 'Futures of Futures Scenario Salon' invoice, but those who participate in this network are clearly convinced about its value and suggest the key need is to improve our ability to make the case to our sponsors.

The professional niche

It's probably a good time here to take a time out here and confront the potential perception that professionals may appear snobbish. The APF indeed has a sharp focus on the profession and on professionals. The point here is not for us disassociate from the field, but rather to simply have some dedicated time with one another to discuss issues unique to one another.

There is a strong democratic or egalitarian streak in futures that is suspicious of any activity that even hints at exclusion. There is a strong bias to include everybody in every activity. There are certainly times when open and free participation by all makes sense, but the fact that a part of the group wants some time for its particular needs does not mean it's anti-democratic or that it not longer wants to participate with the larger group. The American Bar Association does not invite the general public to its members meetings, although it often does sponsor forums for the public. The APF asks for the same freedom, to have its own existence and to also have its interactions with the larger futures community and the public. It's a both-and rather than an either-or.

Catalysing events

About four years ago, many futurists began receiving something called the *Futures Industry Research Report* by Randy Scheel. And many of them asked just what is the futures industry? and who is Randy Scheel? Scheel began bringing news about futures community and pushed forward the concept that the community needed to start thinking about itself as an industry or profession if it were to make progress and move forward. An early graduate of the UHCL (University Houston Clear Lake) futures program, Randy had been active in issues management and had published a text on the topic. Over the years, he drifted away from futures work, but several years ago found himself drawn back into it, and determined to move it forward. Thus, he began publishing his electronic newsletter on the field, and a virtual community of readers began to take shape.

An early physical manifestation of the professional community took place under the auspices of a UHCL alumni retreat organised by Andy Hines, Senior Ideation Leader at Dow Chemical and Peter Bishop, Chair of the UHCL program. It brought together about thirty-five alumni of the UHCL futures program, facilitated by Jennifer Jarratt, Principal with Coates and Jarratt, in an open space forum designed to elicit topics that were on people's minds. Scheel was present and signed up on the open space bulletin

board for a session on forming a professional association. This well-attended session brought together several of the eventual core members of the APF and was perhaps the first public forum to discuss the nuts and bolts of how to make this happen.

A second catalysing event was the so-called Applied Futures Summit in Seattle in April of 2001. The idea here was to quickly expand the professional association concept beyond the Clear Lake alumni. A core team of Hines; Michele Bowman, Senior Vice President, Global Foresight Associates; Christian Crews, Director of Futures Studies, Waitt Family Foundation; Sandy Burchsted, President of Prospectiva; and Richard Lum of HMSA Honolulu organised this gathering of two dozen or so professional futurists around various topics related to professional futures work. The success of this meeting convinced many of us that a professional association was indeed a potentially viable topic.

A key issue before, during, and even for some time after the summit was whether the professional futures community needed to go the formal route of forming a professional association or whether it could and should rely on informal activities such as the Seattle summit. Perhaps the turning point came near the end of the Summit, when the formation of a professional association – the proverbial elephant in the room that everyone saw but didn't feel comfortable acknowledging given the success of this informal event – was brought into the open for discussion. While arguments were made for both sides, enough support was registered so that Scheel and others began formal plans to make the APF a reality.

The formation

The Association of Professional Futurists was formed in 2001, but the tension between the informal and formal camps carried over into its formation. There was in fact a split among the core team soon after the APF was launched as an official organisation. The issue was whether the organisation should be a for-profit company that relied on paid staff or a traditional not-for-profit association that relied primarily on volunteers. Scheel first incorporated the association as a company on the assumption that the marketplace was the best place to establish a viable organisation, but he found little support among the other members of the core team for this assumption. In the end Tom Conger, Founder of Social Technologies, intervened to help the group reach a consensus that a not-for-profit association was the model worth implementing. As a result Bishop, Bowman, Conger, Hines, Jarratt, and Scheel along with Mike DeBettencourt, consultant with URS Corp., and Herb Rubenstein, President of Growth Strategies formed a steering team to set up the infrastructure of the organisation and provide a spur to recruiting. The team agreed early-on that a hands-on membership was preferable and decided to employ a team-based approach to deal with the various tasks at hand. It evolved to the point where today thirteen teams are formed around:

- Benefits
- Branding
- Communities of Practice
- Fundraising
- Gatherings
- Governance

- Member Qualification
- Member Recruitment
- Networking for business opportunities
- Publications
- Professional Development and Best Practices
- Strategic Issues
- Professional Liaisons and
- Early Days.

Jennifer Jarratt headed up a nominating committee whose recruiting efforts attracted eighteen people to run for the first official Board. Information about each candidate was gathered and published on the website. Nine members were eventually elected to the Board in November 2002 by the founding members of the Association. Some of those elected had served on the initial steering team: Bishop, Bowman, Conger, Hines, and Jarratt. The new members were Sandy Burchsted, Bob Hahn, Director of Future Strategies at Pitney-Bowes, Dominique Purcell, Director at Visio, and Lee Shupp, Partner at Cheskin Research. The Board contracted with Randy Scheel to be the first director for the APF. Christian Crews took Bob Hahn's place on the Board in May of 2003 when Bob had to resign due to a change in job responsibilities.

The APF's first public get-together was a reception at the World Future Society's 2002 annual conference in Minneapolis. Here we got to put some names and faces together. It was important for the core team to move beyond just talking to itself and to see what was drawing the early members to the Association. As has been suggested repeatedly in this piece, we quickly learned that professionals wanted to meet other professionals and to get a sense of the best practices in the field. There was a sense of excitement and possibility of being present at the beginning of something that might one day be special. It carried over into the rest of the conference.

Primary purposes

One: networking

We began and continue with two primary purposes in mind. The first is professional networking. Years of conversation and numerous surveys have repeatedly hammered home the point that what the professionals want most of all is networking. Rarely does market research deliver such a clear message, but this is a case where we have it. This finding suggests to us that a primary activity has to be to facilitate networking. This requirement, in turn, puts the onus on the members themselves to act – networking doesn't work without participation. Of course, not everyone will be equally compelled by the networking proposition, and there are other things a professional association can deliver. But, again, our market research speaks very loudly and clearly about what our market wants.

Thus the APF has been relentless in its grass-roots and participative philosophy and approach, although some members still join with the expectation of a traditional association that delivers a set of deliverables roughly equivalent to the membership fee. You sign up for a couple hundred bucks and get a couple hundred bucks worth of stuff. That is not our approach, but we haven't always been successful in communicating it.

There is a strong emphasis that you get out what you put in, and that if you sit passively

and wait for the benefits to show up on your desk, you'll be disappointed. In fact, after a year, we've had a few folks decide not to re-join for just that reason. There is a joke on our board that if a member indicates an interest in a particular topic, they immediately become the chairperson of the committee.

Two: improving the image and performance of the field

Our second primary purpose is improving the image and performance of the field. While not at the same top-of-mind level as networking, it becomes evident with very little prodding. One can adopt a half-full approach in looking at the prospects of the field – to wit, more futures professionals, more futures courses, and, one can argue, a growing interest in looking to the future.

One can also adopt the half-empty perspective. Our journalistic friends routinely paint a field that's had its day and is in decline. And there is some pretty convincing evidence for the half-empty version of events. Most often cited is a perceived lack of access to 'the corridors of power', as was more obvious during the heyday of Herman Kahn and Alvin Toffler. So unless rebuilding the image of the field is a key purpose of the Association, there's a strong possibility in twenty years that there won't be anything left, at least as a distinct field and profession.

If our members weren't fundamentally optimists, we wouldn't invest our sweat equity in something like APF. We believe in the usefulness of futures and its long-term viability. At the same time, we have our eyes wide open and recognise that we have signed on to what we feel is a least a twenty-year mission to build a solid field and profession. We're fairly certain that there will always be a tension between the tendency to focus on the networking aspects to help one's professional prospects versus the more altruistic and longer-term need to preserve the field. But if anyone should be amenable to an argument to build for the long-term, it ought to be us!

Building critical mass

Critical mass toward the APF has been building for several years. Growing numbers began participating in the hallway conversations such that they increasingly moved to larger and more accommodating venues such as pubs and coffee shop. One contributing factor has been that the University of Houston Clear Lake and the University of Hawaii programs have been putting out more graduates who are practising in the field. We've also seen a growing cadre of younger professionals from overseas. While their roots seem more varied, there have been a handful of programs in Europe and across the globe that have also been producing graduates. In the last few years, for example, we've seen the very promising development of a futures program at the Australian Foresight Institute that has been nurturing a remarkable pool of potential futures professionals.

It is worth emphasising the importance of the education programs in developing a pool of professionals, especially when we here mixed news about the health of the various programs. The early days of futures were dominated by those who evolved into their role – there were no academic programs. Programs began emerging in the 1970s but have taken a while to attract and eventually graduate students. We're just starting to see them in significant numbers.

Austin scenario salon

We had about eighty members as we began planning our first conference in February 2003 (date revised 1 June 2011). The conference was something of a test of whether the ten years talking about forming something like the APF, the two years preparing for it, and the year actually building it, were worth it.

One key message we hoped to convey with this inaugural meeting – and we now consider this part of our brand essence – was that this was not going to be your typical talking heads affair. This meeting was to run by the members for the members and include lots of time for networking and interaction. In essence we wanted to carry forward the spirit of the hallway, pub, and coffee shop conversation, with just enough structure to lend purpose and focus.

We debated several topics; a key factor galvanising us around the eventual ‘futures of futures’ topic was a then-recent *Newsweek* article proclaiming the demise of the field. When this piece came out, we asked our members to send in their thoughts for a collective response to the editors. We were stunned when almost the entire membership at the time responded. Clearly, the issue struck a chord. We also felt that as futurists forming a professional association, we ought to practice what we preach and thus chose to look at the long term future of our enterprise.

We chose the scenario approach that Global Business Network designed since it provides lots of opportunities for small group work and discussion. The designers were nervous about whether anyone would come, especially given a topic that had been talked to death informally. These concerns were allayed as members not only signed up, but eagerly participated in the pre-workshop interviews.

Happily, the event was a great success. Members reported that the salon and the report that followed have influenced their work. One member reported, ‘I have been more conscious of the future of the field, the future of the APF and ways to lift both in esteem and relevance.’

The strategic issues

Four strategic issues emerged from the Austin scenario salon that we believe form a solid basis for directing future work for the field in general and for the APF in particular. Our strategic agenda may well evolve – and probably should – but we felt like we needed to put a stake in the ground and start somewhere. The issues are:

- How do we overcome the fragmentation in the field and encourage greater cooperation among futurists?
- How do we enhance our aging tool kit?
- How do we differentiate ourselves from mainstream consultants in the minds of customers and society?
- How do we improve the image of the field and increase demand for futures work?

Futures has been an extremely fragmented field. It’s fair to say that we have not been very good to date at cooperating on issues affecting the field as a whole. By nature futurists tend to be independent, non-conformist and iconoclastic. Our independence gives us strength to persevere with our sometimes unpopular message, but it also tends to make us cats that are difficult to herd for common cause.

One approach we’re developing for addressing the issue is to form communities of

practice (CoPs) around selected futures issues. Futures is of course a very large umbrella. At a high-level there are different kinds of issues faced by different types of futurists, such as organisational, consulting or educational futurists. There are also many different topics of interest. Our first CoP was a topical one around integral futures, which explored the implications of integral philosopher Ken Wilber's work for futures. While we had plenty of interest and enthusiasm, in hindsight we probably should have chosen a less complicated issue to start. It can take some time and reading to get up to speed on integral futures, which raises the danger of losing momentum in the meantime.

The second issue is the need to confront our aging tool kit. It is not as if methodological innovation has stopped but it has been largely incremental. We have been continuously improving the current tool kit. Most tweak the tools and have evolved their own unique approaches to using the standard ones such as scenarios. The most common explanation is that those in the applied space simply lack the additional time required to really develop new methodologies. The paucity of academic research programs that typically supply theoretical and methodological advances is cited as another important contributing factor. A hopeful development is that a recent survey of futures programs around the world identified an increasingly robust set of courses and programs. And there is the very encouraging development of the Australian Foresight Institute under the tutelage of Professor Richard Slaughter that has taken on several doctoral students and has begun methodological development around critical and epistemological lines.

A caveat is that some argue that the aging tool kit is something of a false issue. The really important matter is to improve outcomes, and tools are just the means to this end. Over-emphasising tools could lead us to take our eyes off the ball of helping our clients to better understand and act on the future. We are all seeking better ways to engage our clients, and we believe there must be alternative approaches that will reach them in a way that our current tools are not. While we can debate the relative importance or degrees of emphasis to our tool kit, it is worth paying attention to the fact that this emerges as a key theme.

The third strategic issue we identified is our need to create a unique value proposition. In new business development, a central question that one always answers is 'why us?' There is always competition for any idea or proposition, and if you can't figure out why you instead of someone else, you typically had better head back to the drawing board. We believe that we futurists must ask ourselves the hard question of 'why us?'. We are already seeing the creep of mainstream consultants into what used to be exclusively our space. This trend relates in part to the issue of the aging tool kit. An obvious candidate is our competency in interpretation based on a sophisticated mental model of the future. It may be the artist aspect of futures that ultimately distinguished it from mainstream approaches that are often overly scientific in their approach.

Lastly, we need to address the issue raised by *Newsweek*, a recent *Wired* editorial, and other 'bash' pieces: why has the public profile of the field been fading? There have been some solid publications, but no recent blockbuster that has captured the popular imagination. Futurists are rarely sought for commentary on public issues, with the exception of a small number of 'stars'. Surely lots of solid futures work is going on, but it is often unnoticed or at least under-publicised. This suggests a long-term task ahead of carefully re-building the brand through a more sophisticated engagement with public,

especially the media. A key challenge is how to better publicise great work that is now going unnoticed by the public.

We've put together a team around the branding issue, focusing first on our Association. It has the immediate practical purpose of telling the futures community and prospective members what we're about. As we get that established, we'll expand the scope beyond the futures community to the client community and beyond. Here we need to begin a long-term campaign that is on message about the futures field. We've been in the mode of responding reactively to the latest bash piece. We've done painfully little proactive public communication and certainly nothing about creating an image for the field. We believe these are critical issues for us and ones that we can address, working with our sister organisations where possible.

Challenges in moving forward

There are plenty of challenges ahead. We do feel fairly confident that there is a niche for a professional association and that we'll be able to fill it. The membership reached a level we felt comfortable with and the renewal rate has been encouraging.

That said; it has been difficult to get many of the established players on board. There is no question that the field has simply 'lost' some people who could be a big help. They've become discouraged about the state of the field – or worse see it as a liability – and see no benefit in associating with it. They have walked away and several refuse to call themselves futurists. For many others it's been wait-and-see. While understandable it does put those taking the initiative in the precarious position of having to prove the merit of the enterprise without the benefit of many who could help.

The grass-roots approach itself will be a challenge to maintain over time. Volunteer time tends to lose out when the pressure to make a living increases. A key will be having a big enough pool of volunteers to keep the basic organisation operating and developing financial independence over time.

We choose to see the glass half-full. We're in it for the long haul, and we believe that more and more of the futures community will join us and create our preferred future together.

About the author

Andy Hines is a graduate of the UHCL program and worked for some years with Coates and Jarratt in Washington DC. Since then he has held senior positions at the Kellogg Corporation and at Dow Chemical where, most recently he is 'ideational leader'. He has been among the prime movers of the APF and is the author of a number of papers on the practical implications of futures and foresight.