Curious to know how an organization can cope with uncertainty +20-40 years ahead?

As global connectivity becomes the driver of value and vulnerability, technology-intensive organizations are faced with new concerns coming into the foreground – for example, the resource security–climate nexus, or the means of governing emerging technologies. The future is more difficult to predict the further away it is, but perhaps a systematic approach towards managing multiple possibilities can ease the comprehension of the otherwise overwhelming uncertainty of continuous change?

By Charlotte Dahlgren & Katarina Bergman

According to a newly conducted study, there are indeed ways to systematically combine foresight activities. Through interviews with Saab; a global producer of products, services and solutions within the defense and civil security industry; and other similar organizations, as well as a Delphi study with foresight experts, a number of conclusions were drawn. These regarded how macro-factors, as well as foresight methods, should be selected and combined for foresight activities in the time horizon of +20-40 years. More specifically, a demonstration has been made in detail of how activities can be composed methodologically into a framework to suit a technology-intensive organization with a need for long-term foresight, as existing methodological compositions cannot simply be reused for other areas of application.

Summarizing the significant findings, it was first shown that the selection of macro-factors should be the initial step in a foresight process as it sets the frame. It is further beneficial to use a framework of macro-factors to build on and to align the chosen factors with those investigated in more short-term foresight processes. As macro-factors tend to change at various paces, they should be examined in various time perspectives corresponding to these changes. Moreover, it was found that the choice of macro-factors should be made solely by individuals within the focal organization.

Second, it was found that it is essential that there already exist processes for conducting foresight in a shorter time horizon when implementing a long-term process; this will allow the outcome of a long-term project to be converted into actionable results. It further helps questioning the business-as-usual view that tends to result from wishful thinking or linear extrapolation of current trends. Hence, inform-ation exchange between various areas of the organization is promoted and silo thinking can be mitigated.

Third, the study concluded that activities concerning framing and scanning should be gated by a decision point to generate continuous updates of the surroundings in a long-term perspective, while preventing that a complete long-term analysis is conducted by routine. The decision point further provides an agile approach towards the assortment of factors; thus, allowing for adjustment in each iteration, and mitigating the risk of being blindsided by disruptions as the decision point

enables a mechanism to monitor and track long-term trends through a more dynamic rhythm. By not only focusing on regularized cycles it is also possible to invigorate the plausible futures depending on the signals of change that are scanned for.

"So, how can this study be used in practice when exploring the possibility of implementing a systemic approach towards strategic foresight?", one might ask.

While the study has illustrated one example of foresight practice, more is needed in order to expand the knowledge base in the area of strategic foresight as well as to promote foresight within organizations. Practical applications of the framework in other organizations, as well as continued open dissemination of information on how one's own organization operates in the field of strategic foresight (without necessarily sharing the derived insights) will contribute to a more efficient flow of knowledge.

Eager to know more? A more comprehensive coverage of the topics brought up in this article are found in the full study titled "A Conceptual Framework for Long-Term Strategic Foresight".