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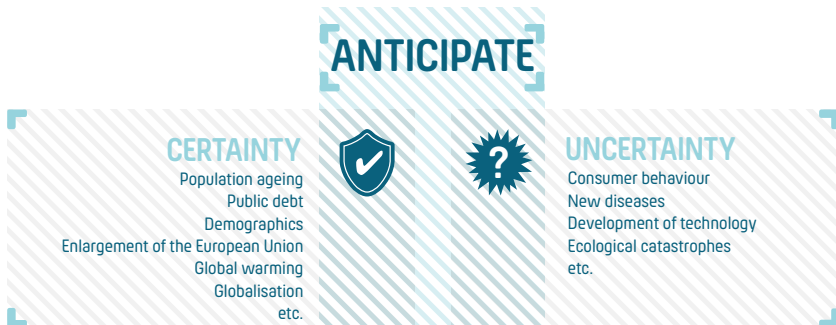


NO MORE  
STRATEGIC MYOPIA:  
GOOD USE  
OF FUTURE-LOOKING



**The future is fashionable:** in a world ruled by uncertainties and anxieties of permanent disruption and being unable to predict the future, we call upon strategy to help ourselves prepare as well as possible to avoid the first form of strategic myopia - not anticipating. In this way, future-looking is becoming part of the role.

**Nothing new in that:** future-looking as a strategic discipline was born in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its aim: to inform strategic planning by picking up strong and weak signals, with variable levels of certainty and uncertainty – what's more, this is how it differs from the concept of forecasting.



**PREPARE CHANGES: FUTURE-LOOKING AND FORECASTING**

A future-looking approach can also be used to identify, decipher, question and adopt potential trends and changes to influence strategic directions and put them into medium-/long-term forward planning. The exercise is all the more interesting as it calls on specialities and various sources of inspiration, stretching from anthropology to neurosciences, taking in technology, geopolitics or, more conventionally, consumer trends.

**And yet, while future-looking, in its content and form, is a seductive exercise, it can also prove relatively pointless, as its practical use and relationship with strategy are complex.**

Such an approach usually results in developing scenarios, more or less futuristic and more or less (too often rather less) breaking away from the current situation, with the aim of taking options for the future. Beside the scenarios, a wide variety of tools and methods are used, such as visualisation, *what ifs*, *storytelling*, utopias or dystopias, to **put the strategic thought process and the people developing it off-balance**. These methods are often distractions and even recreational for business leaders who lack opportunities to think and breathe. And yet, what is their real impact? **How do you ensure that future-looking actually corrects strategic myopia?**

**The “Quart d’Heure d’Avance Stratégie” proposes four responses and recommendations:**

## **1/ Define your time horizon**

The starting point is the decision about the right forward-planning timescale. Not too far, not too close, it should support trends, signs of which are already evident in the present but their strengthening could lead to breaking out of the current situation. Furthermore, all business sectors do not perceive time in the same way: investment and innovation cycles are varied and the returns on investment sought are different. Ubisoft and Air Liquide are perfect illustrations: in the video games sector, characterised by relatively short investment cycles, and consumers and technological platforms that change rapidly, the right forward-planning timescale is about 3-5 years. However, in the energy sector, you have to think in the long term. Between the two, in the equipment industry, forward planning tends to be over 10-15 years. Nonetheless, there is no choice but to accept that, in all sectors, time accelerates and brings the future nearer – and therefore the corresponding forward-planning timescale.

## **2/ Make the 'Choice of King or Queen'**

One of the virtues of the future-looking exercise is that it opens doors and generates uncertainty. One of its potential perverse effects is that it reveals a broad scope of possibilities, in many different fields, too big to be properly explored and, possibly, too open to focus on and make choices – even so, it's one of the key functions of the strategic role. There is no choice but to accept that the 'Choice of King or Queen',

i.e. arbitrary and deliberate selection of fields to be explored by those directors who look most to the future, most frequently proves to be the best solution. By the way, asking these directors in advance to choose themes for future-looking makes it subsequently easier to take positions on strategic options.

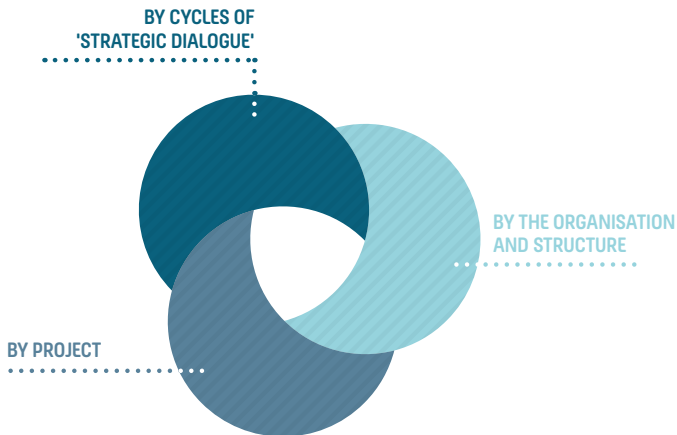
### 3/ Take a future-looking attitude

Whether or not it is part of the Strategy team, whether it is in-house or outsourced, it is essential to clarify the role of the Forward-Planning team, in its relationship with strategy and in its way of circulating the future-looking exercise within the organisation. Thus, a leadership attitude will be focused on coordinating the forward-planning activity and its contribution to strategic planning. Conversely, a deliberate attitude as 'idea stirrer' or 'itching powder' will encourage contradiction and promote new and sometimes thought-provoking ideas. Finally, the future-looking attitude is also embodied in its positioning within the organisation.

Three instances emerge:

1. Permanent resources responsible for forward planning and assigned to the strategy department
2. Often, in the absence of a strategy department, the Forward Planning team exists entirely separately and reports to Senior Management (as at Ubisoft)
3. The most frequent situation, where internal or external forward planning resources have *ad hoc* input to specific projects (e.g. innovation projects) or 'strategic dialogue' cycles.

## SEVERAL WAYS OF ORGANISING THE MEETING BETWEEN FORWARD PLANNERS AND STRATEGIST-DECISION-MAKERS



Very often, it's not so much bringing content as its integration in the strategy and its coordination with operations that pose problems. Many people contribute to forward planning but only one clear attitude allows best advantage to be drawn from it.

## 4/ Model your future before experiencing it

One of the pitfalls of the exercise would be to believe that the future is an external given that is imposed and dictates the present. Thus, forward planning would predict the future and would impose obvious strategic choices today. Such a perception leads, at best, to accurate anticipation of trends and consequent adaptation but certainly not to being given a 'nudge forward' compared to competitors.

The reality is quite different for two main reasons. Firstly, because wait-and-see or mimicking strategies are rarely tenable over the long term. Secondly, because taking strong strategic options on a market is also a good way to create your own 'desirable future' and to force your destiny. The most virtuous businesses are not settling for reacting to background trends or disruptions; they themselves are disruptive, are creating new markets and imposing them on their competitors. This eloquently illustrates the Ubisoft and Air Liquide situations.



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## UBISOFT LAB, A FUTURE-LOOKING THINK & ACT TANK

For Ubisoft, world leader in video games, remaining at the forefront of innovation is a condition for survival. To anticipate the future and help the organisation prepare for it, Ubisoft relies on the Strategic Innovation Lab, an internal *Think & Act Tank*. Its action is focused on 4 roles:

- > **Lookout:** identify and decipher new technological, scientific, business and societal trends, looking beyond the Entertainment industry.
- > **Scout:** analyse the impacts of these trends on Ubisoft to inform the strategic vision, whether they are impacts on the business's operating mode, on the development of new markets or on the products and services offered.
- > **Connector:** connect Ubisoft teams across the world to each other and to external partners to accelerate learning.
- > **Catalyst:** light the spark to drive change through effective and engaging communication and by developing pilot projects and prototypes.

### PRIORITIES AND CAUTION

From among the subjects explored by the Lab, the CEO selects those to which Ubisoft will be really committed. These priorities cannot be set based only on calculating a relatively unreliable return on investment for subjects under exploration. So it involves setting up iterative experiments to explore the potential of subjects in more depth and avoid closing the door too soon. Exploration 'over time' also makes it possible to track the development of a trend (accelerating or conversely slowing its growth), and so refine strategic recommendations. Therefore this method assumes the most cautious approach possible to be able to experiment over several fields with limited investments.





**LEADING THE REST OF THE BUSINESS DOWN INNOVATIVE PATHS:  
A PARTLY-RESOLVED CHALLENGE?**

One of the Lab's current challenges is to commit teams to the practical implementation of its forward planning work. They are already committed to the marathon of existing challenges; integrating projects driven by trends identified by the Lab represents an additional source of complexity. Against such a background, the Lab uses a certain number of operational drivers to facilitate moving from inspiration to action:

- > Set up an internal prototyping unit within the Lab to test, iterate and speak a common language.
- > Create a community of colleagues able to drive innovative initiatives more practically locally and to inform the Lab's ideas.
- > Set up more experimental and more stimulating communication events to learn by running: *learning expeditions, speed dating, hackathons.*
- > Experiments in operational implementation with partners in *open innovation.*
- > A support programme at Station F, which encourages exchanges of expertise and experience between Ubisoft and start-ups working on topics driven by the Lab.