



'The Future Delivered'

Case studies of the delivery of '**Your future in business**' – a Foresight training toolkit offered by the Centre for Competitiveness to business facilitators and client executives.

Are you sure of a future for your businesses?

- The pace of change is getting faster; do your businesses know how?
- Where would you like your businesses to be in 2010?
- Do they have big, hairy, audacious goals?
- Do you want to help them plan for a successful future?

In the cultivation of essential sustainable business patterns in knowledge-based organisations, a requirement exists for creative and practical business planning:

- For vision;
- For understanding of markets;
- For growth;
- For innovation & creativity; and
- For investment.

'Your future in business' is a new Foresight training toolkit offered to business facilitators and client executives by the Centre for Competitiveness to help SMEs, micro companies, Strategic Business Units and research institutions answer and address these questions.

Our aim in putting together this toolkit is not to present a sanitised picture of a *'do it yourself'* future; a model of tomorrow with an a-z set of instructions; if only it were that simple. What we will provide is a range of ideas and proven techniques that can make a real difference.

What is Foresight?

'Strategic Foresight is the ability to create and maintain viable forward views and to use the insights arising in organisationally-useful ways,' (Richard Slaughter, 2000)

The environment for the knowledge-based organisation is a complex web of interrelationships which defies unifying theories. However, planning and conceptualisation is necessary and important if these organisations are to be enabled to compete and survive in an uncertain future. Foresight offers us the opportunity to understand the business environment, the forces shaping that environment and the range of possible effects these forces may have, now and in ten years time. Through the *'Your future in business'* toolkit, we hope to offer you that same opportunity.

In the UK, Foresight activity is coordinated by the Department of Trade & Industry; in Northern Ireland, it is delivered by the Centre for Competitiveness on behalf of Invest NI. To date, over 350 members of the Northern Ireland business community have been engaged in Foresight through Panels and workshops. Those involved have welcomed the opportunity to think about the future in a structured way, network and share common strategic concerns with those active in their respective sector, and to discuss how technology can be employed as a competitive weapon.

As part of a National Foresight benchmarking exercise, Continental Research (COI) was commissioned in June 1999 to conduct a survey amongst private sector businesses in Northern Ireland and benchmark against comparable research in England, Scotland and Wales.

The survey found that although most businesses in Northern Ireland were planning more than 2-3 years ahead, recognised the importance of doing so, and also the importance of considering '*external factors*' such as demographic trends or technological changes, they appeared to rely quite heavily on current customer feedback and current trends within their sectors in developing their plans. This implied a short-term perspective and possibly a reliance on more anecdotal rather than factual or data based information. The overall impression was therefore of many businesses taking an inward-looking market maintenance approach rather than a forward-looking, wider perspective, as in the Foresight programme.

Why a training toolkit?

The Foresight Toolkit exists to help local private, public and voluntary organisations become more forward looking, to create exciting visions for the future and then set about fulfilling them. Foresight is about taking control, it is about having the knowledge, skills and commitment to shape their own future, rather than react to the future that would otherwise impose itself.

Foresight combines a way of thinking with a way of working. It is not something that sits on the side of an enterprise; something to be done '*when there is the time...*' it is much more than that, it impacts upon every aspect of a business and as such is massively important to success.

Given the importance and the benefits that flow from a more anticipative and forward looking approach to business it is a sad irony therefore that so few currently have the wherewithal to able to do so. This toolkit is designed to help those involved with the delivery of any aspect of business support and improvement, to introduce foresight techniques to their clients.

There are 8 modules available:

- ***Introduction to foresight*** – a powerful introduction to thinking about the future.
- ***Vision*** – Produce a clear, compelling and informed vision of your future.
- ***Setting and achieving stretch goals*** – set goals you never allowed yourself to dream of before.
- ***SWOT and STEEP*** – Use foresight products to find out about the future drivers that could make your vision fly or blow it directly off course.
- ***Ideas*** – are your most valuable asset. If you think being creative is not your strongpoint, use this module to find out how wrong you are!
- ***Decisions and strategy*** – Achieving stretch goals needs really robust decision making. What big decision do you need to make to achieve your vision?
- ***Strategic planning*** – Find out how to plan for a future in the sun.
- ***Next steps*** – Find out about the support available to help you realise your vision.

Case Study: Training the Trainers at the University of Ulster

- The market need

The Technology Transfer Officers at the University of Ulster support the commercialisation of University research through company incubation and business support. The clients are primarily start-up firms in the first to third year of development in the University of Ulster Science Research Parks.

'Our client companies are based on excellent technological market potential; it is our job to help support company growth. All have well designed products developed but need a clearly defined way ahead, a vision, and how to get there.'

- The suitability of the tool

'This is a very useful toolkit, adding a lot of value to the service offered by UU. It addresses the needs of our client companies and indeed has generated considerable enthusiasm for business planning using Foresight. The simplicity of the tools bears no relation to the positive reactions being observed... a very practical approach instead of a lot of theory is how clients have described their experiences.'

- The expectation

'Initial feelings were positive at the prospect of having access to such interesting tools and also a keen desire to get involved. These expectations have been rewarded, now that the training programme is completed and the product is being delivered to clients.'

- The experience

'When the time came round for the delivery of the first session there was perhaps a slight feeling of "yet another training session"... it was anything but! A challenging mix of interactive delivery, a unique style which ensured full understanding of the topics and some really useful times spent sharing experiences and ideas with the facilitator made time pass almost too quickly.'

- Delivery & client response

'Our clients all responded well to the introductory session to the extent that they have been passing on their positive reaction to other companies, hence we are finding they are approaching us directly. Eager to follow up is a fair comment. They have found the Foresight process provides excellent focus in even the early sessions, identifying their current position and looking at possibilities for the way ahead.'

- Support & general comments

'The support given to the team throughout the training process was first class, increasing knowledge and usefulness and adding a lot of value to client delivery in day to day activities. Overall, a very positive experience with the added benefit of one to one mentoring for the preparation of first delivery which proved very beneficial in terms of confidence building. This has been a very useful exercise, the workshop was a brilliant experience with lots of useful information, and the applications are wide and varied... it even applies to home life!'

For further information, please contact Dr David Brownlee at the University of Ulster on:

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Case Study: Company intervention at Hansard Diagnostics

One of the first companies to use the Foresight toolkit in Northern Ireland was Hansard Diagnostics, a small biomedical company based in Belfast.

'Having been formed less than three years ago, the company already has 26 customers, all but three of which are outside the EU. Hansard is well received by its distributor partners as a result of the consistency of quality of the products and service they receive.'

However, as a small enterprise Hansard Diagnostics recognised the need to continually innovate and improve efficiency in order to achieve growth targets: Thus the team's open and upbeat attitude as a team towards any tools that help to maintain focus and increase competitiveness.

- Our experience of the toolkit workshop:

'The day kicked off with some relaxed but interesting brainteasers etc. that instantly put everyone at their ease and set the tone for the day. Such was the structure of the various "lecturettes" that we were constantly encouraged to look at the company from "outside the box". This detached overview of our ordinary activities instantly made us aware of numerous inefficiencies that had gone otherwise unnoticed, or whose negative impact was not fully appreciated. Only in hindsight does it become clear that the day is a journey, the product of which is the participants agreeing goals and visualising their collective future.'

'What participants take away from the workshop is directly proportionate to their open-mindedness and honesty. Participants must have ability to direct and/or/drive change in their enterprise – don't send the janitor!'

- Foresight impact on our activities

'The impact is multifaceted in our case. The following changes are the most apparent:

- *Our perception of our company in the future is what has changed most significantly, it is now focused and tangible;*
- *We are more aware that our efforts now directly influence the shape of our future;*
- *Our awareness of each others individual talents and strengths and how these in-turn strengthen the team has been heightened;*
- *We are more aware that what we do has an intrinsic value, and think more highly of the company;*
- *We hold weekly review/planning meetings, which accentuate focus; and*
- *Whilst we could not be accused of complacency previously, we are now intensely aware that we must increase the pace of change in order to achieve our goals and continued growth.'*

For further information, please contact Glynn Patterson at Hansard Diagnostics on:

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Cost

To enable your advisory team to deliver Foresight workshops effectively to your clients, the Foresight (NI) team will provide a series of five full days of detailed workshops at times appropriate to their availability. Successful completion of the training culminates in certificated delivery status of the Foresight *'Your future in business'* Toolkit. Thanks to financial and developmental support from both the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and Invest NI, the Centre for Competitiveness can deliver all five workshops, materials, accommodation and full support mechanisms etc. for £2,500 per person, exclusive of VAT.

Delivery

The Foresight facilitator for Northern Ireland is Brian Sutter who is a self-employed associate of the Centre for Competitiveness. Brian has had 30 years experience in the field of training and development and was previously N.I. Training and Development Manager for a major national corporation.

Brian facilitates workshops on human resources, project management and leadership for local companies and in addition has been Training and Employment Executive for Growth Challenge since 1996, developing strategies with the private sector for provision of training and mentoring schemes. His main activity during this period was the project management of a trans-national European Social Fund Employment Programme, one of the objectives of which was to standardise the training processes of Belfast jobclubs, this culminated in the provision of a detailed trainer manual.

This highly successful project won both Regional and National Training Awards.

Contact

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