



Finding Zika Funding in the Sofa Cushions



Broad Power to Recoup Relocation Benefits



The Secret to Staying Off the High-Risk List



Trump to Border Union: 'I Have Your Back'



Free eBook: Closing the Skills Gap

Excellence in Government

INNOVATION. PEOPLE. PERFORMANCE.



Promising Practices

A forum for government's best ideas and most innovative leaders.

Follow on Twitter
Subscribe

Effective Leaders Know How to Focus on the Future

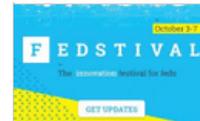
By Amy Zalman February 11, 2016 3 Comments



GaudiLab/Shutterstock.com

The demand for measurable outcomes has historically posed an enduring challenge for strategic foresight projects both within and beyond government. As Robert Shea observes in his recent post, Advancing the Evidence Agenda in the Next Administration, the U.S. Government has long sought better nuance in measuring outcomes and to more readily show whether programs are actually effective. However, in the case of strategic foresight, common notions of outcomes and effectiveness may not apply. This difficulty is no reason to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Rather, it is an opportunity to sharpen the governmentwide understanding of what strategic foresight does and does not do, and to continue refining our measurement

HIGHLIGHT



Coming October 2016- FEDSTIVAL

Top thinkers and writers from Nextgov & Government Executive convene October 3-7 for a full week of conversations, debates, hackathons, workshops, live events, panels, networking, and more.

ARCHIVES

By Contributor
By Date

RECENT POSTS

- A Data Scientist's Guide to Ending the Wage Gap
The Secret to Staying Off the High-Risk List
How to Stay True To Your Values at Work
For the Future Success of Space Exploration, We Need More Female Astronauts

NEWSLETTERS

- GovExec Today
Pay & Benefits
Route Fifty Today
Research & Insights
FITARA Forward

SEE ALL

Enter email address

INSIGHTS



GBC Poll Reveals Disconnect Within Government Contracting Organizations



Improving Collaboration through Identity Management: 2016 Progress Report



Constant Vigilance: Navigating the New Cyber Threat Landscape

SEE MORE

and evaluation toolkit.

Understanding Foresight

Strategic foresight is a set of techniques and processes designed to help managers orient policies and actions toward the future, in part by stressing that policies and actions in the present help to shape the future. In everyday parlance, foresight and the work of futurists are often conflated with our simplest notions of prediction, the idea that someone might see into the future and know what, when and where an event will happen. This is wrong. Those who work in strategic foresight do not connect dots. Rather, they seek weak signals and trends in a world they presume to be governed by complexity and uncertainty, the free will of men and women, and coincidence and accident, as well as intent. How these signals will surface later, and how trends – in demography, technology, and the economy, for instance – will play out, cannot be known exactly at present. However, rigorous and systematic ways of examining the future, coupled with expert opinion and the free play of imagination, can help governments produce a range of scenarios of what the future could look like.

Having these scenarios in hand positions leaders and managers to be more conscious about why they are pursuing particular strategies, resources or policies and, as a result, change course more quickly should the need arise. Having these scenarios in hand also ensures that leaders are focused on the future, which can make policy less reactive.

Measuring the Effectiveness of Strategic Foresight

Once we grasp that the activity of strategic foresight is to help leaders make better decisions and to more powerfully shape the future, we can also better grasp what we might measure. Here are just a few ways in which the government's effectiveness could be measured:

1. Performance measurements: Assess whether the agency engages in strategic foresight activities and if so to what degree.
2. Quality of strategic foresight: Evaluate the quality of evidence and richness of the assessment of the future, as well as the plausibility of the scenarios created as the basis for policy.
3. Leader assessments: Gauge policy or resource allocations before and after strategic foresight activities to assess their responsiveness to future threats and opportunities; program leaders and managers can rate their own level of understanding.
4. Measure additional government values. Sid Kaplan has persuasively [made the case](#) that cross-agency collaboration is essential to strategic foresight. This is also measurable.
5. Assess whether and to what degree foresight-based exercises influence policies and actions. The US Coast Guard's [Evergreen Program](#), which generates future based scenarios, uses scenario development to create and surface otherwise inchoate strategic needs—the basis for the Coast Guard's strategic planning. In recent months, the program's

VOICES



[A Data Scientist's Guide to Ending the Wage Gap](#)
Promising Practices by Jessica Kirkpatrick



[Do Government's Foibles Turn off Millennials?](#)
Fedblog by Charles S. Clark



[Those Emails You Send From Home At Night Are Creating More Problems ...](#)
Executive Coach by Scott Eblin



[Foreign Hackers May Be Targeting U.S. Presidential Candidates](#)
On Politics by Kaveh Waddell



[An Almost-Routine Pay Freeze, Defending Senior Execs' Bonuses, ...](#)
Pay & Benefits Watch by GovExec Staff



[The Other Open Season This Year](#)
Retirement Planning by Tammy Flanagan

leadership has mapped the degree to which the needs identified via strategic foresight are developed in strategic documents and, from there, when and how they appear in concrete decisions.

6. Develop measures that take into account the range of virtues that strategic foresight promotes. The United States Government is rightly concerned that its workforce, at every level, display the qualities required to thrive in complex times: imagination, innovative thinking, cross-disciplinary abilities, the ability to work beyond silos and programs. Strategic foresight activities sharpen all of these abilities, in addition to sharpening the U.S. competitive edge in a tough world, full of surprising threats and astonishing opportunities.

Amy Zalman, Ph.D., is a national security analyst and was formerly the CEO of the World Future Society. This post first appeared on the National Academy of Public Administration's [T16 blog](#).

(Image via [GaudiLab/Shutterstock.com](#))

Get the Excellence in Government newsletter — the big ideas resource for your federal mission and career

Previous Post | [When Employees Allege Wrongdoing, Tread Carefully](#)

Next Post | [What's Really Behind Why Women Earn Less Than Men?](#)

Want to contribute to this story? Share your addition in [comments](#).



[Big Data, Big Challenges](#)



[Get Smart. Get The D Brief](#)



[The Biggest IT Contracts of 2016](#)



[Budgeting Challenges and Opportunities](#)

MOST COMMENTED

[Is This the Worst Congress Ever?](#)

131 comments · 56 minutes ago

[An Almost-Routine Pay Freeze, Defending Senior Execs' Bonuses, Bonding With Trump and More](#)

9 comments · 17 minutes ago

[Should Federal Agencies Stop Researching Drunk Birds to Fund the Zika Response?](#)

33 comments · 12 hours ago

[Trump to Federal Employee Union: 'I Have Your Back'](#)

81 comments · 10 hours ago

[MORE COMMENTS SITE WIDE](#)

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

By using this service you agree not to post material that is obscene, harassing, defamatory, or otherwise objectionable. Although GovExec.com does not monitor comments posted to this site (and has no obligation to), it reserves the right to delete, edit, or move any material that it deems to be in violation of this rule.