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Where do Future-Oriented People Find Weak Signals?

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Weak signals and environmental scanning have been discussed diligently in the literature since the famous works of Aguilar (1967) and Ansoff (starting from the 1970's). For example, many studies have been conducted about different aspects of environmental scanning processes. Weak signals, on the other hand, have not been considered in strategic literature to nearly such an extent. Specifically, there is a lack of theoretical studies on how and where business managers or futurists can scan and use weak signals, which here refer to signals of possible change.

During the spring of 2007, I completed a study on the sources of weak signals for anticipating future changes. The main research question of this study was: "Where do future oriented people find weak signals about forthcoming changes?" The target group of the study consisted of futurists and future oriented people, who were selected because of their natural tendency to scan for weak signals of change because of their work. In addition, I consider these people to be pioneers in studying the future.

The study was completed in two phases and used Webropol's (www.webropol.com) Internet questionnaire program. In the questionnaire the respondents were asked to answer some questions about their backgrounds (demographic and professional), choose two areas of life in which they follow changes, and mark good sources for weak signals from a list of 36 sources, which can be divided into three categories: human sources, textual sources, and on-line sources. The respondents were also asked to explain why they think that some sources for weak signals were especially good. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants in the study were given an opportunity to provide general comments about weak signals and the questionnaire.

First, a small pilot study was accomplished at the Finland Future Research Center (FFRC), primarily to test the functionality of the questionnaire. Based on that, some minor changes to the questionnaire were made. The primary international research was done in the spring of 2007. An invitation to participate in the research was sent to as many futurists and future oriented people as possible via various channels such as FUTUREtakes, the World Future Studies Federation (WFSF) mailing list, the Millennium project mailing list, speakers at the 2006 World Future Society (WFS) conference, and my personal contact network. The total number of respondents was about 120. It appeared that the majority of the respondents belonged to the age group of 40 years and older. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents were male and most of the respondents were living in Europe or North America. The

experience in the working with futures issues was high among the respondents; the biggest group of the respondents had more than 15 years of experience in working in the futures field.

The results of this study show that ranking of good sources for weak signals varied slightly according to the areas of life as categorized in this study: changes in politics, economics, society, technology and science, the environment, and education and learning. For political changes, politicians, government officials, “ordinary people,” television/radio, colleagues, scientists/researchers, futurists, and local newspapers were ranked at the top. Good sources for weak signals in the area of economics, according to the respondents, were futurists, consultants, scientists/researchers, academic and scientific journals, colleagues, and popular science and economics magazines. For changes in society and culture, sources such as futurists, ordinary people, scientists/researchers, colleagues, popular science and economic magazines, and academic and scientific journals were at the top of the list of good sources for weak signals. For technological changes, scientists/researchers, futurists, academic and scientific journals, popular science and economics magazines, reports of research institutes, and science fiction were considered top of the good source list. Scientists/researchers, reports of research institutes, the Internet (company and organization Web pages), colleagues, academic and scientific journals, and public sector reports including government reports were considered the best sources for weak signals in the area of environmental changes. For changes in education and learning, the top sources were futurists, colleagues, scientists/researchers, academic and scientific journals, and popular science and economic magazines.

All in all, the top five good sources of weak signals (among all areas of life considered here) were: scientists/researchers, futurists, colleagues, academic and scientific journals, and reports of research institutes. Because of the division of the sources of weak signals into three categories, it was found that human sources were the most appreciated in all areas of life. This supports the findings of previous studies (Aguilar, 1967; Choo, 1995; and El Sawy, 1985). By using statistical analysis it was also noticed that experience in the futures field, and the gender and continent of the respondent, did not seem to affect the appreciation/use of different categories (human/textual/on-line) of sources.

The participants in the study had some valuable comments about finding and collecting weak signals. Interaction, openness, and discussion were emphasized as essential for finding weak signals. More generally, keeping one’s eyes open, being sensitive to changes, creativity, receptivity, intuition, and curiosity are needed to find weak signals of change.

“Scanning the scanners” was a quotation from one study respondent for the reason why she/he thinks futurists are good sources for weak signals. This appeared to be a common trend about future oriented people: for looking at the changes in the future they look for other people interested in the future. There is a logic in this behaviour: scanning the scanners would be expected to provide a wider aspect to the future. However, there also is a threat of “collective blindness” – that is, what if all the futurists are looking at the same direction?

Elina Hiltunen is completing her Ph.D. in weak signals and is a weak signal enthusiast. In addition, she writes both a blog and a column about weak signals in Talous Sanomat, a Finnish business newspaper. In her column, she writes four times per week about interesting weak signals that can provide insights about future trends. She finds the periphery to be a valuable source of weak signals. The best access to the periphery, she has found, is through the blogosphere, and she recommends to her fellow futurists to dig in more deeply to the world of blogs as a source of weak signals. Elina can be contacted at Elina.hiltunen@tse.fi.