

OFFICIAL



Postnormal

The APS Futures Capability Project Newsletter



October 2023

If this has reached you in error or you don't want to receive further correspondence from us, unsubscribe instantly and forever [here](#). If you've been forwarded this by a friend, you can subscribe by clicking [here](#) or emailing us at: futures@pmc.gov.au



In this newsletter

1. Project update
2. The Temporal Salon: Seven Generations Ahead
3. Technique of the week: Disruptor Cards
4. 3 Cool Things

Welcome to this week's edition of POSTNORMAL: the newsletter from PM&C's APS futures and foresight capability project, which this week we can reveal has a new name:

POLICY FIT FOR THE FUTURE: Building APS Futures and Foresight Capability.

Will Hartigan, our project director, wanted to call it, "*Platinum APS Megafutures Overdrive*" but he lost the vote (and nearly his job). However, we will continue to push out some of our less conventional ideas via this newsletter, POSTNORMAL – recognising we're in a world where a lot of the rules are changing and we're still figuring out what the 'next normal' might look like.

This week in POSTNORMAL: In our Temporal Salon article "**Lessons for the APS: Seven generations ahead**" we're looking at what we can learn from First Nations

Futures: the discipline of exploring, anticipating and shaping the future. Also known as *strategic foresight*.

Futures is not about prediction (forecasting). It is about using collective intelligence with structured approaches (such as horizon scanning and scenario planning) to make pro-active decisions in a global environment characterised by uncertainty, complexity and change. It is fundamental for good policy and thinking beyond the short term.

Futures gives us the tools to **identify the future we want and take action now** to pursue it.

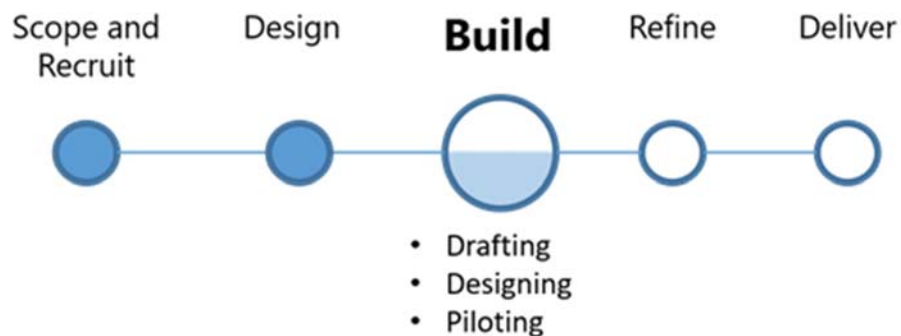
people’s perspectives on long-term policy decision making with a multigenerational focus. In our **“Technique of the Week”**, we will explore how disruptor cards can be used to expand thinking about the future (including a set PM&C’s used for a recent climate exercise – completely free with this edition!). Finally our, **3 Cool Things** will get you ready for the opportunities of artificial intelligence and how to embrace change.

If you’re new to futures or our project, see the attached one-pager for a high level view on what we’re doing.

As always, get in touch with us at futures@pmc.gov.au if you have questions or comments about the project, or want to explore using futures in your agency. Feel free to send this on to friends and colleagues – we’re happy to add them to our subscription list on request.

Project update

We are into the build phase of the project! We are **drafting our futures primer for policy teams**, working with the Futures Hub at the National Security College on **an agency-level resource**, and **refining the design for our SES futures workshops** to be held the first week of December.



We are sending out **invitations to policy agency SES** to join these whole-of-government strategic insights workshops looking at “what’s next” in domestic policy for future governments and the APS. These are primarily targeted at SES Band 2 leaders, but we’re also including SES Band 1s from policy areas with a strategic focus. If SES in your area might be interested in participating, [get in touch](#) with us. We may also have capacity to run these workshops on a per-agency basis if there is sufficient interest – let us know and we can send you more details.

We’ve gathered a lot of amazing insights from our stakeholder consultations, which we are continuing to synthesise both for our primers and as a resource other

agencies can benefit from in future. We're now progressing to consultations with international experts and from state & territory governments.

We've also partnered with several agencies to run light touch, quick and dirty **futures workshops** to build mutual capabilities and help us test and refine the methods we are developing. If you, your boss or your team might be interested in exploring the future of their policy space or doing some longer term strategy work, [get in touch](#) with us to see if we can help!

The Temporal Salon

Lessons for the APS: Seven generations ahead



Futures is not new to the APS. Two examples of futures thinking functions within Government from decades past include the Hawke Government's [Commission for the Future](#) and Whitlam Government's [Industries Assistance Commission](#). Our research through this project has found that this is not at all uncommon across the entire OECD, particularly outside of defence and intelligence portfolios – there is a persistent interest in futures thinking and foresight within government, but specific functions, agencies and teams rarely endure. Through myriad APS and agency reviews there have been compelling [arguments](#) that the Australian Public Service (APS) needs to do more strategic and forward thinking to effectively serve the Australian Government and our communities.

That we continue to find this challenging speaks to the significant institutional and structural factors that push us towards a reactive and short-term stance. These include the 3-year election cycle, the 24 hour media environment, the rise of social media, and tensions within global systems pushing us into frequent crisis and aftermath (financial crises, COVID, natural disasters, security challenges – and so on). The general complexity, uncertainty and interconnectedness of systems and

issues also can be paralytic for teams seeking to think long term – so where does one start?

Rather than trying the same approach to embedding traditional foresight methods into APS policy and decision-making, we may benefit from considering alternative approaches and perspectives, particularly those that might suit an Australian context. One of the most important sources to consider for inspiration in this respect is indigenous knowledge.

For example, in other countries, Indigenous cultures have used a generational lens for thinking about the long term implications of decision-making. The [seventh generation principle](#) based on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois) philosophy is paralleled in [similar traditions in Australia](#) and has informed the cross-nation Indigenous concept of “seven generation sustainability”, based on harnessing collective wisdom for long term equity, wellbeing and security. The Our Responsibility to the Seventh Generation [report](#) states, *“We cannot simply think of our survival; each new generation is responsible to ensure the survival of the seventh generation.”*

There is something to be said about how Indigenous communities value future generations, as much as they value the challenges they have faced in the present or the past. In Australia, it is epitomised by how each ‘Welcome to Country’ and an ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ speech places deference and respect to Elders “[past, present and emerging](#)”.

So how can the APS include First Nations perspectives on foresight to help us make better decisions for all Australians? One useful example can be found in the [2021 National Indigenous Climate Change Dialogue](#) to explore opportunities to share knowledge with the traditional owners of the land and request their recommendations on climate adaptation. Another example from this year was a futures hackathon held by the Institute of Public Administration Australian (IPAA) to aid policy officers on how Australia have might have hypothetically ‘[closed the gap](#)’ in a future scenario, drawing on primarily Indigenous knowledge, expertise and experience.

While there are examples of engaging with Indigenous models of foresight and working with our First Nations to think about the future, why don’t we make a sustained effort to incorporate that more consistently into our strategic planning? Because it’s difficult and often unfamiliar. It’s tough to think beyond what is known - and yet, it is our role as futures thinkers and stewards within the public service to provide our leaders with tools to think beyond the here and now, and consider how their decisions impact future generations.

As aspirational as seven generations may sound, maybe the answer lies in the APS learning from this more human-centric approach. Let’s look beyond the next electoral cycle and even the current generation of Australians. A more considered

long-term focus not only make our forward plans more robust, but keep our priority focused on genuinely lifting over time the wellbeing and security of Australian individuals and communities. So the question for you today, is: has your agency considered two generations ahead - are they even considering one?

Technique of the week – Disruptor cards

Whether we are paying attention or not, there are always clues to the future embedded

in the present. Futures uses tools such as horizon scanning, driver mapping and megatrend analysis to help us understand the drivers of change that can shape our future.

However, we don't always have time to undertake deep horizon scanning or trend analysis exercises in a policy context. Disruptor cards (also called trend cards or driver cards) can be helpful in shorter exercises by injecting ideas about possible trends, uncertainties and wildcards that may influence a future policy space. They can support many different futures exercises, and can sometimes be useful simply distributing in advance (or on tables in a workshop) as thought-provokers or inspiration. Exploring the intersections of different issues, policy domains and drivers of change is absolutely fundamental to futures, and disruptor cards can help accelerate thinking about possible issues which could intersect with their future policy environment.

We've attached a sample set of disruptor cards used at PM&C for a climate futures exercise. These cards were designed for a specific workshop, but we're thinking about iterating on these to produce a more generalist set to accompany the futures primer we're planning to release in January.

Disruptor cards (Example workshop used for PM&C Climate Futures project)

What is it suitable for? Stimulating and stretching thinking to brainstorm what ideas are impacting your policy or project area and envision what the future might look like. This exercise works well if there is an identified policy space or focal topic.

Process

Divide participants into two or more groups. Distribute a subset of disruptor cards to each group (3-4 of each coloured border).

Each group reviews the cards they have been given, then:

1. **Choose one trend (blue border), one strategic uncertainty (red), and one climate issue (green).** This can be done by placing the cards on a line and rearranging them by importance or interest, or by putting them in the middle of the table and taking turns at the table to remove the "least relevant, important or interesting card" one at time. It can also be a great idea to have blank cards on the table and let people contribute their own!
2. **Discuss** how each card might affect their policy space/focal topic over the next five to ten years. (Or simply Australia)
3. **Explore intersections** between the issues on the cards and the policy/focal area– what are the combined implications? How will these issues affect each other? Will there be co-benefits in addressing multiple challenges simultaneously? Or will they be threat multipliers? (This can be supported with a futures wheel – see attached for a copy used in the climate futures exercise).

4. **Create a scenario vignette** by combining the disruptors, interactions, and implications into a story – how did these factors affect the future of the policy space, or Australia’s politics, society and economy? Describe how the world looks as a result in a decade in a few sentences, supported by 3-5 dot points about how that future is significantly different from the present.

Timeframe

- 1 hour

Benefits

- Establish a picture of how possible disruptors can shape the future.
- Ideate on future issues affecting your work that you may not have considered.
- Identify how different trends might create tension or opportunities with one another.
- Consider what trends are impacting your policy area.
- Start a conversation with colleagues/teams on emerging issues or opportunities.

Limitations

- We can overestimate the influence of trends we are aware of in the present in shaping our future environment.
- There is a tendency to ignore some slow-forming trends and weak signals over other big megatrends.
- A group will typically get more out of an exercise if they come up with the disruptors themselves, ideally through other exercises and preparation. Disruptor cards can be a useful shortcut but are less robust than proper horizon scanning, megatrend analysis and driver mapping, especially for building team future awareness and capability.

If you are new to futures, disruptor cards are a good place to start. For more information on evidence-based long-term trends for policymakers, consider the UK Government’s [guide](#) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s website on identified megatrend [report](#).

3 Cool Things

1. *Stylus Future Thinking Podcast*. If you are looking for an innovative podcast

that may stretch your mind about the future, look no further than Stylus Future Thinking! This podcast showcases industry thought-leaders and commentators who unpack tomorrow's trends and explore hidden opportunities around us.

One particularly interesting episode you could start with is '[Designing for Disability](#)', which discusses the challenges and opportunities of combating social isolation through play. Video games as a social hobby involves 400 million with neurological or physical disabilities - so it is vital that the industry considers their disability in product design.

Examples discussed include the use of interactive bots for deaf players to recognise the voices of other players via an onscreen avatar through sign language. If you are interested in the intersections between AI, design, accessibility and inclusion, tune into this episode to learn more!

2. *The eerie future of TED Talks.* TED Talks typically aim for a tone somewhere between interesting and inspirational. But unlike most, James Skinner's presentation on '[ChatGPT, AI, and the Crazy Future That Already Happened](#)' is incredibly eerie. Indeed, it could possibly make you feel a bit uncomfortable.

His entire presentation – the audio, virtual voice and physical avatar - was generated entirely by artificial intelligence. It may not be pleasant viewing, but James vividly paints a picture of how machine learning capacities can challenge human creativity in music, art and books. In an age of possibilities, he advises us to not underestimate these tools as simple amusements and instead “use them” in our everyday life.

1. *The Black Swan*. Looking for a book to expand your world view? Look no

further than 'The Black Swan' by Nicholas Taleb. This thought-provoking read explores the question of why we fail to acknowledge black swan (highly improbable / high impact) events until they occur.

Generally speaking, human beings tend to concentrate on things we already know and fail to reward those who can imagine the "impossible" such as the success of Google or the attack on 9/11. These events continue to - time and time again - blindside us.

If we fool ourselves into thinking we know more than we actually do, we fail to prepare ourselves for what lies ahead. Exploring the concepts of probability, statistics and human psychology, Taleb encourages his readers to embrace the inherent uncertainties of life. Check out his book to find out more!

Thanks for reading! Send us your feedback and feel free to forward this on to your friends and colleagues. If you're working in the futures/strategic foresight space in government, we'd love to hear from you. Once again, our address is:
futures@pmc.gov.au

This issue was drafted by Faseeha Hashmi with support from the PPTO Policy Fit for the Future project team: Will Hartigan, Arthur Horobin, Katherine Knowles, Anton Falez, Melissa Permezel, and Alexander Tobal.

Please note due to the public facing nature of the APSC website, we have not included the attachments originally sent attached to this newsletter. If you would like a copy of the disrupter cards and futures wheel template, please contact:

futures@pmc.gov.au