



An Eagle Eye to the Future

Developing Agility, Responding to Emerging Risks, 2015-6

The client:

A UK-based regulator

The challenge:

Our client operates in a rapidly changing, highly regulated market. In order to serve its stakeholders it needed to sharpen the organisation's eyes on the future and to become more resilient in the face of long-term challenges. They knew that in order to build their agility and responsiveness, they would need a way of identifying emerging future risks at the earliest warning signal. So they asked Sparknow to help them shape a new approach to futures and determine the extent to which future scenario planning could be used to shape long-term strategy and help prioritise their work. They also asked Sparknow to bring expertise to the table that would guide them in building their knowledge and understanding of futures methods.

The solutions:

Over a six-month period Sparknow worked with the core team and with selected people across the organisation to:

- analyse the current operating environment to assess cultural readiness, attitudes and beliefs about the value of futures and a longer-term view
- propose models for a "Futures Function" at strategy level that used cultural insights to help with effective embedding of the chosen model
- build a "Blueprint for Futures". This included a recommended futures toolset, a systems map and a guide to implementation along with recommendations for embedding futures in a systematic way that connected to the organisation's business plan and strategy

"Understanding the impacts of the future on the decisions we make today sits at the heart of being an effective and responsible regulator. Our work with Sparknow has enhanced the way we both think and talk about futures internally and how we engage with those externally. Having the expertise of the Sparknow team really galvanised interest and credibility in futures work – in a way that internal peer-to-peer conversations were likely to have been less successful and inspirational. Sparknow have provided a great platform on which to continue to build."

Client lead

Notes on approach:

- We knew how important it was for our client to be able to draw on leading thinkers in the field in order to select the best solution. To help the client access this expertise we did what we often do, inviting world-class experts from Sparknow's networks to a private round table. The conversations at the round table were a highlight for the client, helping them to test their choices with the outside world. The client now has those relationships with the outside world to draw on in the future.
- Sparknow partnered with Infinite Futures, an expert in the field, on the project. Together we made sure the client had an opportunity to try out the futures methods. This way they were able to build their understanding of futures methods and tools, as well as experiencing what different methods and model options felt like. In particular, a session on "Three Horizons" (a framework for thinking about longer-term change) proved rich and insightful as it invited people to challenge current thinking and identify likely emerging risks. The blend of specialist foresight expertise and Sparknow's experience in cultural shifts was a key to enabling the client to select the futures model that was right for them.
- During the work Sparknow intentionally looked to identify members of the organisation at the forward edge of futures thinking, so identifying and starting to shape a network ready and able to continue the work. Working with the critical few who will magnetise networks and sustain forward momentum is central to our approach.
- By holding paired interviews we stimulated new connections and understanding in the organisation, helping to build awareness and buy-in for the solution, paving the way for embedding the change.

Key words:

Futures, regulation, governance, compliance, risk, dashboard, networks, strategy, culture

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