

Interview – David Smith

Gill McKay speaks to David Smith, Chief Executive of The Global Futures Foundation.

The first and obvious question is, what is The Global Futures Forum and what does it do?

“The Global Futures Forum (GFF) is a global organisation that brings the world’s best futurists together into a single network.”

“It’s purpose is to work with businesses and organisations to inspire people to think more creatively about the future and build those thoughts into their planning processes. By applying much greater thought to what might lie ahead, we hope that the future, when it arrives, will hold fewer surprises or, better still, through their greater awareness of what might happen, people will play a greater part in creating their own future.”

Who are these “futurists” and what do they do?

“Unfortunately, as with all terms, they become jargon if used too much. For example, in North America there is a directory of futurists that list over 4,000 individuals and organisations, only a few of which are part of our network.”

“I therefore prefer to describe them simply as what they are, which is experts in their particular area or discipline who consequently spend a lot of time thinking about how things will change in the future in that particular area.”

“For example, Robert Heller is a highly respected writer in the area of management strategies while Karl Heinz is a leading authority on demographic change. All are leading thinkers in a particular aspect of future thinking and together they form an extraordinarily powerful body of thought and opinion.”

How does the GFF operate?

“The GFF is an independent body, originally conceived and established by Unisys, which is now supported by sponsorship.”

“Our role is to manage and coordinate our global network of futurists, promote the importance and benefits of future



thinking in organisations’ planning processes and provide resource and support for specific projects.”

“In addition to this we publish a regular newsletter called ‘Food for thought’, publish the occasional report based on research conducted amongst our panel of futurists as well as the wider business community and run an annual ‘Futurescene’ conference.”

How does an organisation use the GFF?

“We are always pleased to speak to organisations about the importance of future thinking and so are often invited to give presentations at senior management conferences and the like”.

“Quite often these informal engagements develop in specific projects where an organisation wants to consider a specific aspect of the future as part of their planning process. In these instances, we will pull together the individuals within the organisation with the most appropriate knowledge and expertise to work on the project.”

In working on specific projects, do you not find yourselves in competition with analyst and consultancy companies?

“Not really because what we provide is unique and complements the services of those organisations. For example, at the moment we are involved in a project where we are working alongside McKinsey and a separate

analyst company. We are providing the external thought, the client provides the internal thought, the analysts test those thoughts and provide the analytical framework and McKinsey manage the overall process”.

Is all of your work with large businesses?

“Our objective is to provide ‘Useful and useable views of the future’, which inevitably means that we focus on commercial aspects of the future. However, this doesn’t mean that we are exclusively for business as this type of future thinking is equally important for people in the public sector or in charities as it is for IT companies of manufacturers”.

Apart from inviting you as a guest speaker or commissioning a project, how do people get involved with the GFF?

“The first thing to do is to visit our web site at www.thegff.com where the different ways of becoming involved are described. Membership is free of charge although we do encourage organisations to become sponsors, and we are finding that an increasing number of organisations are interested in this option as it makes an important public statement about the importance they place on strategic thinking and forward planning.”

“All members receive our free newsletter and are invited to attend our annual conference.”

So what of the future? Do you see it as more of the same or are there interesting things happening?

“For futurists the last few years have been fascinating as we have seen the dramatic effects of so called ‘wild-card events’ such as 9/11. The effects of these events are to act as a catalyst for change and so the turning points are becoming sharper and more sudden. Factoring in these types of events is now the big challenge. ➔

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