

Managing future danger

by David Hillson

This year daffodils in the UK have decided that it has been far too cold to emerge early and sensibly took no notice of predictions for the past few years that global warming means earlier and earlier Springs.

Daffodils are a pragmatic lot. They probably don't plan too far ahead, simply reacting to life as it happens. We, on the other hand, are much concerned by the future.

When I was growing up, we were looking forward to the leisure society when robots would do all the household chores and repetitive work tasks, and the biggest problem would be deciding how to fill the work-free days.

Space travel would be commonplace and we could choose to live under the sea or on the moon as viable alternatives to the land.

Wearable computers would be controlled by our thoughts, all diseases would have been eradicated, and driverless cars would travel on congestion-free roads or skyways powered by cheap energy from cold fusion reactors.

Of course we were also scared by the prospect of World War III and a nuclear holocaust, but on balance the future looked positive and exciting. What happened?

Danish physicist Niels Bohr reminded us that 'Prediction is always difficult, especially about the future', but it is the purpose of risk management to act as a forward-looking radar to scan the uncertain future and help us prepare for it. But what is it about the future that makes it so uncertain? Perhaps we should just expect continuity with more of the same?

Expecting the immediate future to be a continuation from the immediate past is a dangerous mistake. The following six characteristics of the future explain why there might be DANGER ahead.

- 1 Dynamic.** The future is changing. Even if we think that right now we have a reasonably good view of what might happen in the future, by the time the future actually arrives it will have changed significantly. The future we see today is constantly changing and it will be different when we look at it tomorrow or next week.
- 2 Ambiguous.** We do not have sufficient information today to enable us to understand or interpret the future fully. There are aspects of the future that are not yet clear, and we must recognise the limitations of our ability to make sense of it from our current perspective.
- 3 Non-linear.** It is not possible to draw a straight line from the past to the future. We cannot work out what might happen by analysing the past and simply extending it forward. Such extrapolation is based on the assumption that the past is a good predictor of the future. While that may have been the case previously, it may not always continue to be true. Just because the past was a good indicator of the past future doesn't mean that the future past will be a good indicator of the future future!
- 4 'Glocal'.** Developments in the future are likely to be a combination of global and local. We have become used to globalisation as a fact of life, and also to the need for action at the level of local

communities. This polarisation may collapse with a new emphasis on 'think global – act local', the use of technology to eliminate the significance of geographical distance, and the empowering of local communities to exercise wider influence beyond their natural horizons.

5 Emergent. New forces and factors will arise in the future that are not currently visible or imaginable. These are currently 'unknown unknowns' (sometimes called Black Swans). We can try to improve our predictive capability, but there will always be surprises, both good and bad.

6 Relational. The future will be more dependent on people and the relationships between them, with technology playing an enabling and supportive role. This will be increasingly important at all levels, including family, community, society and national. We must understand how people function as individuals and how they interact in various groups, and we need to include the implications of these relationships in our models of the future.

If we want to use risk management as an effective forward-looking radar, to give us timely insights into what might be ahead, we need to fine-tune it to address these six characteristics of the future. We should be alert to their existence and to their likely influence on our projects, businesses and lives. And we should consider now how we might respond to these important factors in order to prepare ourselves for when the future becomes the present.

So while we welcome Spring and the new life and hope it brings, remember to look out for **DANGER!**



About the author

Known globally as The Risk Doctor, Dr David Hillson PMP HonFAPM FIRM is director of Risk Doctor & Partners (www.risk-doctor.com). David is recognised internationally as a leading thinker and expert practitioner in risk management at both strategic and project levels, and he writes and speaks widely on the topic. He is active in the Project Management Institute (PMI) and received the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award for his work in developing risk management over many years. He is also an Hon. Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM), and a Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM).

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