

Drucker on Looking Out the Window

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By Peter F. Drucker

I am often called a “futurist.” But if there is one thing I am not, it is a futurist. It is futile to try to foresee the future. This is not given to mortal man. What is possible is to identify the “future that has already happened”—changes that have occurred but may not yet be generally seen or understood.

Systematic innovation consists of the purposeful and organized search for such changes—in society, in demographics, in meaning, in knowledge. It is a diagnostic discipline.

To be sure, there are innovations that in themselves constitute a major change; some of the major technological innovations, such as the Wright Brothers’ airplane, are examples. But these are exceptions, and fairly uncommon ones. Most successful innovations are far more prosaic; they exploit change that already has occurred.

Where do you see the “future that has already happened”—and how can this be exploited as an opportunity by your organization?

While I am wrongly acclaimed as a “futurist,” I am equally wrongly criticized for not being a quantifier. Actually, I am an old quantifier. In 1929, when I was not yet 20 years old, I published one of the first econometric studies. I also taught statistics at one time and helped organize the first operations research departments in American industry (at General Electric and Bell Telephone). I can thus hardly be accused of being unfamiliar with quantitative methods.

But quantification is scaffolding rather than the building itself. More important, many of the events that matter most cannot be quantified. To quantify social events that make a true difference, we need a “calculus of relevance,” that is a calculus of qualitative change. But so far, no one has succeeded in producing such a method.

And until someone does, we must use qualitative means to find and assess qualitative change. This, however, is not “guesswork.” It is not “hunch.” It has to be a vigorous method of looking, of identifying, of testing.

It means looking at society and community with the question: What changes have already happened that do not fit “what everybody knows?”

The next question: Is there any evidence that this is a real change and not merely a fad? The best test: Are there results of this change? In other words, has it made a difference? And, finally, one then asks: If this change is relevant and meaningful, what opportunities does it offer?

All of this assumes that you will see change as an opportunity, not as a threat. Organize yourself to see opportunity. If you don’t look out the window, you won’t see it.