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Book Review

Weak Signals in Organizational Futures Learning

Elina Hiltunen
Helsinki School of Economics (2010)
https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://hsepubl.lib.hse.fi/pdf/diss/a365.pdf

reviewed by Bengt-Arne Vedin

This is a doctoral dissertation, defended last year by Elina Hiltunen, weak signals editor for FUTURE*takes*. As a dissertation, it has to conform to academic norms. While the author, following this norm, defines her work within a tradition, this reviewer would regard it as pioneer work.

The book follows two lines of argument. One is conceptual, refining definitions and also offering novelty; the other is empiric and practical, including polling futurists, most probably some of our readers included, about sources for weak signals and also including a method for getting to grips with weak signals in practice. Hiltunen has a background in industry, though here the empirical work has been within Finnish research bodies.

One novel concept introduced is 'organizational futures learning.' We know about learning organizations (recalling perhaps Herbert Simon's warning that strictly, it's only individuals that learn); here, focus is on the future. Weak signals can inform the process through which learning geared at coping with and perhaps creating the future is taking place.

Is *weak signals* (or sometimes early signals)[*] an empty concept, which we may thus give various situational definitions? If so, the author makes it a closed one, and one I'd fully buy into, defining those signals as precursors to full-blown trends at some later stage. Here she gives short shrift to the idea that weak signals should equate with wild cards, and again I'm her willing subscriber.

Relying upon a conceptual structure of Peirce, who constructed signs as triads of an object, its representation, and how an interpreter, well, interprets it, she suggests future signs to consist of the three dimensions: object/emerging issue, signal, and interpretation. The doctoral work contains five peer-

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[*] Googling for the term weak signals would gain any number of weak electronic signals and also some from other fields of material technology

reviewed articles, and one of these introduces such signs to gain a meta-perspective of weak signals. This is an idea and a concept that may hold much potential for future development and exploitation.

An issue is actualized through concrete signals, exosignals, that may result in one or several actors trying to initialize actions from others: thus they initiate secondary exosignals. Interpreting an exosignal, placing it within a frame of reference, transforms it into an interpreter's endosignal(s).

The polling referred to above resulted in an article in *Journal of Future Studies*. Of the 118 respondents, 45 per cent hailed from Europe, 37 per cent from North America. The results are reported in seven tables and one figure, the tables giving rankings as to what categories of people are best for identifying weak signals in a particular area (politics, economics, science, etc). Scientists/researchers come out top, futurists are the runners-up, number three is colleagues. Various Internet related sources are placed in positions 10, 13-14, 15, 17, 19, 23, and 25. What if all or some of those were consolidated? More to the point: what about asking, say, every three years, with the likes of Google *ngrams* being invented (Hiltunen herself has been instrumental in developing a computer software tool for the discerning of weak signals).

Finally, the tool: the Futures Window. As the name indicates, the method relies upon visual stimuli rather than verbal ones. This has profound psychological advantages when it comes to obtaining reactions as to how people really feel. Hiltunen had collected a number of pictures (48) that were displayed for 20 seconds each so eight minutes in total. To give some of the flavor, people tended to remember eye jewelry – operated into the eye – as well as they did a mouse with a human ear growing from its back. Cute lifestyle cats also captured attention. Why did they evoke reactions? Mostly because of positive feeling or, somewhat less, negative ones, but evoking interest is also powerful. Now, this was a pilot, and Hiltunen forwards numerous suggestions for improvements to implement or to test.

With such a rich dissertation, stay tuned for future signals – and signs – from Elina Hiltunen!