

Intelligence, Part 2

MY PERSPECTIVE SERIES:
REPRESENTING THE AUTHOR'S
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

The information and data you gather over the course of years can engender both personal transformation and change your approach to your work.

By Louis L. Marines

Part 1 of this article addressed why and how to expand your worldview to encompass larger sets of information for expanding the number of connections your mind is able to make. Seeking a larger worldview and understanding the interconnection of ideas, forces, systems, ecologies of business, humanity and nature can help us reduce uncertainty and fear, prepare for dealing with uncertain or changing conditions and actively create preferred futures.

Among the ways of expanding viewpoints is the method of asking the three questions that matter:

1. What do I believe that is actually false?
2. What can I discern that others do not see?
3. What is my brain doing to blindside me now?

We looked at examples of how expanding your worldview can impact your firm, with Gray Plosser's story of how his deliberate exploration outside the A/E/C world helped him prepare The KPS Group for impending market and



service changes before they happened, and how Bill Ford Jr.'s commitment to tackling the problem of gridlock on a worldwide scale will help ensure a future market for Ford's motor vehicles.

This second part of the article looks at how to get started, who to talk to, and where to find information and data, including a list of favorite resources of people who are quoted here.

WHERE TO START

With those points in mind, where do you start? The learning organization approach to information, in which we take a much wider perspective and allow for seemingly unrelated data points to display unforeseen relationships, does not mean gathering information more or less aimlessly. Aristotle is credited with launching our Occidental approach to science through his attempt to classify all living things according to type; he invented taxonomy as a system. Taxonomy

“Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things. And the reason they were able to do that was that they've had more experiences or they have thought more about their experiences than other people. Unfortunately, that's too rare a commodity. A lot of people in our industry haven't had very diverse experiences. So they don't have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have.”

Steve Jobs, Wired, February 1996

remains a good starting point for many efforts, scientific and otherwise, so the first step in intelligence gathering is to identify the areas we want to be smarter in and investigate how knowledge in that system is typically organized. The taxonomy of transportation systems is different from the taxonomy of financial institutions or computing.

One challenge is to figure out what data may initially seem unrelated that actually belongs in the category to be investigated, e.g., if a multiday vehicle gridlock in a developing nation can be caused by a herd of goats moving to market down a road, what knowledge about local goat husbandry and customs might contribute to solving the problem? Is there a reason goats cannot be shipped by truck or rail? Is it a cultural tradition to bring the goats to market via the proper city gate on a certain day? Are the farmers unable to afford trucks until after the goats are delivered and sold? Our

initial reaction might be to look at gridlock as purely a modern traffic engineering concern; yet the simplest of elements may be at the heart of the problem.

This expansive attitude towards inquiry applies equally to the kinds of questions that affect our firms and our clients. Even though you seek to identify the categories of data to investigate — markets, marketing, operations, human resources, technology, economy, cities, transportation, project delivery, sustainability, etc. — you should simultaneously keep an open mind-set that allows for unexpected or unusual data to surface or turn out to be a core focus.

KEEPING A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

Data gathering works best as an ongoing process, not as a one-time event or a short annual effort, although these efforts have their purpose.

Glenn Bell, CEO of Simpson Gumpertz & Heger Incorporated, says that, “In the past several years, I have come to rely less on traditional sources to inform my strategic and tactical thinking. Broad economic indicators seem less helpful — in fact, I think our overfocus on general economic news unnecessarily dampened our ambitions in the down economy. Increasingly, I seek richer, fine-grained data that will help us understand opportunities for strong niche-market growth in an otherwise flat economy. Learning from business models outside of our industry, thinking in countercyclical ways and finding nontraditional approaches to providing value are important to us.

“I think most firm leaders draw on a number of information sources. Some of my favorites include:

- **An informal CEO peer group.** We meet regularly, but talk individually more frequently. The members of our group include a bank president, the founder and CEO of a high-end diamond brander/retailer, the president of a prominent interiors contracting company, the founder of a company providing professional development to teachers, and then-Gov. Mitt Romney’s director of Budget and Administration, now a business school professor. The richness of knowledge and span of perspectives of this group are unparalleled.
- **Our participation in the Global Design Alliance.** This is a group of A/E/C industry leaders that seeks to share best practices and pursues projects and clients together.
- **Our clients.** This is a tried-and-true technique and a lesson I had to learn and relearn, but your customers are an invaluable source of information. I spend a good fraction of my time meeting with our company’s best clients, outside of project settings and agendas.
- **Our employees.** Our folks on the front line are incredibly plugged in to what’s going on in our industry. They can tell me the trends before the industry gurus. As our company has grown and established more offices, the opportunities to collect ever broader information have increased, but it requires more organized and deliberate efforts on my part to take advantage of it. I spend a great deal of my time in offices outside of corporate headquarters.
- **Universities.** I serve on several advisory boards of engineering schools in the U.S. Among other things, this helps me stay connected with technical, academic and research trends in our industry. I love to guest lecture, interact with faculty and staff, and, most especially, tour research labs.”

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Looking outside the industry to universities and other sources broadens perspective and can help reduce the chances of benchmarking the firm in ways that lead it into too much similarity with competitors.

GETTING INFORMATION FROM CLIENTS

No database or search engine can replace the lifetime of knowledge, study, experience, connections and learning from mistakes that accumulates in the human mind. Glenn Bell mentioned how much nonproject time he spends with clients.

Howard Wolff, consultant and former vice president and worldwide director of marketing for international hospitality architects Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo, agrees that there is no replacement for speaking directly with the source, particularly when seeking data about your clients. “After doing a little background

digging, I’ll pick up the phone and call someone. Who better to ask about a company’s business plans than the CEO? I like to use what my friend, the late Ken Erdman, called the ‘Nine Magic Words of Networking’ — *I have a problem and I need your help*. People love to solve problems and this simple declaration gives them an opportunity to assist someone in need.”

Wolff recommends learning as much as you can from your clients by getting closer to them. “Ask what clients are reading, learn about the issues they are dealing with and the challenges they are facing. Hang out where they hang out. Learn to talk their language. Clients don’t care about you and your business; they are focused on their own businesses. You only become relevant when you can

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find ways to help them, to offer something of value, to solve a problem or suggest an innovative way of addressing an issue they face, save them money, make them money or make them look good.”

To do these things, your perspective needs to encompass your clients’ business ecosystems and the larger world in which they operate. Attending conferences in their industry will help you gain an understanding of their challenges. Ask clients what conferences they recommend you attend to learn more about their business.

FINDING SOURCES BEYOND YOUR CIRCLE

What about when your intelligence needs expand beyond the expertise of those you already know?

FMI senior research consultant Sabine Hoover determines who to talk to by

looking at key documents. She calls the authors as well as making a list of people quoted in a report or article, along with those whose works are cited.

“When I reach people, I always ask them who else I should talk to about the topic, what other authorities are out there,” she said. “They will often refer me to their own sources, who will then refer me on to more people. Eventually this tends to circle back around — the new sources will start sending me back to the first person. That’s often an indication that I’ve completed a circuit and talked to most of the experts.” She also points out that the people whose works are cited repeatedly by different authors are likely the top experts or the source of original research.

“I also find conferences a great way to make personal connections that will help me get information later on,” Hoover added. “When I was working on the report on P₃ (public-private partnerships), I went to the P₃ Conference. Most of the people I met there agreed to be interviewed later by phone. Since I’d sat through their sessions or had a chance to talk with them afterwards, I already had a sense of their context. Establishing a personal connection this way, even for a few minutes, definitely helps when it comes time to set up interviews with people.”

Hoover also tests concepts with people who are entirely unfamiliar with the topic; this helps her gauge how those who are outsiders to the ideas react. “Sometimes one of them says something that takes me completely by surprise; it can be a great reality check. Peers outside the industry are also good to do this with; it helps me gain some perspective to know if they’ve heard of something and what they think about it.”



THE VALUE OF TIME TO REFLECT

“Reflection time is a key component,” said Hoover. “I make time to think about what’s important in the material I’ve read and conversations I’ve had, how it ties together. This isn’t something where when you have a free half-hour, you can say, ‘I’m going to think about X for a half-hour’; our minds don’t work that way. You need the opportunity to clear your mind of other concerns and let your subconscious work. Many executives find it hard to take this kind of time, but it’s key to making important connections. I recommend to people that they build it into their schedules and be disciplined about it — it’s tough in these times where we feel like we have to be in constant connection, but those interruptions don’t let your mind do its work. You have to be disciplined.”

This kind of thinking also is helped by changing environments. “If the project I’m working on seems to be getting stale, I can usually refresh my outlook by working somewhere else,” Hoover says. “Getting out of the office to a café,

working at home, taking some of the reading to a park. Changing your environment changes the energy and can shift your perspective.”

KNOWLEDGE SEEKING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE DRIVER

At a deeper level, the information and data you gather over the course of years can engender both personal transformation and change your approach to your work, as architect Ray Lucchesi has learned.

“The longer I have looked at architecture, the more I see it changing,” Lucchesi said. “Society is undergoing a shift from wanting buildings as beautiful objects akin to sculptures to wanting systems that are sustainable, preserve the natural environment and enhance the community. The coming stage in this shift already is being felt and is based on living systems. The next several generations of design professionals will be faced with clients and communities whose goals go far beyond preservation to regeneration: regeneration of the natural environment, a rethinking of cities not as objects set down on top of the ground, but as systems that operate as integral parts of the landscape — both as natural and cultural elements.

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“Now, when I am looking for information, it is of a different order; I’m seeking a deeper understanding of place, almost the personality of the place, and how to understand that place as a living system. For example, food production is going to move closer to and inside cities. When you produce food locally, you end up with a better local economy and less costly energy expenditure. People get better quality food value than they do from products shipped for days or weeks from distant locales. You can close the loop in the food and water cycles through reuse and composting. So how many calories

of food per year are needed for the population of a city, and how much of that can be produced near or even within it? This is a higher-value design proposition.

“What I’m trying to learn when I look out there is, ‘Why is the system I’m engaging with doing what it’s doing? What is its story? How did it come to be in this location, and is that function still a part of the place? What does this place need now?’ Seeking out these kinds of knowledge can generate a higher order of design thinking that will cascade back into building design, so that we move from simply working ‘on time and on budget’ to working ‘on purpose.’”

Research on this level can be the work of years, if not a lifetime, and Lucchesi has delved outside of architecture into sociology and systems thinking to help expand his perspective and understanding. What he has learned has completely shifted his approach to his work.

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE INFORMATION?

For design firms, much of the research conducted will be in the service of strategic planning, scenario planning, decision-making and change management.

Strategic planning, especially when it is founded in scenario planning, must be grounded in trends research and the projection of varied possible futures that the firm should prepare to encounter.

Decision-making and change management likewise require that enough intelligence be gathered to make the decision or understand the direction of the change and how it will affect the firm.

Expanding your perspective and seeking to understand larger trends that will ultimately change the design professions requires a long-term commitment to being open, accepting a wide range of input and seeking out new ideas. ■



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APPENDIX: RESOURCES

Note that many of the sources listed here offer multiple media options — blogs, publications, conferences, videos:

Conferences

This site attempts to list every upcoming conference on the globe, searchable by keyword.

<http://www.allconferences.com/>

Academic Conferences: a conference search site focused on academia

<http://www.conferencealerts.com/>

Science Conferences: the prestigious publication “Nature” offers an extensive list of science conferences: <http://www.nature.com/natureevents/science/>

TED Conferences: <http://www.ted.com/pages/registration>

Design and Construction Industry Sources

American Institute of Architects: <http://www.aia.org>

American Consulting Engineers Council: <http://www.acec.org>

Associated General Contractors of America: <http://www.agc.org/>

Engineering News-Record: <http://enr.construction.com/>

FMI Resources: <http://www.fminet.com/resources>

Governmental Sources

This page provides links to all U.S. federal government agencies in alphabetical order:

<http://www.usa.gov/directory/federal/index.shtml>

This page provides links to the agencies of each state and U.S. territory in alphabetical order:

<http://www.usa.gov/Agencies/State-and-Territories.shtml>

This page provides links to the government of every European country:

http://europa.eu/about-eu/countries/index_en.htm

Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>

Institutions

Brookings: <http://www.brookings.edu/>

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/>

Center for Strategic and International Studies: <http://csis.org/>

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: <http://www.cbpp.org>

International Monetary Fund: <http://www.imf.org/external/index.htm>

Peterson Institute for International Economics: <http://www.iie.com/>

Pew Research Center: pewresearch.org/

Projects for Public Spaces: <http://www.pps.org/>

Urban Land Institute: <http://www.uli.org/>

World Economic Forum: www.weforum.org/

World Future Society and The Futurist Magazine: <http://www.wfs.org/>

Media and Blogs

3QuarksDaily Blog: <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/>

The Atlantic Cities: <http://www.theatlanticcities.com>

Big Think: <http://bigthink.com/>

Brain Pickings Blog: <http://www.brainpickings.org/>

The Daily Beast (Atlantic author's blog): <http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/>

Daily Cultures News: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/archives/cultures/>

Economist Intelligence Unit: <http://www.eiu.com>

The Forum: <http://www.forum.com/>

Harvard Business Review: <http://www.hbr.org>

Kurzweil AI: <http://www.kurzweilai.net/>

McKinsey "What Matters": <http://whatmatters.mckinseydigital.com/about>

MIT Sloan Management Review: <http://sloanreview.mit.edu/>

MIT Technology Review: <http://www.technologyreview.com/>

PSFK: <http://www.psfk.com>

Science Daily: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/>

Springwise: <http://www.springwise.com/>

strategy + business: <http://www.strategy-business.com/>

Wired Design: <http://www.wired.com/design/>

Wired Science: <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/>

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