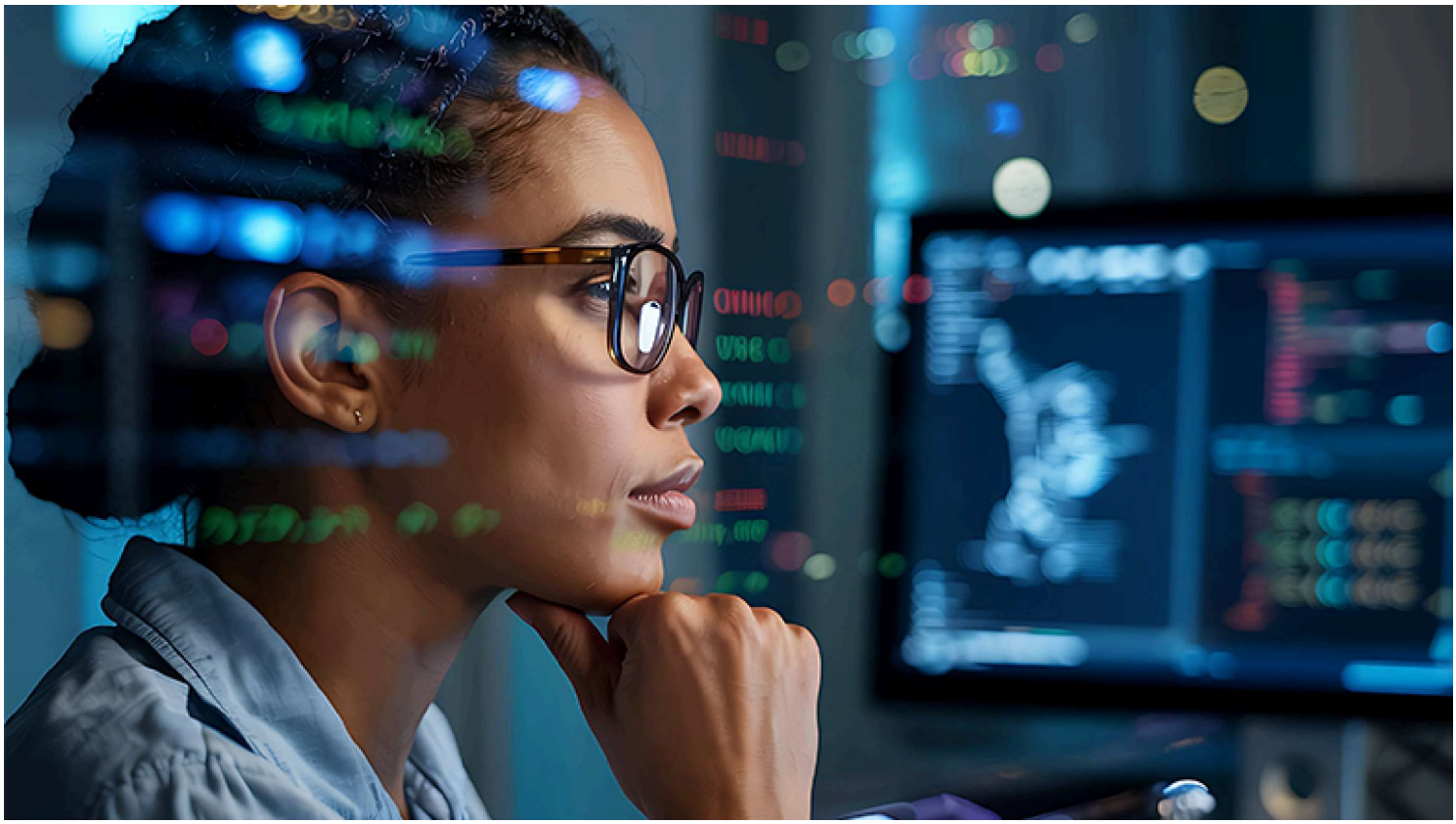
Foresight: The Board and CSE Role In Shaping Professions Into the Future



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> **We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet.**
>
> **Richard Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education (circa 1999)**

> **The most valuable workers now and in the future will be those who can combine human + technical skills (human+ for short) and adapt to the changing needs of the workplace.**
>
> **Michelle R. Weise, Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs That Don't Even Exist Yet (2020)**

Boards of nonprofit associations are staring down an imperative: Envision the future of the profession or face irrelevance. The pace of change, especially from technology and societal pressures, requires that trade associations and professional societies determine their role in shaping the future of the profession's workforce represented by their organization.

To effectively impact a profession's prospects for the future, the time is now to develop the board governance strategic muscle to deliver such weighty outcomes. These muscles include foresight thinking, data analysis, and provocative dialogues. Being successful at these governing skills will impact the organization but can have an even greater impact on the workforce development role of the organization.

Enter Foresight

ASAE ForesightWorks defines foresight as "a structured process for discerning, analyzing, and acting on potential futures." Foresight is not about predicting the future—it's about preparing for it through structured analysis and actionable strategies.

When a foresight framework is created and diligently pursued, a culture of foresight can be forged, but it requires intentionality, engagement, and discipline. A culture of foresight positions the organization for action and decision-making today that drives toward that potential future. This work is not daydreaming about the future; it's about engineering actionable scaffolding throughout the organization to support a two-way flow of information and decision-making that impacts the future.

This work, if done well and consistently, naturally positions the organization as an influential leader in the profession if it adapts to and creates a learning environment throughout all levels (including staff, committees, and chapter components). It infuses this forward-focused thinking into all elements of the organization. This can ultimately lead the organization toward being an influential entity for the workforce of tomorrow.

Role of the Board

If not the board, who? The board's responsibility is in guiding the long-term strategy and relevance of its members and profession or industry. When using foresight as a framework for envisioning the future, the board focuses on environmental scanning, trend analysis, scenario planning, and visioning exercises. This work will include analyzing data, engaging provocative perspectives, and adapting finely tuned listening mechanisms (internal and external to the profession).

Beyond this philosophical orientation, there are practical applications for building a culture of foresight.

- **Agenda:** As the road map for board meetings, the agenda must dedicate a healthy portion of time to foresight thinking, data analysis, and provocative discussions. Consider articles or perspectives (preferably from outside the organization) that may, or may not, on the surface seem relevant to tease out future impacts on the profession. Select one external provocateur per meeting (industry, tech, policy, workforce, higher education, etc.) to challenge assumptions. Discuss topics that are oriented toward environmental scanning and scenario building to flex that muscle for constructing a desired future while also understanding probable and even improbable scenarios.
- **Onboarding:** Aside from learning the bylaws and policies, governing bodies oriented toward foresight thinking include a focus on foresight in the onboarding experience—what it is and what it isn't. What are the instruments and practices the board has already created? What resources and exercises still need to be created? In what ways is the board forging ahead and how can new directors effectively engage? The board demonstrates its commitment to this approach by integrating foresight practices into future generations of leadership.
- **Continuous learning:** Feed the board's appetite for learning these skills through additional and continuous learning opportunities in the form of literature review, consultants, videos, and exercises, all to sharpen the foresight skill of the board (individually and collectively). Seek out signals—both weak and strong—in the marketplace for discussion and analysis, including how these signals might one day impact the profession.
- **Data analysis:** A continuous and two-way flow of information and data aids the board in building data analysis skills with a critical thinking approach. What are the insights to be gleaned? Where are the data gaps? What data sources are available and what new data sources can be cultivated to shape a deeper understanding? This data analysis should link to horizon scanning activities and should include a variety of voices including employers and other stakeholders. Explore external sources of workforce data such as the **World Economic Forum** or the **U.S. Chamber of Commerce Workforce Data Center**.
- **Succession planning:** Sophisticated board members understand their individual impact is isolated to their terms of service but is balanced by the building of that pipeline of future leaders.

Seeking out diversity, maintaining a strategic orientation, and forging a path for accessibility highlights a board's commitment to cultivating the future. This orientation goes well beyond words and is seen in recruitment and development activities.

- **Governance structures:** Most organizational structures are well-established and operate within the machinery of the organization. But are they supporting the orientation toward the future? Do these structures enhance the understanding needed for the imperative of and focus on the future? If not, how can these structures be tweaked, reinvented, or disassembled and rebuilt completely, if needed? If the structure is prohibiting two-way communication flows and needed insight, then structures can be refocused, or reconstructed entirely.

Role of the Chief Staff Executive

If the board is responsible for creating a culture of foresight, then the CSE must develop foresight as a competency and embrace learning as a change management tool. (See ASAE **ForesightWorks Courses** for training opportunities.)

- **Data gathering and analysis:** Key metrics have long been the hallmark of a highly functioning operation. Is that sufficient? Data flows forward at such a rapid pace, so it's difficult to capture meaningful data and make sense of it. But capture, we must. And analyze. And question. And combine. Finding diverse sources of data and then making sense of it is an ongoing challenge.
- **Organizational systems:** Our systems are only as good as how much we push them, and what we demand from them. When current systems aren't sufficient for supporting the future orientation, we create new systems. For example, a job analysis is a reliable mechanism to understand the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of today's worker. What mechanisms are in place for determining those KSAs needed in five years, 10 years?
- **Staffing talent:** Staffing is typically the largest asset of any nonprofit organization. Are the staffing positions and descriptions poised for success for today or are they oriented to tomorrow as well? Professional development opportunities for management need to include an understanding of foresight as well. A gap analysis of staffing might reveal the need for more research positions or additional technology strategists. Is the organization positioned for attracting diversity? Does an accessibility and inclusion mindset prevail?
- **Professional development models:** Once future skills are identified, how are the professional development delivering or certification programs recognizing that skill development? Perhaps a competency model is more appropriate—or alternate delivery mechanisms for programs that enhance skills like digital engagement. A variety of models exist (certification, assessment-based certificate programs, microcredentials, etc.) for engaging the workforce in training and recognition, all with different purposes and intended outcomes. What's the next potential model? In addition, future assessment systems are poised to change drastically to use real-time, on-the-job data for determining individual proficiency. How are your assessment-based programs evolving?
- **Prioritization:** Foresight thinking can sometimes lead to an abundance of options and overload. The CSE leads the discussion on how to prioritize the various scenarios or how to break down a possible future into actionable and prioritized steps. The CSE's understanding of current workflows can aid in the conversation on how to execute on a desired future state. Resisting the temptation for being overwhelmed is a critical state of mind for this prioritization work.

What's the "So What?"

If the board and staffing partnership is properly aligned around the importance and practice of foresight, what will be achieved?

- *Anticipating industry disruptions and technological advancements.* Boards that actively scan for emerging trends can position the organization to pivot before disruptions become crises. This proactive stance enables organizations to lead conversations on innovation rather than react to them.
- *Ensuring member value and relevance.* By forecasting future needs, the organization can tailor programs and services that keep members competitive in evolving markets. This foresight-driven approach strengthens loyalty and reinforces the association's role as an indispensable resource.
- *Strengthening advocacy and influence in policymaking.* Understanding future regulatory and societal shifts allows the board to shape policy agendas in advance. This positions the organization as a trusted voice in legislative and industry dialogues.
- *Driving innovation in professional standards and education.* Foresight helps identify emerging competencies and ethical considerations, ensuring standards remain current. It also informs curriculum development so education offerings anticipate—not lag behind—industry changes.
- *Creating skills enhancement through professional development.* Boards can integrate future-focused skills into existing learning platforms, preparing members for roles that don't yet exist. This continuous evolution of PD offerings ensures the workforce remains agile and future ready.
- *Aligning with the evolving nature and importance of durable skills.* Many foresight experts emphasize the need for more human-centric skills like adaptability, critical thinking, and collaboration alongside technical expertise. These durable skills become the foundation for thriving in unpredictable environments.
- *Applying financial resources with impact.* Strategic foresight ensures that financial investments are directed toward initiatives that anticipate future needs rather than reactive fixes. Allocating resources with a future-focused lens maximizes return on mission by funding programs that build resilience and long-term relevance.

The best time to have started building a culture of foresight within an organization for the skills needed in today's workforce was probably 2019. The best time to start building a culture of foresight for impacting tomorrow's workforce is today.

Tags:

BUSINESS SKILLS

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