

SCENARIOS AT WORK Oxford Scenarios Programme



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Using scenarios to reinvent transportation in France

I work for a consultancy and my job is helping other companies to work on their strategy.

My focus is the transport sector, so clients include SNCF (the French national railways system), the Ministry of Transport, and individual cities who are planning or operating different transport networks.

We were commissioned by SNCF to work on a project that would help them build their vision for the future of mobility in France, and understand different trends and opportunities for the railways sector. It was an exciting new project and I wanted to learn about different methods that I could use. A few people from my company had already been on the Oxford Scenarios Programme. They knew the method and had already used it with other clients. But I wanted to experience the programme for myself, and I am very glad that I did.

The concept of 'scenarios' is understood very differently in France from the way it is envisioned and explained in Oxford. We generally think of it in terms of quantitative methods, measuring, and trends analysis, while the Oxford approach is about understanding and learning – looking at factors that influence the sector and the environment.

Making a mental shift

This can present some difficulties when explaining it to clients. They, like me when I was on the programme, have to make a mental shift and realise that when doing a scenarios exercise, you are using difference competencies. The trick is to move away from always focusing on their immediate environment, the actors they know and are in contact with. What we can do is help them enlarge their vision and the scope of their understanding.

We practised the scenarios method a lot during the week of the programme, which was a good way to feel and internalise the approach. When practising I found it very helpful that I was working in a sector that I didn't know – although initially I found it stressful as I did not understand all of the context. However, I realised how helpful it is to have someone involved who is at some distance from the sector, as they are more likely to be able to see possibilities and less likely to shut ideas down.

When I returned from the Oxford Scenarios Programme I started applying the scenarios work to the strategic direction of SNCF.

We developed a community of 80 people in which all the different parts of the group, such as economic experts, networks, marketing, innovation, and the

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regional networks, were represented. We chose these people because they came from different levels in the organisation and had a range of different experiences. And we brought them together in three meetings: the first at the end of May, the second in mid-June, and the third in July.

Enlarging a vision of the environment

The first meeting was all about helping the community to enlarge their own vision of the environment in which they were operating. We had interviewed a range of people (experts and researchers on energy, oil and gas, economy, architecture, urban planning, the social sciences,...) to give different perspectives on the issue and provided different materials to inspire them. In fact, the first meeting was held in a huge room, and we covered all the walls with pictures and extracts from newspapers, to give them a visual stimulus and get them to think about all the new sectors that were changing. They were very enthusiastic about this totally new approach. In addition, we brought into the meeting two experts who made two presentations: one on physical internet principles applied to logistics, and the other one on metals economy (especially on stocks and uses) and low tech. They gave presentations explaining how they viewed the trends that will have an impact on the sector. Then we got participants to create a hypothetical

newspaper for 2030, writing articles to reflect the new things they had learned and new ideas they had discussed.

We created a community on the internet so that they could share ideas between meetings and keep up the momentum. So by the time we had the second meeting they were ready to build the scenarios, which they did in three groups. Then we helped them enrich the scenarios and storylines with pictures and images.

Major impact

In the third meeting we presented the scenarios to all stakeholders and invited discussions and questions. Again, this was really rich, and we followed it by thinking about SNCF in the three difference futures. The futures were very contrasted and very well built. They yielded insights that could have an effect on strategic decisions now, but also in 10 years and in 20 years. The SNCF used this work during a major national consultation, the Assises Nationales de la mobilité, launched by the ministry.

The Oxford approach to scenarios is very unusual in France; our companies and institutions are simply not used to this type of exercise. But it will enlarge your comprehension and is a good way to gather people together so that they can build collaboratively for the future.

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