

# The Corporation is at Odds with the Future

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by Grant McCracken | 1:00 PM May 29, 2013

A client recently asked me to comment crisply on the future. I came up with these observations.

See if you can spot my error.

1. **The world is speeding up.** In 1989, Alan Kay <sup>[1]</sup> said it takes at least 10 years for an innovation to get from the lab into everyday life. Twitter did it in 4.
2. **Faster change means more turbulence.** Assumptions are now less reliable. Best guesses are often shots in the dark. Planning sounds like an act of courage, strategy like a flight of imagination. When Alvin Toffler <sup>[2]</sup> warned us of this in 1970, we scoffed. Now we're living it.
3. **Every individual and organization lives in a state of surprise,** as Peter Schwartz <sup>[3]</sup> puts it. Just a couple of years ago, professional planners at a big ad agency informed me that Twitter was a passing fancy. So I was interested to note that the first thing LL Cool J did as host of the Emmy's this year was announce the hashtags for the show. Boy, was that agency surprised.
4. **There is a considerable advantage to seeing the world in motion,** picking up "noise" well before it becomes an intelligible "signal." We have to extract more intelligence from less data. We will need "big data" and good ethnography to spot and track the world in the works. For instance, this would have meant grasping the fact (and some of the implications) of Twitter in, say, 1998.
5. **And what we really need is a more responsive organization, one that can reinvent itself in real time, on the fly.** This will take potent, new powers of adaptation, but it's our only hope.

Spot the error?

I carried my assumptions into the future. I continued to think about the corporation as I normally do... and resolved merely to retrofit it with new parts in order to make it more sensing and more responsive in the future.

Boo! No, really, I mean it. Boo! Bad anthropologist. Bad!

What I should have done is examine my idea of a corporation, dig out the assumptions, and re-craft the idea. That's one of the ways we make ourselves ready for the future.

Here is my present idea of the corporation, give or take. **The corporation is a thing of people, processes, places, and products (give or take). And these 4 Ps are relatively well-defined, organized, boundaried, and anchored (more or less).**

But that's a problem. **This corporation is deeply at odds with the future.** Because the future is never defined, organized, boundaried, or anchored. Really, it's all just hints and whispers. Fragile melody, no refrain.

Hence, the great antagonism between corporations and time. A creature that defines itself out of definition, organization, boundary, and anchoring, must hate a future that is shapeless and unmoored. To the corporations, the future looks like the enemy, a risk that can't be managed, an idea that can't be thought.

The corporation puts a particular boundary between now and the future. And it guards this border ferociously. New ideas are scrutinized with tough mindedness and high indignation. If we can't see the business model, we're not interested. If we can't see how to "monitize this sucker," we're not interested. When the future manifests itself merely as a murmur of possibility, we are not interested.

Too bad. **There is really only one way to live in a world of speed, surprise, noise, and responsiveness, and that's to visit the future frequently.** And, if we have the intellectual capital, maybe get a *pied-à-terre* <sup>[4]</sup>. Well, and if we're really committed, we need someone to take up residence full time.

Most of all, **we want a corporation that is porous in ways it was not before.** We want it to cantilever out into the future. We want to make pieces of the future to happen inside the corporation. We want pieces of the corporation to happen out there in the future. In sum, we want the corporation and the future, once so completely separated from one another, to have a new reciprocity and transparency.

It's a weird idea, counter-intuitive in exactly the ways that provoke suspicion and dismissal. And it is an idea that will make a hash of the model of the

corporation we mostly keep in our heads. But honestly, we have no real choice.

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan\\_Kay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Kay)
2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin\\_Toffler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin_Toffler)
3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Schwartz\\_%28futurist%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Schwartz_%28futurist%29)
4. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pied-%C3%A0-terre>