

Building a Next Gen Insights Practice



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When it comes to consumers, markets and businesses, shifts, changes and disruptions are occurring more frequently and with more speed than ever before. Some come with a degree of forewarning; clear and obvious signals that allow smart organizations time to develop a strategic response to their threat. But most do not. No matter how many signals of change are out there, either right in front of everyone or on the horizon where few are looking, most organizations are still surprised by change and caught off guard by its implications.

Why? Because somebody wasn't as attentive as they should have been. Or because it was nobody's job to keep a vigilant watch over signals of change. And so: surprise! The shift, change or disruption becomes a reality. Market share starts eroding. New players with new products begin replacing you with them. And your company has the honor of becoming the next Blockbuster.

Who should have seen change happening now and coming soon? Other than chastising the C-Suite for being asleep at the wheel, we at Gemic believe that change – in people, society, technology and culture – should be the purview of an insights department. But not just any insights department, and certainly not one that talks about that big a-ha moment in the last focus group or in-home they watched. It might be what some might call, for the corporate world, a next generation insights department, a team that works to uncover and explore the big, meaty questions of consumption and value creation.

So, how do you build a next generation insights organization? Here's a start...

Insights departments must get smarter

Insights departments need to make the transformation – and be fully supported by the C-Suite in doing so – from being transactional and reactionary information delivery services for business units to being proactive thought leaders and sparring partners for the highest levels of corporate strategy. So, stop training and asking them to answer your goofiest, most insignificant questions and, instead, give them the room to deliver on big, existential human, social, technological and cultural questions that are essential for the long-term survival of business.

No longer should insights be a soft skill, but rather an integral component of the company brain with a minimum headcount made up of the best possible minds you can gather. If you are truly trying to build the capability to know and understand, those minds will have advanced degrees in one of many social sciences: anthropology, sociology, social psychology, behavioral economics. And if you really want to keep an eye on people, society and culture, your team will include not only the insight people but also those who practice foresight. Without that disciplined lens on the future that foresight provides, your perspectives on humans, society and culture will largely be limited to how they are today, not how they might be tomorrow. And tomorrow is where your sights should be set.

Vertically connecting micro, macro and multiple perspectives as well as different data types across one or more disciplines like anthropology and foresight will give your organization an advantage over the many others that hire unqualified people

to conduct human research, silo their insights into oblivion and ultimately fail to act or innovate on anything they have learned for any number of reasons, including the sad fact that all too often the stories that are told to business stakeholders about people today or people tomorrow just don't inspire them to act on behalf of those people. Inspiration matters a great deal. If your insights people aren't the most interesting conversation partners for the management team, something is broken. The corporate intuition is built in high-level conversations in which thinking on business and insight merge into one. That's why your new insights task force will have to understand business strategy too.

You must choose the right partner

There's a good reason why the people in corporate insights departments rarely design, conduct and report on human research: they've got too many projects going on at one time to have any real bandwidth for one alone. So, the reality is that your organization will likely be better served by having outside partners to help you with this research. Your challenge is to define 'better'. To do that, you need to take a deep, hard, critical look at the pool of available consultancies out there and ask yourself how the ones that you currently work with do and the ones that you are considering working with will make your organization 'better'.

Do they have experience? Is that experience about or adjacent to your business, and does that matter? Does their team have any qualifications to be conducting this type of research in a commercial space? Do they have proven research skills that connect to proven results? And most importantly, do they deliver interesting thoughts beyond PowerPoints? Would you give them a call late at night if you need clarity on whatever you were working on?

If the answers to those questions are all yes then you likely have a candidate partner. Vetting your choices should come down to another set of questions: What qualifications sets this consultancy apart from others? Will its teams be able to draw on previous research experience in my business and adjacent businesses to show me what's relevant? Will they challenge me and my team or are they just a bunch of client-service experts? Do they talk about what they do and how they do it a) like pompous know it all -types, b) like people who are just trying to hustle me with words they know will resonate with me or, c) like a smoke & mirrors factory where proprietary research methodologies mask the fact that nothing smart is happening with their firm.

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Figure out how your next gen model works

Once you've vetted and landed on a choice of consultant – or, perhaps, this topic becomes part of your vetting process – you must begin shaping both methods and methodology. There's a difference, and it's an important one.

A methodology is a research strategy. It is the umbrella under which you select and develop research methods and employ them in a study. More importantly, it is a theoretical analysis of the methods and principles associated with how a study is undertaken. In short, it's the why behind your how. A method is one of the many 'ways' or 'hows' that a study is conducted: ethnography, interviews, focus groups, semiotics, co-creation, quantitative approaches etc.

So how do you create a research methodology? One that gives your organization a serious edge over your competitors through the cultivation of insights that drive empathy, experience, ideas, action and value?

You begin with the three factors that should guide every consideration and decision in your efforts to build a new insight (and foresight) methodology.

The first is your research objective. What kinds of questions do you want to explore and to what extent do you even believe that there are ‘answers’ to them? Come to grips with that and you can begin assembling a team of ‘experts’ who can lead those efforts, depending on your objective. Two examples: if it’s a numbers game, consider someone from data science because the days of the old-school quant guy are numbered, or over; if it’s human-centric issues, you should look towards anthropology and sociology. And, of course, if it’s futures then do foresight. In practice, this means that you need a conversational relationship with the potential partners. Just sending requests for proposals out there is seldom a good way of choosing your thinking partners. Developing a better understanding of the types of questions you need to ask through conversations with potential partners is an essential step in choosing a partner. Good research strategy is always a match with the right questions.

The second is your corporate culture. How have insights (and the insights department) been treated in the past? Who in the organization has the authority and status to elevate the practice within the organization? In what formats and settings do (or will) leaders best receive insights? These and a litany of other questions must be answered if you plan to change your organizational insights function for the future. Answering them, strangely enough, is best achieved by having anthropologists or some other social scientists talk with your leaders, teams, employees about organizational realities. The right model has to be relatively proprietary to your organization as it needs to take into account the formal and informal practices that inform your corporate intuition. The right model will improve this intuition and clarify where the company should go next.

And the third is, ultimately, how you look to tomorrow. Imagine a car maker or a mobility service provider that wants to understand where to compete and how to compete. It will need to have a core team dedicated to strategic thinking that defines its ideal future. Chances are that if their vision of their own future is worth the paper it might have been written on, then foresight and social science will have played a significant role in shaping a robust social theory of how to create value for mobility consumers. They will have defined a POV on how the industry, its platforms

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and mobility ecosystems might evolve. And they will have identified where and how the mobility service provider can add unique value that taps into its core strengths. In the end, it is the combination of social sciences and foresight that will form the base of what will be your most humanly, socially, culturally and forward-thinking methodology.

However you proceed, know that no next gen insights department is possible without a tightly integrated and future oriented corporate thinking mandate. Insight will disappear as a separate function and blend more fully into strategy and all business units. When that occurs, a company will know at all times how it can create unique value.



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For more information about Gemic and how we might be able to help with your business challenges please get in touch:

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