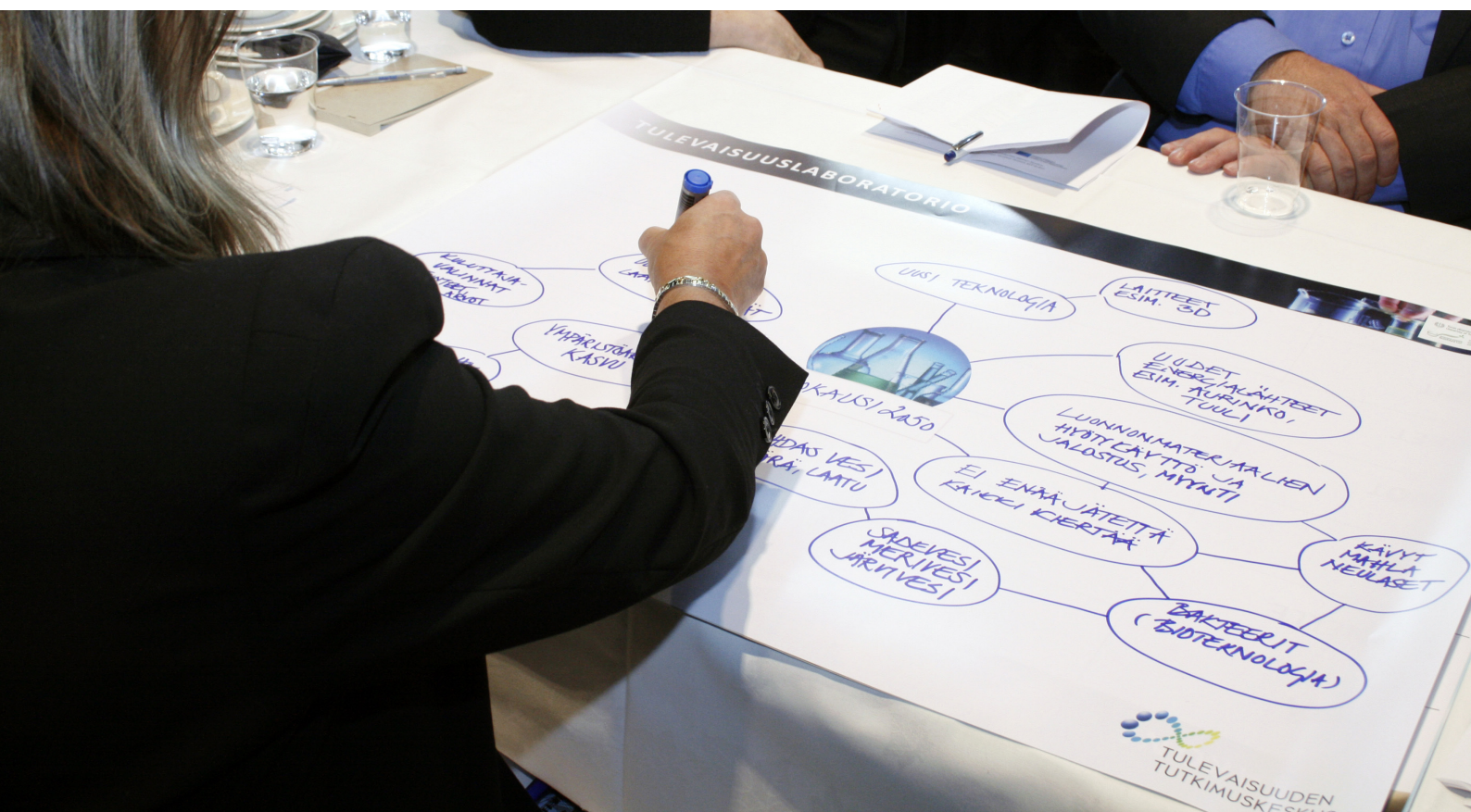


# PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR FACILITATING A FUTURES WORKSHOP



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# Introduction

Futures studies as a discipline and its methods have become more commonplace during the past decades. Together with growing interest towards the field, also the need for information on how to apply futures studies methods in practice has increased. This concise “entry-level” guide for facilitating futures workshops is an attempt to partially answer that demand.

It should be noted that there are many possible ways of facilitating a futures workshop. The ACTVOD process briefly presented in this booklet shouldn't be seen as the only correct way to search for future possibilities in a workshop setting. The format of a futures workshop presented here shows how a typical workshop facilitated by the Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC) Turku office is carried out. Typically this format is used when seeking answers to practical questions (e.g. future of an industry) and devising action plans for achieving desired future at a one-day workshop. Presented views are founded on author's experience on facilitating tens of dozens of workshops for various groups mostly in Finland between years 2006–2014.

Since the purpose of this guide is to inform on practical issues related to facilitating a workshop, discussion on many interesting and important issues related to participatory methods in general and workshop method in particular is kept to a minimum (for a detailed guide on using a range of participatory methods, see Slocum, 2003). Reader who is interested in more detailed information on characteristics of futures workshops is encouraged to familiarise himself with key journals and textbooks of the field (See section “further reading” at the end of this document).

This guide begins with a short introduction of the history and potential uses of futures workshop. After that practical issues to consider before, during and after a futures workshop are presented.

## Background of the method

The original idea of a futures workshop is to bring together people from various backgrounds who all share an interest in a common issue or a problem. Aim of the first futures workshops was to increase people's participation in solving collective problems by giving them an opportunity to influence future decisions of an issue whose development might otherwise be defined solely by traditional decision makers such as politicians, civil servants or experts.

Origin of futures workshops is often attached to the work of an Austrian futurist Robert Jungk (1987), who developed the basic form of the workshops for the purpose of enhancing democratic municipal decision making in Austrian towns. The idea was to give residents of different districts of a town, to whom the decisions made by the political command have the most profound effect on, an opportunity to influence the future of their neighbourhood.

Futures workshops are originally an instrument for collaborative problem solving but in social sciences, especially futures studies, workshops are also used for collecting and refining information that doesn't have a direct influence on the participants of the workshop. Futures workshops are a good tool for tackling complex problems where many, often seemingly contradicting views, have to be fitted together. In addition to collecting and producing information futures workshops act as an instrument of social learning which is especially beneficial if the people taking part in the workshop are also responsible in bringing about the desired change.

## Before the workshop

### Determining goals

Futures workshops can be held in order to fulfil one or several goals. Workshops can be used for assessing features and finding alternatives for current activities, seeking possible new directions against the outlined future possibilities (scenarios) or for collecting images of the futures without an immediate use for this information in mind (food for thought). Futures workshops can also be used as a tool of proactive futures creation by collecting a

group of stakeholders related to a specific problem and using futures workshop as a tool in forming a common opinion on the desired future and the most important actions needed to achieve that future.

Workshop can be a “one-off” event or a series of inter-connecting workshops that can be stretched over a long period of time. Determining the goals of a workshop and the level of precision of the results the workshop is expected to yield often vary depending if the workshop is a “one-off” event or one in a line of several events. In a “one-off” workshop the goals should be quite clearly determined and workshop planned so that this result is achieved, whereas in a series of workshops there is much more flexibility regarding required results of a one single event.

When determining goals it is also important to consider the target year for envisioning the future in the workshop. This choice has a big impact on the possible variance of the future end states of the group work. If one sets the target year quite close to present day (typically less than 10 years from present) there are a lot of things that will limit the array of possible futures. As the goal of futures workshop is to be a forum for creative thinking, it is advisable to use longer timeframes (20-30years). It should be noted, however, that regarding what is considered long and what short timeframe there are differences between topic areas; for instance in energy sector 20 years is often considered short time, whereas in ICT 5 years is a long time.



## Choosing and inviting the participants

It is essential to define what purpose the workshop serves since this has an effect on what kind of people should be invited. To a workshop whose goals are very practise orientated (for instance improving existing or designing new services and initiating the desired change) most of the participants should be stakeholders regarding the theme of the workshop, whereas in exercises where the key is to produce and collect future-related information, it is advisable to collect a diverse group of experts who have wide knowledge on various issues relating to the subject at hand.

The importance of successful selection the relevant stakeholders (or experts if the goal is to produce new information) cannot be overstated; the quality of the results that the workshop may produce depends greatly on the input of the participants (to a small extent the results also depend of the structure of the day and the facilitator’s capabilities). Ways to ensure that the people who are wanted to attend the workshop accept the invitation are to motivate them in the invitation and to send the invitations well in advance so the people have spare days in their calendars.

In a good invitation letter, in addition to essential information on the workshop, it should also be clearly stated

what purpose the workshop serves and what is the benefit of attending firstly for the participant secondly for the organiser. The invitation letter shouldn’t be too long, three or four short paragraphs should do. If the workshop is sponsored by a well-known body with a high status and a good reputation, it is a good idea to use this name in the invitation.

It is not possible to give a specific number on how many people should be invited to the workshop, sufficient amount of participants depends on the nature of the problem. For instance, in a practice-orientated workshop where the goal is



to devise and plan implementation of actions many stakeholders as possible should be present. In contrast, when future of a specific area is the topic, just a handful of experts can be enough.

It is advisable to send invitations to a larger number of people than what the desired number of participants is since not everyone will be able attend. Typically the invitations are sent by email with a request to reply to the mail or fill a registration form via a direct link attached to the mail. For those who don't reply anything to the first invitation mail, a reminder on the event should be sent about a week from the first contact. People whose participation is seen essential to the workshop can also be contacted by phone.

## Duration of the workshop

It is advised to reserve one full working day for the workshop. Half a day (roughly three hours) should be seen as the absolute minimum duration for the kind of futures workshop described in this booklet. During the workshop day one can always shorten the duration if it so happens that the intended results are achieved in advance. Lengthening the duration at the end of the day is not advised. If the workshop fails to produce what it was supposed to, one can fill the remaining gaps by drafting a questionnaire on the issues that were left unclear and sending it to the participants afterwards.

When planning what time to start the workshop day, one should in mind that some participants might have to travel to the workshop venue, so it is a good idea not to start too early in the morning.

## Facilities

The venue where the workshop is being held has some significance. The nicer (peaceful, undisturbed place) the place, the better chances there are to get a good result. Budget permitting, it is also a good idea to serve lunch or refreshments during the workshop. Lunch or coffee breaks serve several purposes; they give the participants a chance to discuss the topic in a relaxed manner, give the participants a chance to refresh and it also serves as a token of appreciation of the time people are willing to give for the common cause.

The structure of the workshop and the amount of participants determine what kinds of space arrangements are necessary. Typically almost any kind of room(s) where there is a possibility to organise tables freely to form table groups of 4 to 8 persons, will do. Out of commonly available seminar spaces, a typical auditorium with fixed seats and tables is almost the only type of space that isn't suitable for organising futures workshop.

## Information provided for the participants

In some cases – especially if there are reasons to suspect that all participants don't share the same knowledge base needed to discuss the issue of the workshop – it is a good idea to compile a background report containing data that collects key issues regarding the subject of the workshop.

The breadth and structure of a background report depends on the topic and purpose of the futures workshop. It can be a review on what we know of the topic at hand (state-of-the-art), it can consist of most important development trends regarding the issue of the day, it can be an account of goals and values the sponsor of the workshop wishes to achieve or it can be a thought-provoking collection of wacky future possibilities. In cases where the workshop is a part of a longer process, background material often consists of collection of the information produced in earlier part of the process. In these cases the report sets the stage of common understanding and the issues presented in the report are thought not to be contested in the workshop.

If preliminary material is collected and sent to the participants before the workshop, it should concentrate on the substance of the workshop. In most cases it is not necessary to inform the participants on the characteristics of the futures workshop method. Focusing on the method might stray participant's attention away from the topic of the workshop.

# During the workshop

## Phases

According to Jungk and Müllert (1987) (See also Apel, 2004) a “classic” futures workshop consists of four phases. This division is very applicable and ACTVOD workshop presented here can be seen as a slightly modified version of it. Idea of the structure is that each phase is – at least to some extent – relying on work done in previous stages so that knowledge is cumulating throughout the workshop. In textbook example the phases of a futures workshop are:

1. **The preparation phase** – the conference room (or rooms) is prepared (papers, pens, post-it notes etc. should be available). The workshop method, its rules and the scheduled course of the workshop are introduced.
2. **Critique phase** – actual start of the workshop. Here, the problem is investigated critically and thoroughly.
3. **Fantasy phase** – creative phase where it is allowed to vision different possible futures, even goofy ones.
4. **Implementation phase** – the ideas found are checked and evaluated in regard to their practicability. If a solution has been found, an action plan is written down.

## Preparation phase

Before the start of the workshop all material needed to go through the day is collected. Futures workshops don't really require anything special, large sheets of paper and pens (in various colours) will do. One can also use post-it notes instead of writing all the ideas directly at the paper. If this is the case, one should reserve plenty of post-it notes. There are possibilities to use modern ICT, especially in the final exercise where stories or timelines describing various possible future paths are written a laptop connected to a data projector. This helps everyone to get involved in editing the text is useful, but if data projectors for each groups are not available, traditional methods will do just fine.

After participants have arrived the day should start by the facilitator giving a brief overview on the subject and goals of the day and the employed method. If the participants have received background material in advance and there is reason to believe that the participants all have sufficient information needed to attend the discussion on the topic, there is no need to give a thorough overview on the subject. The duration of facilitators opening speech on the goals and progress of the workshop shouldn't be too long; 10–15 minutes should be enough. Along with practical arrangements, the facilitator should encourage the participants to be creative.

## Groups

After the facilitators opening speech is finished the participants should be divided in groups. In a typical workshop where the idea is to get as great a variety of views to surface as possible, it's a good idea to try to mix people so that each group would have a selection of different kind of people in them (various backgrounds, skills, knowledge, age, gender, etc.). Size of each group should not exceed seven or eight people. If the group is larger than this, the risk that someone is being left out of the conversation or the risk of having several parallel discussions going on in the group, grows.

These small groups should be seated in circle around the table to be able to interact and write to the paper in the middle of the group.

There should be no hierarchies in groups' discussion even though in some cases, where for instance some people in the group have a high position the society, this might somewhat difficult to achieve. The facilitator should keep an eye on groups and monitor that groups are functioning properly. This means, no domination of one or few members, just one discussion going on in the group at a time (instead of many separate discussions at other ends of the table) and that group is recording



their discussion on the provided paper(s). Groups can assign a clerk who does the writing on the group's behalf, but the preferred way is that everyone in the group contributes to writing.

### *Critique and fantasy phases*

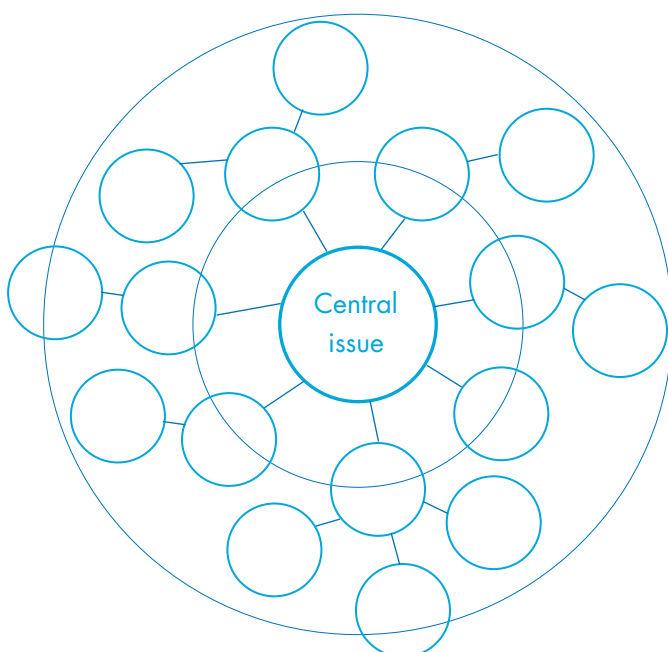
The workshop method presented here is called ACTVOD futures process (the characteristics of the ACTVOD process are described in more detail in Hietanen et al., 2011). The name of the process is an acronym of the items used to view a system around the topic of the day in second of the three phases of the process. The process presented combines critique and fantasy phases of a "classic" workshop.

### *Futures wheel*

ACTVOD futures workshop begins by fairly simple exercise called futures wheel. This is a form of visualised brainstorming which is performed around a fairly general issue or a question concerning the issue of the day. Aim of this exercise is to engage the participant's futures thinking as well as to understand the operational environment regarding the topic of the day. Futures wheels is a tool to visualise and collect issued related to the topic at hand, it also allows to map what kind of indirect consequences changes in the issue of the day can have on other actors in the society.

Futures wheel exercise proceeds in the following way: first each participant spends five minutes thinking about the issue and making notes. When the discussion begins, the topic of the futures table is written in the middle of the paper. After that groups discuss and collect actors who are directly affected by current actions or changes in the central issue (first level). Also possible effects the actions and changes might have on them (around each actor) are discussed and written down. After that the process is repeated (2...n level) and continued as long as increasing levels seems reasonable. Instead of writing everything down on paper, the group can also use post-it notes to write their ideas (post-its are then placed on the paper). Benefit of using post-its is that they make clustering ideas into groups easier as the work progresses. Connections between issues should also be written down and if one is using post-it notes in collecting the ideas, items belonging thematically together can be clustered together.

Picture below describes a textbook example of a futures wheel. There the lines represent links between issues and the big circles illustrate first- and second-dergee effects that possible changes regarding the central issue might have on the society. Note that this level of sophistication is not necessary or often even not attainable in a workshop setting, but in an ideal case is possible. The result of this phase is often more or less a fuzzy mind map than collection of symmetrical circles.



Picture 1. Futures wheel, adapted from Glenn (1994).

When the group feels the wheel is finished, the facilitator can order the group to vote on which of the surfaced issues the group considered to be most important or interesting. Results of the vote can be used when deciding on formulating the topic in the next phase. Also, the results of the vote can be used when deciding on what images of the future to look more closely in the following stages of the workshop.

As a result of this stage there should be a picture of a network (or system) regarding connections or possible effects of changes of the central issue. In addition to systemic view on the topic, another benefit of futures wheel discussion is that it offers a good change for the participants to get acquainted with the subject, its characteristics and the views of other members of the group. In a whole day workshop 45 to 90 minutes of time should be reserved for this exercise.

### Futures table

Compared to futures wheel, futures table is more systematic way of collecting and organising futures information. Aim of this exercise is to identify and collect all relevant issues related to the selected topic (to form a system model of a sort) and use the items in the table to derive outlines for several distinctive future paths. Where futures wheel was a phase of very free association, futures table is more structured and allows (or forces to) more detailed examination of the topic.

The group can draw the table themselves or the facilitator can draw the blank tables beforehand. In this version of futures workshop the table is called ACTVOD table, where the acronym comes from first letters of the six variables in table's left column. Variables are explained in a table below.

Table 1. ACTVOD table variables (Hietanen, 2011).

A	<b>Actors:</b> those who produce and do things
C	<b>Customers:</b> the actors for whom things are done
T	<b>Transformation process:</b> the goal of operations and the basic tasks of the actors; i.e., that intended for accomplishment through activity: condition X changes by means of action Z into condition Y.
V	<b>Values:</b> the values connected with operations (among other things, the values of clients and actors)
O	<b>Obstacles:</b> those factors which act as obstacles to the attainment and realization of objectives and goals
D	<b>Drivers:</b> those resources and other factors which help the actors to achieve their aims



One can change the names of variables if some other variables seem to be better suited for the topic at hand, one can also add new variables to the table if necessary. For instance, if one were to view the future of marine industry in a futures table, one might want to add a variable "products" to the column on the left. This way also possible future products produced by the industry could be considered. The essential thing in using the table is to have a selection of variables that covers the most important features of the system around the discussed topic.

On the following page is an illustration how a blank table should look like.

Table 2. Blank futures table.

	Selected topic					
Actors						
Customers						
Transformation process						
Values						
Obstacles						
Drivers						
(Products)						
...						

In the beginning of the exercise each group must choose a topic for the futures table. Topic can be the same as it was in the futures wheel but preferably it should be a bit more precise than that and describe an action or an objective relating to the topic of the day. If the group has voted for most important or interesting issue from the futures table, it can be used as a topic for the table. Year in the future, to which the discussions in this stage are stretching, should also be noted in the title. In an ideal case various groups in the workshop each produce futures tables with slightly different topics. This way workshop produces many insights on the topic of the day. In choosing topics for the table facilitator can guide groups to choose different topics from group to group. If the workshop day has clearly defined goals of topic areas, the facilitator can also suggest topics that suit to this purposed for the groups. Once the topic is selected, it is written down at the top of the table.

As the discussion starts the table is filled with various issues related to the topic of the table (one can start with collecting material from the futures wheel). After the group feels like it can no longer produce new inputs to the table the group can move to the next phase of the workshop exercise. As a result of this stage there should be a table that describes the system regarding the topic at the top of the table. This is probably the most important exercise in this model of futures workshop, so one should reserve ample time for this. In a whole day workshop 1,5 to 2 hours of time should suffice for this exercise.

Next, a few, preferably 3–5 distinctive images of the future, are constructed using the items in the futures table. Item(s) that can co-exist (i.e. are rational) from various rows are selected to form an image of the future. One can choose more than one item from each row. Different kind of approaches regarding envisioned future can be probable, preferable or possible (physically, technically and socially) future. Table below shows how different end states can be picked out from the table (x's are various items that the group has written in the table, red circles and a line connecting these circles show an example of how different elements in the table form descriptions of the future). Here only one image of the future is created; following future end states derived from the table should be marked with different colours from the first one (next might be blue, then green and then yellow...).

Table 3. One future end state derived from the futures table.

	Selected topic					
Actors	x	x	x	x	x	x
Customers	x	x	x	x	x	
Transformation process	x	x	x	x	x	x
Values	x	x				
Obstacles	x	x	x			
Drivers	x	x	x	x	x	
...						

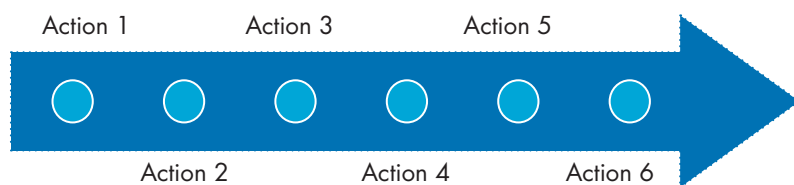


After the images of the future are created, the key elements of each projected end state should be written to a format of a story. The idea is to present the work of the groups in a format that is easily understandable even to anyone who wasn't present in the workshop. In an ideal case the group writes the stories together. This is achieved best by using a computer (and a word processing software) that is connected to a data projector so everyone can assist the writer in forming the story. If these tools are not available, the story can also be written on paper. Here the facilitator should encourage the groups to be creative since the table can be sometimes be somewhat restricting in that people often fail to be truly creative when choosing the variables and items for the table.

The texts don't have to be true scenarios depicting events from present to the projected future, the stories are refined further in the final stage of the workshop. Time needed for writing stories depends on how many paths the groups have constructed. Roughly 20–30 minutes per story is needed.

## Implementation phase

The aim of the last phase of a futures workshop is to determine key actors and actions that would make the desired future, formulated in the previous stage of the exercise, to come true. A draft of an action plan illustrates how the desired future is achieved (who does what, when, with what resources, etc.). However, if the idea of the workshop was just to collect ideas (food for thought) or to vision a range of potential futures, this stage is not necessary. Action plan can be constructed by using a timeline along which all necessary information is added. When completed, the timeline describes the sequence of events needed to fulfil the depicted future end states in a concise form. Together with the stories written in the previous stage, forming this kind of an action plan is about as close to scenario writing as one can achieve in a group exercise.



Picture 2. A Simple timeline.

This exercise should be quite simple so roughly 15 to 30 minutes of time for depicting the progress of the events from present to the projected future year of each future end state should be enough.

## Ending of the workshop

Typically the workshop ends with a short final discussion where each group gets to say what their key findings during the day were. This discussion serves two purposes: it gives the facilitator an overall picture of what was discussed during the day and an opportunity to clarify issues in the group's thinking that might've been unclear. Discussion also is a good closure for a day of intense workshop activities. The time for each of these presentations should be no more than 10 minutes.

Facilitator moderates this discussion by inviting each group to briefly present their work and commenting, making specifying questions and giving other groups the chance to also present their comments. It is a good idea to make an audio recording this discussion. Often, despite facilitator's efforts to get the groups to write the key points of their discussion to provided papers, the notes provided by the groups are somewhat modest. Audio recording on the final discussion is often a big help when the facilitator is writing a report on the results of the workshop.

## Role of the facilitator

Depending on the size of the workshop there can be one or more facilitators. Since in the ideal case individual groups work rather autonomously, one facilitator can handle even a rather large group of participants (app. 50 people). If resources allow, using more than one facilitator is advisable. This way help is always available for the participants and also it is easier to monitor the progress of the groups. More eyes and ears also help when reporting the results of the workshop.

Facilitator's job is to ensure that the workshop produces the desired result. This means guiding the participants in various phases of the workshop and encouraging the participants to be creative. The role of the facilitator can vary from an active person giving suggestions and inputs to a mere timekeeper who makes sure that all planned activities are finished in time. In the best possible case the facilitator doesn't influence the groups' work during the workshop in any other way but keeping the time and instructing what to do in various phases. Since the influence of the ideas and opinions of the facilitator on final results of the workshop should be kept to minimum, the facilitator shouldn't sit in the same table where the group work is done or take part in the discussion. Facilitator should be available for the groups at all times so that he can help the groups in case there are some problems (e.g. with the method or regarding the goals of each phase).

The most important task of the facilitator is to get people to be present (not just physically but also mentally) and discuss the topic of the day, i.e. ensuring that the day produces the result it was organised for. In some cases this might mean banning the use of own phones, laptops or tablet computers while discussions are underway. In ACTVOD method, where most of the reporting on the results is based on the output groups produce on paper (or in some cases electronic forms) during the workshop, it is essential to monitor that the groups are writing the most important notions of their discussion on the provided forms or papers.



## After the workshop

### Questionnaire

When reporting the results of a workshop exercise, the person writing the report sometimes notices that the materials produced at the workshop leave quite a lot of room for interpretation. This might be due to unclear handwriting in the materials produced by the groups, unclearly presented development patterns or vaguely presented, yet interesting, ideas. A good way to improve the quality of the information collected at the workshop and to ensure that reporting reflects the ideas of the workshop participants is to make a short survey for the participants regarding the ambiguous points. This should be done quite soon, within about a week or so after the workshop. For this purpose many software are available: one fairly good one is found at [www.webropol.com](http://www.webropol.com) (requires a licence), others (free of charge) can be found at [www.drive.google.com](http://www.drive.google.com) and [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

### Reporting

A successful workshop might produce a whole lot of material, but presenting everything as a result is not a good idea. Report should be concise and focus on the issues that were completely new or of which the groups were clearly uniform on. One advisable way to produce a report is to present "cleaned" versions of groups' futures

wheels and tables along with stories (if they are of good quality) and action plans. Along with these the report should have some kind of analysis of the results (written by the facilitator) and possibly a list of open questions and next tasks concerning the topic of the workshop.

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## Further reading

### *Selected journals of futures studies*

Futures

[www.journals.elsevier.com/futures](http://www.journals.elsevier.com/futures)

Technological Forecasting and Social Change

[www.journals.elsevier.com/technological-forecasting-and-social-change](http://www.journals.elsevier.com/technological-forecasting-and-social-change)

Journal of Futures Studies

[www.jfs.tku.edu.tw](http://www.jfs.tku.edu.tw)

### *Books*

Bell, Wendell (1997) Foundations of Futures Studies. Human Science for a New Era. Vol 1 & 2. Transaction Publishers. New Brinswick & London.

The FOR-LEARN Online Foresight Guide. [http://forlearn.jrc.ec.europa.eu/guide/O\\_home/index.htm](http://forlearn.jrc.ec.europa.eu/guide/O_home/index.htm)

A Glossary of Terms commonly used in Futures Studies. The Forward Thinking Platform & the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR). <http://www.fao.org/docs/eims/upload/315951/Glossary%20of%20Terms.pdf>