

# Back to the future: Surviving the pace of change

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My father spent his career as a social science instructor at a rural community college in Michigan, where he is a locally recognized orator on the subject of society, culture, and the future. As a growing student, I was often enlisted in dinner table trivia quizzes that included inquiries, such as “what percentage of the Gross National Product do you think the U.S. grants in foreign aid?” (a mere one-tenth of 1%, he would instruct, rendering my guess at least 1000% too high), and where—on an imaginary chronological continuum that stretched the table length—I thought humans appeared on the planet? (I was typically about two feet off the mark). I clearly recollect his lecture notes on the book reviews of Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* (1970), which described many cultural and societal changes that we could expect in the next 20 years. My father’s lectures forecasted our life at the turn of the century with astonishing accuracy.

Among the most relevant predictions for us here in British Columbia in 2003, he expected that the rate of change in business and society would increase exponentially; that the time span between one way of doing business and a new way of approaching our work would decrease steeply. I think of this prediction each time I recall the dog-eared address lists maintained at work for at least a year before replacing them and compare that experience to the almost monthly address updates I receive in my current job. Not only are we enduring new circumstances, we are enduring change in the pace of change. It’s easy to overlook this in our day-to-day work.

FORREX is a product of the information age—extension organizations are considered “change agents” and we are both subject to this profound change and promoters of it. Natural resource management in British Columbia is changing at a pace unprecedented in even the previous 5 years; we are experiencing some of the same societal and demographic forces that the United States and Europe have historically experienced, but in a much more condensed period.

Given the profound changes we face, how do we survive and thrive as people and as natural resource organizations? As individuals we recognize that most of us were not raised to expect this pace of change and that this new pace represents a major cultural shift for us (a culture to which our young children are already assimilated). And we give ourselves permission to feel the discomfort of operating in the new cultural reality, recognizing that the old culture has been replaced. As organizations, we position ourselves to become more agile and able to adapt to new information. Organizations positioning themselves as “learning organizations” have the greatest chance of success. Stepping back to analyze how well we receive, communicate, and incorporate new information into operations is a critical first step. Organizations whose personnel are encouraged to become “lifelong learners” and can “learn to learn” will survive and thrive. The *BC Journal of Ecosystems and Management* is one tool that should help organizations position themselves as learning organizations and increase their ability to adapt to new information.