

Future Search Conference

Engagement range	Partnership/Delegate/Control
Difficulty level	Medium to Hard (some previous group consultation needed)
Cost	Medium (\$1,000 to \$10,000) to High (over \$10,000)
When might you use it	To showcase product, plan, policy To discover community issues To develop community capacity To develop action plan To communicate an issue To build alliances, consensus
Number of people required to help to organise	One-three, depends on the audience size and level of complexity
Time to organise	Medium (six weeks to six months)
Size of audience	Medium (11-30) Large (over 30)
Issues/resources to think about	Publicity; Venue; Catering; Moderator/facilitator; Audio and visual recording; Overhead projector; Data projector/screen; Response sheets; Artists; Photographer; Props for working in groups (pens, paper, pins, etc.); Furniture; Children's requirements.
Innovation level	Medium to High

Description

A two-day meeting where participants attempt to create a shared community vision of the future. It attempts to bring together those with the power to make decisions with those affected by the decisions to try to agree on a plan of action.

The future search conference can also be used to focus on the future of an organisation, a network of people or a community. Participants are encouraged to explore the past, present and future and make action plans based on common ground.

Objective

- To develop a series of options for the future, and agree on a plan of action, which, because participants include those with the power to make it happen as well as those who will be affected, should be able to be implemented.

Desired Outcome

- A feasible work plan towards a future vision which incorporates the needs and wishes of those affected as well as those of the decision making agencies or departments.

Uses/Strengths

- The search conference is useful in identifying issues at the early stages of a project or process.
- It assists in identifying key or priority issues.
- Can provide guidance on how the participation process should be run.
- Can provide advice on who to involve in the participation process and gain support for ongoing involvement.
- Can empower individuals to become better informed, and better able to express their opinions.
- Useful when participation of large groups is desirable and an open forum is sought.

Special Considerations/Weaknesses

- Can be logistically challenging given the number of potential participants.
- Requires the engagement of an experienced facilitator to be successful.
- Can be difficult to gain complete commitment (to attend or to agree on outcomes) from all participants.
- Large time frame (two - three days) may affect the availability of volunteers/participants.

Step by Step Guide

1. Canvas people to be invited to be part of the future search.
2. Book venue.
3. Hire a facilitator.
4. Advertise event.
5. Brief participants and the facilitator on the aims and objectives of the session.

6. Provide a background briefing for participants if required.
7. Conduct discussion. One methodology for conducting the discussion is outlined by Emery, a pioneer of the technique, who identifies five stages to the process:
 - 7.1 External environment: 'the futures we are currently in' are described by the participants.
 - 7.2 Desirable futures: groups construct a list of desirable futures that build upon the current situation.
 - 7.3 Desirable futures are transmitted into more explicit pictures.
 - 7.4 Testing desirable futures against the reality of the current situation and the criteria generated earlier in the meeting.
 - 7.5 Discussing the implementation of the desirable future, based on current circumstances and resources.
8. Record issues raised by individuals and report back in the plenary sessions.
9. Compile a report of proceedings.