Most CLOs I talk with are so busy taking care of today’s business that they spend little time preparing for the future. Short-term thinking is good to respond to incremental change, but deciding things one step at a time doesn’t prepare you to thrive in a world of systemic, wholesale change. You can’t leap a chasm in small jumps.

To get beyond immediate concerns, you have to make the future tangible. Examining scenarios — stories about alternative futures — makes the future imaginable and real.

Royal Dutch Shell, the fifth largest company in the world and a long-term player — it is more than 100 years old — has been learning from scenarios for 40 years. At Online Educa Berlin in late 2011, Shell’s innovation manager for global learning technologies Hans de Zwart and manager of learning strategy and innovation Willem Manders led a scenario planning process to address these issues:

1. How do different global and national trends shape the future of corporate learning?
2. What opportunities and challenges does this create for corporate learning organizations?
3. How do those insights help to make better decisions around current learning challenges faced by the organizations involved in the exercise?

To answer questions like these, you have to escape your current mindset. In Berlin, de Zwart and Manders led us in an exercise where we came up with these key drivers:

1. Ten years out, how might work be organized? On the one hand, it might be structured, regulated and managed. On the other, work could be flexible, individual and enabled.
2. In the same timeframe, how will work be done? Will it be relationship-driven or data-driven?

The drivers yield four scenarios: Old-boy network — structured and relationship-driven; in crowd — flexible and relationship-driven; big data — structured and data-driven; and quantified self — flexible and data-driven.

These scenarios are neither forecasts nor projections. They do not predict what’s to come. Rather, they provide alternative views of the future.

Think about how you’d prepare for futures like these; I’ll append a few thoughts to get you started.

**Old-boy network:** This is a world of clear expectations and roles, organization-driven development, structural talent management, competency mapping, subject matter expert-focused, authoritative knowledge, planned innovation, business cases, calculated risks, planned careers and large structured curricula.

Many old-school companies think this is where they live. They have big plans but don’t want to throw away their LMS. Can this methodology work in an increasingly fast-paced world?

**In crowd:** This is a community of practice that focuses on hyper connectivity inside community, low connectivity outside community, interest/passion-driven strategies, many repositories of content and a wide variation of roles. Development in this scenario is peer driven, self directed and focused on personal networks and professional connections. Community is a curator, personal value aligned, and subject matter experts emerge from community.

This is social business. Informal learning thrives here, and the motto is to make your social networks thrive and get your mobile learning strategy together.

**Big data:** This scenario is gathered toward the data-driven organization with outsourcing/franchise models, high volume, high variety in personalized information and structural competence visualization. You have to choose the right data to act on. Customers are creating the data; this setup can make companies more agile responding to change.

**Quantified self:** In this scenario the individual is in control, and competence development occurs through automated feedback, high talent mobility and self compliance.

Some people predict the end of jobs and corporations as we know them. Might this be where we end up? It could be chaotic. We’ll need more engaging learning resources than ever before to keep people’s attention. It’s time to get those learning games online.

Among other things, this exercise taught me to rip my blinders off. I’ve been such a cheerleader for one of the scenarios that I’d slighted the rest.

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