

# Japan Future Centers

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## Introduction

Business in Japan will play an essential role in rebuilding the Tohoku region and all of Japan. To do so, we must go far below business as usual. A whole new economy awaits us in the future. One that uses less energy, makes sustainable use of resources, and produces durable goods and valuable services. It is an economy where we will have even closer relationships with our employees, suppliers, subcontractors and customers. It is an economy that will be more resilient.

It is a new economy we have to invent, now. Doing so will be demanding and challenging. Part of the challenge is that we need to create this new economy and the businesses that prosper in it while continuing to do business as usual!

Knowledge Dynamics Initiative of Fuji/Xerox, because of our relationship with companies throughout Japan, has seen this challenge growing for many years. The challenge wasn't created by the triple disasters of 3.11 – but the terrible events of early 2011 has brought a sharper focus. We need to change quickly and we need to keep doing what we are doing as well.

KDI started doing Knowledge Management work with Japanese companies in the late nineties. We've worked with many of the top companies in Japan and we know how important it is for companies to manage and use what they know for both business and social benefit. One of our surprising realizations after doing this work for more than a decade is that some of the most important knowledge in companies is unseen and unused. Our employees, suppliers, subcontractors and customers usually have substantial insight and knowledge about our businesses which are unseen and untapped. We need that knowledge now, perhaps more than ever before.

For the last several years at KDI we have been working with the question of how do we find and utilize this unseen knowledge to create essential innovation in Japanese businesses.

We believe that “Future Centers,” which began to flourish in Europe in the 90s, can be adapted to meet our needs in Japan.

A Future Center is a BA where people feel welcomed and where they can engage with each other to solve complex problems, explore important new possibilities, resolve troublesome issues and begin to shape a new future.

This small pamphlet gives you a brief introduction to Future Centers.

### History of Future Centers Globally

Future Centers were first developed in Europe in the mid-1990s and have been used in many contexts including: business, government, and civil society serving geographical areas as well as specific sectors. They have operated in numerous domains, for a variety of purposes, dealing with content-specific questions and issues in many sectors including transportation, taxation, insurance, banking, energy, education, water and coastal management, pensions, employment, and stimulating an entrepreneurial economy.

Future Centers were first developed at the Swedish Skandia Assurance Group in 1995 and quickly inspired similar initiatives elsewhere in Scandinavia and the Netherlands. Independently, the first Future Center in the UK was created in 1996 at the Royal Mail Group Innovation Lab to address challenges of emerging technologies, strategy and organizational development.

Both approaches were based on the concept of *experiential knowledge exploration* – the ability of people to improve the quality of their work and working life through deeper understanding and direct experience, and the ability of organizations to create value for their customers, stakeholders and society by translating knowledge, intentions and ideas into action. The models proved successful and were replicated across Europe in the late 1990’s, the Royal Mail Innovation Lab influencing diverse centers in Britain, and the Skandia Future Center model spreading to diverse countries in Europe and Asia.

More than 40 Future Centers of different types have been developed in Europe. They assume different forms in different places, and in different organizations they are known by different labels: innovation labs, creativity centers, mindlabs, accelerated solution environments, and diverse organization-specific names.

In Europe, Future Centers have been fed and inspired by the European Commission project OpenFutures (2006-2008), which examined state-of-the-art developments in centers across the world. After looking at issues like why Future Centers are established, how they work, why they are successful, and how they create value for their environment, OpenFutures created the first Operating System for Future Centers (2008).

Since 2005, the international Future Center Summits have offered opportunities for the members of the international Future Center community to meet, exchange experiences,

learn from each other, explore new ideas and launch joint initiatives. They have taken place in the Netherlands (2005), Italy (2006), Sweden (2008) and Japan (2010).

In 2010 the Future Center Alliance was established to promote Future Center thinking and concepts, and support members to develop new approaches and share learning across the worldwide Future Center community.

## History of Future Centers in Japan

For many years, KDI's core work has been helping companies making more effective use of the knowledge they already have. Using the knowledge management insights of KDI co-founder Ikujiro Nonaka, we have worked with hundreds of Japanese companies to analyze and change different corporate systems in order to achieve better performance. We also began to understand that something else was needed.

Japanese businesses are always busy! There is always another target to be met, another report to write, and someone else's new idea to be tried. There are countless meetings which often produce dubious results. In spite of the ways in which we are good at cooperating with each other, mistrust arises, people feel constrained from offering their ideas and insights and we often feel under too much pressure to pause, reflect and learn. The result is that most companies don't make full use of the knowledge and competencies readily available.

KDI started looking around the world for new ways for companies to create innovation. We discovered the Future Center movement in Europe. In 2008 and 2009 KDI and companies we work with visited Future Centers in Europe. We liked what we saw. We knew Future Centers would be different in Japan – but the idea of consciously creating spaces for innovation and change in companies made a lot of sense to us.

In Japan we started talking about the idea with more companies and, in 2010, launched the Future Center Development Program

Also in 2010 we invited the world to Japan to talk about Future Centers. KDI hosted the 4th International *Future Center* Summit in Tokyo. More than xx people from Europe and Asia joined yy people from Japan to talk about how Future Centers might help in creating successful innovative practices in business.

March 11, 2011 brought disaster to Japan. Companies who were part of the FCDP talked and we realized our work was even more urgent. The Future is NOW. Japan needs businesses that are resilient and durable. We need companies that produce goods and services people really need. We need companies that use less energy and fewer resources to produce better products that improve people's lives. We need to start today.

## Rationale for Creating Future Centers

A Future Center is a new and hospitable space where access and use the knowledge, insight and wisdom readily available in our businesses. The simplest way to understand

Future Centers is to think of it as a BA for the future that creates innovation and change through dialogue. In Japan, more than anywhere else in the world, we are sensitive to BA. We know that in a good BA trust is present, people speak the truth, creativity is invited forward and there is a flow in which newness can arise. Future Centers make it possible for people with diverse experience and perspectives to create a collective intelligence that provides new guidance for the future.

Future Centers are a BA in which companies can:

- Begin development of new products and services
- Devise complete new business strategies
- Find hidden opportunities for new business
- Improve the workflow in different divisions
- Create teams which work even better
- Raise and consider tough questions

Our companies must do two things at the same time. On the one hand, they need to engage in business as usual – getting products and services delivered to customers. They also need to spend time discovering their future. A Future Center is a BA of creativity and experimentation.

### Future Centers Are Used In Many Ways

A Future Center is a special BA where people develop a relationship with each other to listen and learn, brainstorm, think critically, develop and test new ideas. A Future Center Session brings a group of people who don't normally work together in a BA that invites thoughtful listening and insightful speaking. The Future Center Session is hosted in a way that invites people to set aside their own fears, judgments and suspicions and begin a new dialogue with those present.

Future Center Sessions can be used to:

- Build teams
- Identify problems
- Develop ideas
- Find resources
- Think logically and “out of the box”
- Solve problems
- Create strategic vision
- Make decisions

You can probably imagine more uses which happen naturally when people are comfortable with each other.

Most of us know and sense much more than we usually speak and share with others. We call this tacit knowledge. Sometimes people are simply unaware of what they know.

Othertimes they don't have a place where it is easy for them to speak-up. Dialogue in a safe BA helps each of us become aware of what we know and share it with others, where it becomes explicit, shared knowledge

### Future Centers Make Use of a Variety of Spaces

A Future Center Session can happen in many different spaces. Movable chairs and tables, a white board or two, walls that can be used to display materials, and a space big enough to comfortably accommodate the number of people who will attend are the basics. The aesthetics of a clean, attractive space combine with well conceived design and skilled facilitators to produce meaningful results – quickly.

Sometimes a business is able to dedicate a **physical space for exclusive use** as a Future Center. Tokio Marine Systems Future Center and the KDI Offices are examples of this kind of dedicated space. When possible, it is wonderful to have this sort of space for creativity, innovation and change. Part of what happens is that people through the business know they can easily call and schedule time in the Future Center to work with pressing issues or to explore new opportunities.

In many other cases, an available space is “cleared” for a **Future Center session**. A training room, a cafeteria, a classroom can be made available for particular Future Center sessions. “FutureCenter Week,” in May, 2011, was even started in the main hall at Takamatsu Castle! The hosting team comes into an available space and makes an inviting BA to begin the work of a Future Center.

### Future Centers Are Used for a Number of Purposes

As you can probably imagine, Future Centers are used for a number of different purposes. Ask yourself “What does Future Center mean to you?” You will probably get an inspiration! Ways in which we have seen Future Centers used include:

**Business Innovation.** Within a company, people who often don't talk with each other because of organizational and work flow boundaries work to accelerate speed of innovation. Frequently this Future Center creates new organizational vision, new culture, innovation, knowledge sharing and knowledge management.

**Business Collaborators.** Future Center which opens introversive companies and creates social shared value from connections beyond sectors. Company owns it, and opens up to other sectors. Appropriate for projects which promote new business creation, CSR strategy, and branding.

**Community Design.** Led by local citizens, this Future Center brings a people together to envision what they can do themselves to create a healthy and resilient community. Coming from many sectors – business, government, NPOs, schools, homes – people work to become aware of their local resources and abilities and begin to build new community themselves.

**Social Design.** Experts from various fields and social entrepreneurs gather around a common theme to dialogue about possibilities and programs in order to create a social change. Appropriate when many group from various network are ready to combine their knowledge and expertise.

**Open Government.** Representatives from government at all levels – national, prefectural, local – work with civic groups to create a BA for dialogue with citizens about important issues. Can be used to find a new vision, to develop policies, or determine new actions. Public spaces such as municipal offices, public halls, universities, and libraries are used for Future Center sessions.

## Components of Future Center

Future Centers all over the world look and feel different. They've been created by different people in different times for different purposes. We've seen Future Centers in a 200 year old mansion in the Netherlands, in a futuristic looking building in Italia, in a straw and mud hut in Zimbabwe and in an office building in Roppongi!

They all have four components in common:

### **Space**

They have beautiful space which is inviting and uncluttered. Space where desks and tables, chairs can be freely moved and which are arranged in an attractive pattern. A wall where ideas and others information can be made visible and shared.

### **Facilitator**

A person or a small team engages diverse participants and encourages creative dialogue. This team or person has good listening skills, experience in using diverse methodologies for enhancing creativity and group interaction,, and an inviting presence and experience in designing processes for dialogue.

### **Hospitality**

The BA radiates welcome. Someone who greets and welcomes, refreshments, light music all help someone immediately realize they are entering a different space. A serious atmosphere like a meeting is a taboo!

### **Methodologies**

A variety of tools are used to facilitate effective work. Dialogue tools like World Café, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), FutureSearch, Open Space Technology (OST) help to make people's knowledge explicit. Systems thinking tools help examine possibilities from many perspectives. Reflective processes like Theory "U" allow for careful examination of alternatives.

## What Makes a Good Future Center?

In Japan we move between many different spaces. Each of these spaces has its own "rules." We behave differently – and so does everyone else. We learn the rules of

different spaces and act differently when in a busy train station, an onsen, a temple, an office, a department store or our home. This is completely natural. We know how to move in and out of different spaces and as we do, we change the way we act.

A Future Center is a space where people are invited to be really, really curious about what else is possible, to respect each other's ideas and insights and to relax in each other's company.

A Future Center is a place where people who normally would not have a chance to talk with each other as equals meet and share ideas and ask questions of each other. It is a place where we put a lot of ideas together in the middle of the room and see what new possibilities begin to take shape.

A Future Center uses dialogue, and it also uses silence, reflective learning, working with different media, embodiment, personal journals and other processes which help us let go of habitual thoughts and invites the other things we know come into the room.

What makes a Future Center? How is it different than, for example, an R&D laboratory or a "think tank?" A Future Center is created when special attention is given to creating a BA that uses dialog to make a new future visible.

A Future Center is a place of creativity and innovation where it is possible to develop new insights and approaches which are understood and embraced by a wide number of people.

Let's create one together!

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