



Exploring futures in the Irish Food Board – Bord Bia

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Helen King interview

Speaker key

IV Interviewer
HE Helen
TO Tobias

IV I'm talking today with Helen King, who is Senior Business Analyst with Bord Bia, which is the body responsible for supporting the food and drink industry in Ireland; and, also, Tobias Rooney, who's a Principal with Innovaro, a major innovation consultancy. And we're going to talk briefly about the challenges and the possibilities in thinking about the future in a structured way as a feed into the innovation process. Helen, perhaps I could ask you, first of all, could you just tell us a little bit about Bord Bia and the role it plays on behalf of the food and drink industry in Ireland?

HE Yeah, Bord Bia is the organisation responsible for the marketing and promotion of food and drink, both domestically and around the world. We would primarily be known for our beef export, but we're a consumer for exports as well, and our role is to support them in any promotional way or marketing way. One of our core functions in relation to innovation is about helping them with their information and knowledge and developing programmes around insight and trends and then looking to the future, and innovation from very much a consumer perspective. There are other state agencies in Ireland that deal with the technological side of innovation or the cultural side of innovation; we specifically focus on the consumer and that very much would be about helping our organisations come up with ideas, stimulating their thinking and then developing those ideas through ideation and research, and, and then foresight programmes.

IV And would it be fair to say that part of that is going to try and stretch them to think and do things they might not otherwise have done. I imagine there's a bit of a tendency to sort of batten down the hatches and stick to doing the fairly safe bits, and your challenge is partly to get them to think more broadly and to do different things?

HE Yeah, very much so, innovation has been the buzz word that's been in the industry for a number of years, and we find that it's probably more of a buzz word than it can be a reality, so we try to develop programmes that when they understand what the consumer is doing today, and they can take that consumer knowledge and insight and then put it to use for developing new products, or, or new ideas or concepts.

IV Excellent, and one of the things which I'd particularly like to talk to you about is the way you're working with Innovaro, you use some structured foresight, some structured futures thinking; can you tell us briefly what led you in that direction?

HE I suppose, we run a number of programmes about trends, which we would look at, or we would consider to be three to five years out; but three to five years really isn't enough if you're looking for the

new big thing. So we wanted to help our, our organisations try to get ahead of their global competition, as well as their domestic competition. We undertook a foresight programme about 18 months ago, which specifically looks at the Irish markets, and specifically the Irish domestic market, and that was a scenario-based approach, where we brought in most of our larger manufacturers and some of our smaller manufacturers, and a few external individuals. That programme was quite successful and it helped our company to think strategically about the future of Ireland; but what it didn't do was address the global situation, and because our competition is very much a global market, we wanted to open it up to a wider audience. So we started working with Innovaro, and, again, it was to look at 10 to 15 years out, what the global marketplace would look like, and how our organisations can prepare for that global marketplace, and how they can actually get ready for it and maybe come up with something that consumer, whom we talk to today, can think of what, they can pre-empt what consumers will want in the future. So the Innovaro Programme was devised with the global picture, but it was also devised to bring in external factors outside of food and drink, because they influence what happens within the food and drink industry so much.

IV Tobias, perhaps, I could ask you, at this point, in doing this kind of thing, how do you go about designing an event or a process which picks up on diversity in terms of different sectors, picks up these trends; can you tell us a bit about the design of one of these events?

TO Well, the events, as Helen explained, the purpose of the event is to get people to look sufficiently far out, they're not the trends that they can map, the things that happen, several business cycles ahead, that are not immediately obvious. So the purpose is to get enough people to a room to have a discussion and understand between them what are the things they don't know, and what is it from what they know, what is it they can anticipate happening next? So what we do then is we bring together a lot of external people, our rule of thumb is you need twice as many external people as internal people, and you bring that diversity and reflection. So part of that will be, as Helen explained, you'd have a core, and beyond that you want related sectors, and sectors that influence the sector you're in, and beyond that you want people who are going to add maybe consumer insights and demographers, people who are from research and so on, who can bring in a broad picture. And through that mixture of experience and understanding, what you're anticipating happening is that people will start to join the dots in discussions and identify emergent trends that have sufficient length, because it's been through quite a rigorous process of discussion within the group; the people who can see what it would look like in 10, 15 years time and they can see a degree of visual understanding of what that means and what will happen next. So there's a process of generating a dialogue, and through the dialogue identifying potential trends, and then selecting some of the core trends that everyone agrees are the things they want to look at, and then go into some more detail. So it's a kind of broad discussion, look at the threads, pick up the threads and see what's most interesting, and then start to describe in some detail what those trends will look like.

IV Excellent, so in terms of how the actual event happened, can you tell us a little bit about how, how it played out over the couple of days?

HE It was a two and a half day event.

TO Two and a half days, yeah.

HE We met in Dublin, in an outside hotel; about 15 or 16 external participants came from around the world, primarily Britain and the Netherlands, but a few from other places as well, and then we also had five of our largest export organisations to join us; so we have about 25 to 30 people in the group. The

first evening we met we had a very strong presentation on the current climate, but also how things have changed around the world in the last 10 to 15 years, which is very interesting, and, I suppose, made people think about the past and how quickly things can actually change, that 10 years out really isn't that far ahead, although it feel far ahead when you're thinking in a day-to-day business context. That kind of set the theme, we look at consumer drivers and major platforms that we're going to discuss, that was the first day. And then we got together for the second and third days, and that was very much just about, just discussing the themes, different groups meeting, discussing different topics. And then, I suppose, cross-pollination of ideas from the groups, they were all affiliated or moderated by someone from Innovaro to draw out our ideas and, and make us think differently. And, at the end, we had a huge number of ideas, 100s and 100s, we had a bit of a voting system, I suppose, we clustered those ideas and then voted on the importance of them, and, and the effect on the future, and the effect of, specifically to the food and drink sector. And then, I suppose, we developed those a bit more and then came up with our 10 future findings, so we came up with 10, perhaps a bit extreme, future findings, but based in certainly dynamics that are happening today, which has expanded then out.

IV And I can see you've produced a rather nice sort of booklet that captures them, could you perhaps share one example of one of the future findings, just to give a flavour of the kind of thing that comes out?

HE I suppose, because, oh, this is an interesting one because it relates to food and drink, but quite a large bit of the discussion over the few days was about local economies, local sourcing, local food production. That core topic developed into the possibility of urban farms in the future, so urban farming and localised processing of food will be driven by a combination of top down or eco footprint regulations, and bottom up community interest. That was the core, so that really showed us a lot of the discussion was about going back to the community, a good bit of discussion was about the environment, and how do those topics mesh together to come up with one of our findings; so it was urban farming and localised communities.

IV That sounds a really interesting process and it obviously generates a lot of new directions in terms of innovation possibilities. I guess, one last question which I'll put to both of you, one at a time, from the point of view of a user, what have you learned from the process and what might you do differently in the future through that experience? And to Innovaro in terms of this being a process that you run regularly with a variety of different clients, what have you learned and how is that refined over time as an innovation management tool; so, perhaps, I can throw the question at you first, Helen, and then come back to Tobias?

HE Okay, I suppose, if I was to repeat the exercise, I would ensure that the balance between external force and internal force was more heavily balanced on the external. We had a number of people from my own organisation and then some of our client companies, but then we also had some booty people that were external, so the balance was probably, 50, 50, and unfortunately when you're involved in the sector you tend to be more short-term thinking. And it was harder to push out the boundaries because we were constantly bringing our thoughts back to today or tomorrow rather than the future; so I would certainly ensure that the external sectors are tangential to your own sector, but certainly outweigh your own sector. It just provides more thought and even if the results are way out you can bring those results back and then apply them within your own sector.

IV Great, that's lovely, thank you; and Tobias?

TO Yes, I would tend to echo what Helen has said, I think you do need sufficient balance of the core group of people who aren't dominating the conversation; and the constant challenge of that. As Helen said, we're constantly having to stretch them a bit further out so that the thoughts, and the discussions were that much more different from what they were today, rather than some sort of continuous evolution. And secondly, I think it was very good, we talked about many things and there were also some interesting ideas that came out of it. I think there are probably two things that I think are probably worth thinking about next time you're at an event like this, one is, probably, how to make sure you don't just have White Liberal middle class people sitting in a room talking about the problem of how you should have greater diversity, and whether that's prior to the event, whether it's run in parallel, they're not in the same place, or whether you do spot testing or something, but something that challenges the dominant logic of that subsection of society. So, I think, we're doing something different in that, and the second is how you then log it through to the follow up, because the events are, [unclear] and they're quite low resistance events in terms of [unclear]. Unfortunately innovation doesn't actually stop there, that's just a starting point and then you've actually got to do something for things to happen and you've got to change your priorities, or your business model or your service or whatever; and that's where it becomes more complicated. So it's a great starting point, it's really the very front end of innovation, what is the world in which we're going to be in, and what are the trends in that world at, because at the moment the starting point is where you start to go, what do I then do from there; and what do I do, and how do I then take it to market. And, I suppose, it's almost somehow getting more of long step of, okay, do people do something next, will they do something with it? The information has a sort of shelf life to it, and it's, it's very valuable, and it's very fresh, when you first get into discussions, it's very fresh, and you want to somehow tap into that relatively quickly. So, I think, that's the only two things that I think I would do differently about that, as I say, is potentially mix up the population even more so we very much, and, Helen, you want a strong external group of people. And, secondly, I would also think about the social and demographic profile, how do you get users in, how do you get, more radically if you're talking about the future, how do you get school children along to something like that, because it's their future, so what are they thinking about? How do you get completely different parts of society thinking about it, I think, those sorts of questions are, it would be fascinating to organise an event that did something like that. I don't know how you'd do it, but, I think, that's where it destabilises people's thinking even more, there often is that need, because, as Helen said, there's a, people keep pulling back to what they know, and the more the [unclear] the more they're pulling back to the here and now with food, the more they're that class of the population who think organic food is where the future is; the more they talk about organic food, the more they talk about instant peace or whatever.

IV [laughs]

TO So I think it's those sorts of challenges that sit in events like this, how to make them more destabilising and more challenging for people to take part.

HE I think, just also to follow up in the programme, organisations need to look at it as a tool for strategic planning for the future rather than just an instant NPD solution, it's about changing your, it's about looking at your positioning and your business models and adapting them to the future, rather than just coming up with an idea for a new product.

TO Yeah, I think that's very important, if you do it as an NPD exercise, you are probably missing an awful lot of fundamentals that you're trying to change. What you're actually doing, you're actually looking for them to say, well, is there a business model or innovation in this space that we're looking at? Rather than just saying, what extension comes on the back of it?

IV That's pretty great, thank you both very much indeed.

HE Thank you.