

HSE Scenario Project: Tough Choices

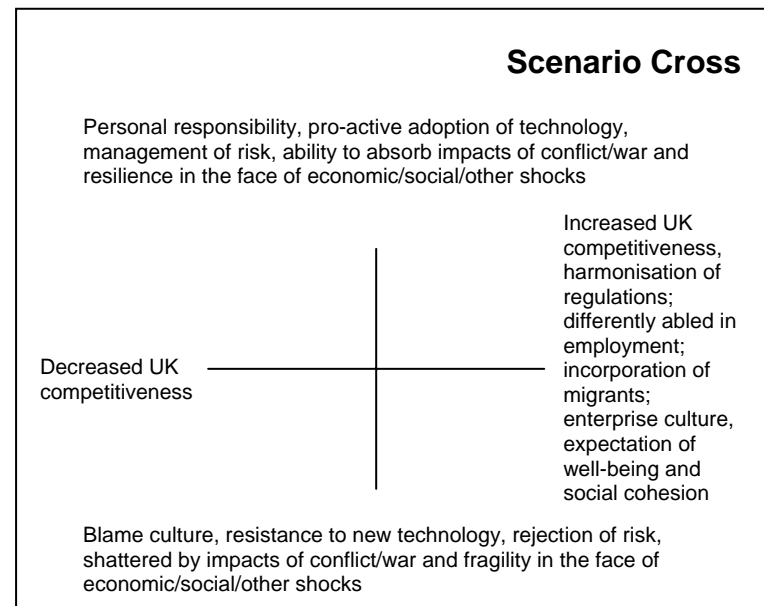
Introduction:

This scenario is one of a set of four comprising HSE's Scenarios for the Future of Health and Safety in 2017. The scenarios resulted from discussions and group work during a scenario building workshop (20-21 July 2006) hosted by the HSE's Horizon Scanning team as part of a wider scenario planning project. Participants prioritised change issues and created the 'scenario cross' to the right that provided the logical framework for four scenarios. The time horizon targeted was 2017. This scenario, 'Tough Choices', is driven by decreased personal responsibility – a 'blame culture' – and decreased risk tolerance combined with decreased UK competitiveness in the global political economy.

Scenarios are not predictions of the future – they are vivid stories about possible futures. They help us explore the boundaries of uncertainty defined by specified drivers of change. Scenarios written for interactive exercises are typically brief, depicted in personal rather than institutional anecdotes, and salted with humour (laughter aids impact and memory). But these are best based on research scenarios: longer narratives, depicted in broader terms. The research scenario for 'Tough Choices' begins with a brief overview of conditions in 2017 and the historical changes that created them. It then explores how life is different in this future in greater detail:¹

- What concepts, ideas and paradigms **define** the world around us?
- How do we **relate** to each other – what are the social structures and relationships that link people and organisations?
- How do we **connect** with each other -- what technologies connect people, places and things?
- What are the processes and technologies through which we **create** goods and services?
- How do we **consume** goods and services – how do we acquire and use them?

The scenario finishes by focusing on the changing workplace, and changed health and safety issues.



Decreased UK competitiveness

Tough Choices

Blame culture, resistance to new technology, rejection of risk, shattered by impacts of conflict/war and fragility in the face of economic/social/other shocks

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'Tough Choices'

Overview

As the 20th century ended, analysts wrote '2020' forecasts, scenarios, and visions – for cities, provinces, and countries; for companies, agencies, and entire sectors; and for species, ecosystems, and planetary dynamics. From the vantage of 2017 – within hailing distance of 2020 –

The present is a landscape littered with tough choices; the future seems nasty and brutish. Any comparative advantage that Europe once enjoyed on the global economic stage has evaporated. The declining economy drove the best and brightest of the young overseas searching for well-paid careers. Innovation has slowed as a result. Unemployment is high while at the same time low-end jobs go begging. More and more often those jobs are filled by migrant workers or illegal aliens.

Social divides and alienation have amplified from the millennium on. Rising resentments generated more litigation as people strove to blame someone else for their grievances. Disaffected youth join gangs that split community turf. News from urban neighbourhoods looks like coverage of civil war – local riots are common, and local policing is tougher in response.

Sweeping deregulation across Europe was hoped to jump-start the economy. The only result so far is an increase in air, soil, and water pollution. The grey and black economies have certainly been growing – but that trend preceded de-

regulation, as organised crime disregards regulations in any case.

While still free at the point of delivery, the NHS is under tremendous pressure. Private health insurance is expensive but those that can afford it, pay. Analysts worry that the UK is on the brink of complete societal breakdown; new data suggests increased malnutrition and declining life expectancy.

Recent History (2007 – 2017)

2007: Society as a whole was growing increasingly litigious. While not matching US levels, more and more companies were coping with class and group actions.ⁱⁱ UK companies also increasingly found themselves in court actions with regard to regulatory infractions. Business leaders decried what they saw as the excessively complex UK regulatory environment.

Attempts to reprioritise the sciences and mathematics within the UK educational system showed mixed results. The first year of the experimental program focusing maths and sciences GCSEs on questions drawn from daily life maintained student interest, but did not demonstrate whether they were adequately prepared to continue science studies post-16.

Towards the end of 2007, the EU economy slowed.

2008: Record levels of immigration into the UK from eastern Europe continued.ⁱⁱⁱ Increasing public unease with the situation may have contributed to the growth of the right-wing in government; candidates were proposing to consider immigration controls in addition to simplifying the regulatory environment for business.

2009: As the first decade of the 21st century came to an end, the powerhouse economies in Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia came into their own. EU competitiveness and growth sagged in comparison. Thus began the UK 'youth drain'. More and more highly qualified graduates began to look abroad for interesting careers.

Domestically, the numbers and varieties of youth gangs in UK communities increased. Analysts suggested a connection with the economic slowdown and rising unemployment. Rising levels of conflict, on the other hand, were attributed to cultural clashes among long-time locals and various new immigrant groups.

2010: By 2010 the European economic hiccup was revealing itself as a major stumble. The UK was not immune, and business' ability to adapt and innovate was hampered by an increasing talent drought in the sciences, mathematics, and engineering. The influx of immigrants and migrant workers continued, along with an increased incidence of illegal work gangs. New ghetto areas emerged in UK cities, and the grey and black economies blossomed.

2011: An already pressured NHS found itself unable to cope with the additional burden of immigrant and migrant worker health problems. Epidemiologists tracked a jump in TB and contagious diseases centred in depressed urban neighbourhoods. Communities were polarised by fear, primarily across cultural lines, when long-time residents blamed immigrants for bringing the infections with them. The public blamed the government as well for failing to control the tide of immigration. This particular crisis was simply a symptom of the polarisation of society as a whole due to a deepening economic divide.

2012: The TB crisis of 2012 finally put the NHS into full-blown arrest: it simply lacked the resources to treat everyone infected, or even to identify who all the infected were.

On the economic front, innovation continued to slow, and employment fell overall. The resulting drop in government revenue coupled with continued stresses on government services forced cutbacks. Health benefits were curtailed; unemployment and incapacity benefits programmes were reduced; and old-age pensions suffered their first cut.

2014: More and more small businesses were driven to dubious hiring practices in an effort to stay competitive. This in turn encouraged gangmasters to procure ever cheaper labour pools and the November accident in Liverpool was commonly referred to as an 'industrial Morecambe Bay'. Autopsies unveiled the appalling detail that the gangmasters in question had injected the workers with subcutaneous RFID 'inventory tags'.

Health officials noted the rise in mumps, measles and rubella with resignation; stresses on NHS resulted in the collapse of anything like an effective vaccination regime.

2017: “It’s official; it’s deflation!” Britain’s consumer spending falls to its lowest point in thirty years. What we need, pundits declared, is incentives to borrow and build in order to jumpstart the economy. Public outrage over the economic crisis was further fuelled by a series of interviews conducted by BBC of pensioners on the breadline.

In-Depth Exploration

Define: *what concepts, ideas, paradigms, and values define this world?*

People have become more inward looking. In straitened financial times, the priority is on personal challenges, not global challenges. Individuals’ primary loyalty is to themselves. Daily life both at work and at home has become a series of difficult trade-offs. Most people see conservation as the best coping mechanism, conserving their energy, their time, their money, and even their social contacts. Life involves careful rationing and allocation of limited resources. Getting ahead is a distant dream; little excess exists for anything much beyond maintaining their status quo. Society’s operational model might as well be, “if you can’t gain ground, at least don’t lose any.”

Society as a whole is more insular, seeing outsiders as competitors for scarce resources. Adventure is a luxury, as is having a choice about work/life balance. People are chafing within their economic constraints. Resentment is rife, and an increasingly aggrieved public finds it easier and easier to complain via the courts. Litigation is the new ‘property ladder’, just another tactic for getting ahead.

Relate: *how do people relate to each other – what are the social structures and relationships that link people and organisations?*

Over the last decade pressure on **government** services and agencies has grown while tax revenues have slowly eroded. The inevitable cutbacks reduced services and benefits. People can rely on government assistance in fewer and fewer areas of their lives. Political initiatives pruning regulatory structures have had the same result vis-à-vis business.

Europe’s role in the **global** economy has ebbed. Britain’s historical connections with South and East Asia now seem to function primarily as a convenient conduit by which Asian investors buy out British companies, and attract young British workers. Even with a sluggish economy, however, Britain still offers more opportunities than many of its eastern European neighbours, so while the best and brightest in Britain head east, eastern Europeans hungry for opportunity head west to the UK. Organised crime networks hungry for opportunity have also moved onto British soil while

maintaining their connections and activities in home bases throughout Europe.

People worry a lot more about security in their neighbourhoods and **communities**. Increased youth violence both contributes to and results from increased ethnic tension between long-term residents and new immigrants, whether legal or illegal. As a result, the police are the one branch of government expanding, and have increased their presence in communities throughout Britain. That presence is tougher than it was in years past, as both the youth violence and the illegal immigrants are often symptoms of the underlying encroachment of international organised crime.

The 'every one for themselves' environment has drawn a close line around immediate **families**. The erosion of middle class expectations, not to mention discretionary income, leaves little excess to aid extended relations. Where young people have found jobs overseas, they often send funds home and assist their brothers and sisters in finding work as well. It typifies the tough choices of this environment: live with your family and struggle to make ends meet, or scatter the family over the globe and get ahead?

Global warming has rendered the natural **environment** increasingly unpredictable. Uncertain temperature and weather patterns make agriculture more of a gamble, and extreme storms accompanied by heightened storm surge damage coastal infrastructure. The environmentalists made their case successfully, and everyone acknowledges the link between the high-carbon lifestyle and global warming. But

most people grumble that most of the fault can be laid at America's doorstep, and it's not like any of us have any spare change for retrofitting our lifestyles with green consumer goods, now do we? People do conserve energy and resources as much as they can, but in this economy, the rationale is cost-saving, not environmental correctness.

Connect: *how do we connect with each other – what technologies connect people, places, and things?*

The 'digital divide' that pundits warned about ten years ago has widened and transformed. It's no longer a question of whether people own a home computer and have Internet access: with the advent of pervasive computing, society now faces a 'real world' – 'digital reality' divide. The wealthy have pervasive computing and communication networks, living immersed in an 'always on' information environment of ambient intelligence. Everybody else is stuck in an analogue world, having to make do with turn-of-the-21st-century ICT systems.

Mobile phones continued their Moore's Law march towards increasing capacity and capabilities, and so have become the poor person's portable information environment. Internet connection, GPS capability, and interaction with other personal computing and entertainment appliances all became cheap enough to include in basic service packages.

As usual, kids are applying those capabilities creatively. The new craze in urban free run orienteering combines free running with more traditional orienteering, with checkpoints

digitally administered via GPS and internet-enabled mobile phones. Of course, youth gangs are also using mobile phones creatively to coordinate their activities; gang wars often begin with coordinated 'flashmob' violence.

The physical infrastructure of connection is decaying. Roads, bridges, rails, air terminals – all need refurbishment now to maintain safe operating conditions, and the funds for capital improvement simply aren't there. Even communications networks need consistent re-investment to assure unbroken service, and continued economic depression will make that difficult. With each year of wear on these basic systems, accidents increase, feeding the litigation frenzy. And the more extreme weather generated by global warming will only accelerate that wear and tear.

Create: *what are the processes and technologies through which we create goods and services?*

The UK labour market has become a push me-pull you of emigration and immigration. Businesses have downsized to cut costs and increase productivity. Competition for the best jobs is hot, and disappointed candidates with great CVs look elsewhere in the world.^{iv} Lower down the employment ladder, people are elbowing each other aside for jobs with long-term health and pension benefits.

Even with high unemployment, seasonal and low-end jobs go begging. That need is answered by EU immigrants eager to get a toe on the economic ladder, even at the low end. Unfortunately, the need has also been answered by

unscrupulous gangmasters and organised crime.^v Stories erupt in the news on a regular basis about the abuse of migrant workers and the illegal import of labour.

Revenue pies are shrinking and resources are increasingly limited for individuals, for companies, and for the government. Belt-tightening is the rule of the day. With limited capital and resources to gamble on new endeavours, investors shy away from risky innovations. This conservatism has slowed the UK's vigorous financial services sector.

The era of traditional industry and manufacturing was fading at the turn of the millennium. Massive transitions are difficult, and the transition to the digital experience economy is no different. With a wealth of intellectual capital, the UK should have been first off the starting block in melding new materials sciences, design, and media into an economic transformation. Where did Britain's economy stumble? The UK's capacity to create snagged on a legacy of under-investment in basic infrastructure and education, compounded by increasing public wariness of innovative technologies as potentially disruptive.

Consume: *how do we consume goods and services – how do we acquire and use them?*

Both consumer spending and saving are at the lowest ebb for thirty years. People are purchasing fewer goods, and purchasing less expensive goods. They are buying cheap, buying knock-offs, and buying in bulk. Sales of specialty and

organic foods have fallen. Consumers are no longer aiming for the best; they are aiming instead for the most affordable.

This means sales in high street shops have dropped, and that high-end supermarkets are losing to low-end chains. Direct marketing via the Internet is also popular, as is eBay. Street peddlers have seen a startling rise in sales in their clientele, and the grey market, the used market, and the black market are all growing, in contrast to the rest of the economy. This of course has its hazards for the consumer, as these goods tend to lack active warranties.

Once acquired, people use their purchases – whether clothing, appliances, or consumables – with a greater eye to their longevity. Deflation has transformed the consumer lifestyle into a conserver lifestyle, where people have less and what they have they use more gently and repair rather than replace. It is, of course, this lowered demand that itself reinforces deflation: the vicious circle of lowered demand decreasing production, lowering revenues, triggering job cutbacks, and depressing demand even further.

Health and Safety in the Changing Workplace

The health divide grows wider: there's not enough work and for those at work, precious little well-being. The priority for people is to have at least one job, particularly a job that may offer the holy grail of perks such as a pension and private health insurance. Accusations of the 'nanny state' have long since withered on the vine of history – no one expects the

state to nanny anybody anymore. It's a competitive and contentious society. Each looks out for number one.

Businesses are struggling and cutting expenses. The average workplace, whether a manufacturing floor or a business office, is showing signs of wear and tear with little hope for renovation or updating in the near future. Old machinery, worn flooring, jerry-rigged wiring and over-taxed ventilation and exhaust systems combine to create health hazards and the potential for accidents. Employers are juggling resource costs, staffing costs, and the need for capital improvement, and health and safety considerations often lose out among other trade-offs. With public infrastructure in a similar state, the health and safety hazards are hardly less when employees leave work.

In a stripped down regulatory structure, safety at work is the priority. People know that health is important – the campaigns of a decade before hit their targets – but why worry about long-term health when an accident at work may strike you first? Already, the media are referring to Britain's accident epidemic, an epidemic that is amplifying litigation, as injured parties look for means to punish offending employers and obtain financial redress. Too often their litigation goes nowhere – employers can't or won't pay and the will isn't there to make them do so. But some high profile cases against organisations with deep pockets succeed and others are encouraged to have a go. So individuals still over-eat, drink too much, and smoke, but are more prepared to lay the fault at the feet of marketers, brewers, and cigarette manufacturers.

Stress, pollution, and street violence have reached heights not seen for thirty years. Underreporting of health and safety failures in the workplace is rife – and the system in any case lacks the resources for anything more than low-level interventions and the investigation of serious incidents. Given the dominance of the black market, huge numbers of workers fall outside those regulatory regimes that remain.

Winners and Losers

The new barons of the black economy are definitely benefiting from the ‘Wild West’ environment of stripped-down regulations. The boundaries between the legal and black markets are narrowing. Street peddlers selling cheap knock-offs are seeing higher growth in sales than the high street stores. Those few companies willing to play fast and loose with the remaining laws and regulations can match organized crime in generating wealth. A flexible ethical and moral framework is a competitive advantage in this environment.

Longer-term economic recovery is emerging where CEOs have retrenched, making strategic trade-offs among staff numbers, capital improvement, and workplace standards. Improved workplace health and safety standards are attracting better staff and avoiding lawsuits. With consumers retrenching as well, discount retailers and wholesale clubs are forecasting some improvement in consumer purchasing.

Youth bright enough and with sufficient initiative to scout out opportunities overseas are coping, if not benefiting.

Basic research is suffering, as is higher education generally: resources are scarce and business foundations have much less money than in past. Older people find themselves in dire straits as public programs evaporate and even their pension payments decline. Other populations in need are also suffering, with incapacity and other benefits sharply curtailed. Recent immigrants, whether legal or illegal, have a particularly hard time, as government has few assistive services to facilitate their assimilation into British society.

References and Resources:

Foresight and scenarios resources which offer confirming evidence and insights for the HSE scenarios:

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ⁱ This organisational scheme is adapted from Global Foresight Associates’ “EthnoFutures Scanning Framework,” devised by Michelle Bowman and Kaipō Lum. Michelle Bowman and Wendy Schultz, “Best Practices in Environmental Scanning: The World Beyond Steep,” presentation at the World Future Society, Chicago, 30 July 2005.

ⁱⁱ See the report by Fulbright and Jaworski, “Fulbright Launches Its Third Annual Litigation Trends Survey Finding,” 10 October 2006, available at: http://www.fulbright.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.detail&site_id=286&article_id=5789 (accessed 10 October 2006).

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ⁱⁱⁱ *The Telegraph*, “Record immigration from Eastern Europe,” 22 August 2006, available online at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml;jsessionid=UIIKWR5GNNIJHQFIQMGSFFOAVCBQWIV0?xml=/news/2006/08/22/uimmigrant.xml> (accessed 15 September 2006).

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^v *Science Daily*, “Polish workers missing in Italian camps,” 14 September 2006, available at: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/upi/index.php?feed=TopNews&article=UPI-1-20060914-07312100-bc-italy-poland.xml> (accessed 15 September 2006).

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