

AN EXPLORATION OF FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY



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Create **Future Intelligence**™

This document has been prepared by Future iQ to outline focus group methodology. Having engaged with over 50,000 stakeholders in a variety of settings Future iQ has developed solid practical experience in the methodology and approaches to gather the optimal results from qualitative and quantitative stakeholder engagement sessions. This publication provides a brief overview of focus group purpose, design and potential outputs.

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1.0 WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

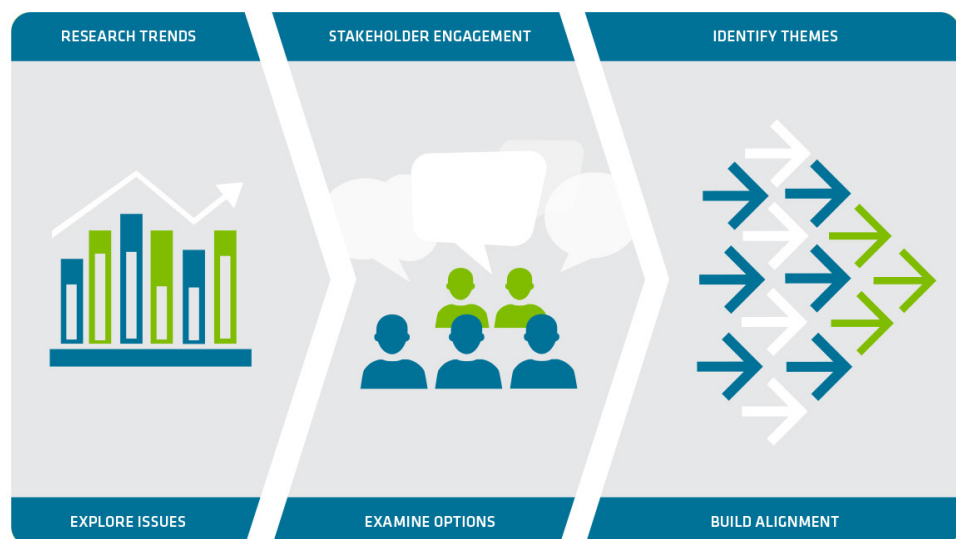
Focus groups have a long history and played a valuable role during the Second World War (1939-1945) to examine the effectiveness of propaganda efforts and the effectiveness of training materials for the troops.ⁱ It was recognized that people revealed sensitive information when they felt that they were in a safe, comfortable place with similar people.ⁱⁱ Psychologist and marketing expert Ernest Dichter coined the term “focus group” itself before his death in 1991.ⁱⁱⁱ

A focus group is a marketing research tool in which a small group of people (typically eight to ten individuals) engage in a round-table discussion of selected topics of interest in an informal setting.^{iv} It is recommended that the focus group session take up to an hour and a half, in order to obtain the maximum input from the participants and this provides the opportunity for all the respondents to participate and to give their opinions.

Focus groups differ from informal group discussions in a number of aspects. Primarily, specific, pre-determined criteria are used for recruiting focus group participants. Second, the topics to be discussed are decided beforehand, and the moderator uses a pre-determined list of open-ended questions arranged in a natural and logical sequence.

Finally, focus groups rely on discussion between participants about the topics presented, and group members may influence each other by responding to ideas and comments that arise during the discussion. There is no pressure on the moderator, however, to have the group reach consensus. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members and group members are free to give their views from any aspect.

During this process, the researcher either takes notes or records the vital points he or she is getting from the group. The moderator uses a discussion guide that has been prepared in advance of the focus group to guide the discussion. Generally the discussion goes from overall impressions of a brand/product category or subject and becomes more specific as the discussion progresses.





2.0 AIMS OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are used to: ^{vi}

- gain understanding of the subject being researched;
- provide an accurate picture of the subject's experience of reality;
- evaluate and analyse needs;
- formulate interventions;
- test new ideas or programmes;
- improve existing programmes;
- obtain a wide range of information on a given topic in order to develop more structured questionnaires;
- inform policies.

These types of discussions allow the researcher to identify where participants' points of view converge and diverge, and to investigate the whys and wherefores of certain phenomenon.



3.0 COMPOSITION OF GROUPS AND ANALYSING DATA BY GROUP

Focus groups should be composed of homogeneous members of the target population. It is a good idea to form groups of respondents who are similar in terms of social class, age, level of knowledge, cultural/ethnic characteristics and sex (in addition to any other variables you may identify) ^{vii}. This will create an environment where participants are comfortable with each other and feel free to express their opinions.

Data should be analysed by group. This also allows for the results of different types of group to be compared.



4.0 STRENGTHS OF FOCUS GROUPS

The advantage of focus groups over individual interviews is that the comments of one participant can generate comments from other participants. Ideas and opinions can be developed and explored more so than in individual interviews. These types of discussions can be very productive. Researchers and interviewers can benefit from the ideas generated in these discussions. In a short amount of time, a large quantity of information can be collected – often more quickly and at a lesser cost than via individual interviews.

Focus groups are useful for obtaining preliminary information about beliefs, ideas, opinions, attitudes and behaviours in a community. They are particularly helpful in identifying pertinent and appropriate questions for individual interviews (semi-structured or structured).

Focus groups can be relatively low cost and provide quick results. The actual time and cost for planning, conducting, and analyzing data may be relatively small when compared to alternatives such as survey projects and individual interviews.^{viii}

They are a flexible assessment tool. Interactions between the moderator and participants allow the moderator to probe issues in depth, address new issues as they arise, and to ask participants to elaborate on their responses.

Participants may be more comfortable talking in a group than in an individual interview. Interactions can generate more discussion and, therefore, more information.

The data is in the respondents' own words. Therefore it is easily understood and will provide insights into how respondents think about the topic.^{ix}



5.0 WEAKNESSES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Some perceived weaknesses of focus groups are:^x

- The researcher has less control over the flow of discussion in the group interview as compared to the individual interview;
- Focus groups cannot tell you about the frequency or distribution of beliefs in a population;
- Results are harder to analyse than individual interviews. Participants' comments must be interpreted within the particular social environment created by the focus group (a discussion among strangers in a neutral place), and care must be taken to avoid lifting comments out of context or out of sequence;
- Because the amount of response time required for any given question is increased by having discussion among participants, the number of questions that can be addressed is smaller than in individual interviews;
- Facilitating and conducting a focus group interview requires considerable skill. It is important to know how to manage the focus group so that one or two people do not dominate, and all participants are able to share their views.



6.0 TYPES OF FOCUS GROUPS

There are a range of types of Focus Group methodologies that can be used:^{xi}

- **Two-way focus group** - one focus group watches another focus group and discusses the observed interactions and conclusion
- **Dual moderator focus group** - one moderator ensures the session progresses smoothly, while another ensures that all the topics are covered
- **Dueling moderator focus group** (fencing-moderator) - two moderators deliberately take opposite sides on the issue under discussion
- **Respondent moderator focus group** - one and only one of the respondents is asked to act as the moderator temporarily

It is pertinent that the type of Focus Group methodology is suitable for the subject matter, audience and context of the Focus Group brief.



7.0 USE OF FOCUS GROUPS BY MARKETING COMPANIES

In the world of marketing, focus groups are seen as an important tool for acquiring feedback regarding new products, as well as various other topics. In marketing, focus groups are usually used in the early stages of product or concept development, when organizations are trying to create an overall direction for marketing initiative. In particular, focus groups allow companies wishing to develop, package, name, or test market a new product, to discuss, view, and/or test the new product before it is made available to the public. This can provide valuable information about the potential market acceptance of the product.

Focus Groups provide an efficient and effective method of collecting stakeholder input and perspectives on key issues. Such group sessions provide an ideal complement to quantitative surveys.



8.0 TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF THE GROUP MODERATOR

The focus group can take many different forms, and the materials used to stimulate discussion will vary according to the purpose of the group. The group moderator will establish the stimulus materials prior to the group in conjunction with the client, to ensure all issues are covered.

The line of questioning will be defined through the topic guide and any additional stimulus materials will be introduced at particular points in the discussion. This requires particular skill to ensure that the questions asked will deliver the answers to the questions we need answers to. This is because the questions we ask and the questions we need answers to are not one and the same. For example, whilst we usually need the answer to “Why?” questions, the way to discover this is often to ask “How?” and “When?”, or “What?”. Paul Lazarsfeld (1986) suggested that this line of questioning is more productive as the “Why?” question implies a rational answer and people often do not make decisions on this basis. The “Why?” question is too harsh and people have not often thought of this beforehand and therefore find it difficult to answer. Equally, the questions need to be of the type where conversation will be opened rather than closed.^{xii}

The questioning route will be clear to the respondents and take account of the time available for discussion. It will generally have an easy non-threatening beginning designed to make the respondents feel comfortable, and will follow a clear sequence moving from the general to the specific. Good questions are conversational in nature; they use the language of the respondent, they are clear and easy to express, they are open ended and they do not mix dimensions. If respondents are required to carry out a task, or outline a process, the directions need to be clear and well thought out.

The best focus group questions are simply stated. Complex questions are confusing for the respondents and difficult to remember. By contrast, however, the simple question does not produce the simple answer. Stimulus materials, in addition to conversations are:

- Visual stimulus materials e.g. video, story boards, photographs, advertisements, web sites
- Auditory stimulus materials e.g. tapes and video

In addition to stimulus materials, there are a number of specific techniques which can be utilized in the focus group. Many of these techniques are termed projective techniques and are borrowed from the field of psychology. They are used to seek information on a particular topic by asking about a different or easier topic. They work because they circumvent potential barriers to expression and tap into different ways of thinking (Krueger 1998).



Question 1:

the concept of a
tionally, national
er Lima Region is
d viable? Why?

Brainstorming is a common technique used in most business meetings and this is useful in a focus group to identify issues. It is also closely linked to word associations where respondents are asked to think of words which are associated with a product or brand.

Sentence completion is a development of word association where the moderator presents the group with an incomplete sentence for completion. This can be carried out individually and introduced into the group for discussion, or the group can engage in discussion to complete the sentence jointly.

Word sorting is a technique where the groups are presented with a number of words or sentences and asked to sort them into groups according to the attributes of a product, or brand, or need they have. This is commonly used in advertising research and identifying positioning statement for products and brands.

Developing a campaign is a group activity that can be used. Here, the group can be asked to work together to come up with a campaign around an issue, for example how to get other mature people, like themselves to study at a particular university.^{xiii}



9.0 MORE PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR FOCUS GROUPS FROM MARKETING COMPANIES

Here are four practical and simple techniques. This is not an exhaustive list.

- Metaphors, Analogies, and Similes
- Third-Party Projections
- Role-Playing
- Associations

METAPHORS, ANALOGIES, AND SIMILES^{xiv}

A metaphor represents or explains something in terms of another. Metaphors explain complex or new subjects [target domains] by using a familiar subject [source domain]. The purpose of understanding metaphors is to understand people's mindset and feelings about a topic.

Most importantly, metaphors can reveal underlying emotions about a target domain...such as a product or brand. And, one can infer whether emotions are positive, negative, or neutral. You can use the results from metaphor techniques to develop advertising, brands, sales pitches, and to support product or brand positioning.





Here is a simple sentence completion exercise using similes. Respondents could be asked to complete the sentence.

- *“My cell phone is like a...”*

Here are some results at the category level for cell phones.

- *“A cell phone is like a best friend.”*
- *“My cell phone is part of my body.”*
- *“A cell phone is like my wallet. I would never leave home without it.”*
- *“A cell phone is like a lifeline now. Leaving it behind is like cutting off the oxygen supply.”*
- *“A cell phone is like a leash.”*

The results show cell phones are a necessity for a segment of consumers. A minority find them annoying.

Besides sentence completion, you can also ask respondents to associate a product or brand to pictures and images.

The respondents can be asked to draw pictures. Another way to elicit metaphors is to ask respondents to complete storyboards.

Third-Party Projections

With this technique, you can ask respondents to describe what other people are doing, thinking, feeling, believing, and saying. Ask respondents to project to a third-party.

Here are some example questions.

- *“What does your friend think about brand X?”*
- *“What does company X think about you?”*
- *“Who uses brand X? What is the real reason they use it?”*

Ask follow-up questions and probe answers, using the third person.

Use third-party projections for sensitive subjects. In other words, when people hide or deny their real thoughts, feelings, or beliefs.

Role Playing

You ask respondents to assume a role and act the part. It is a variant of third-party projection.

- *“If you were the product manager, what would you do to improve the product?”*
- *“If you were the CEO of this company, what would you do to reduce customer complaints?”*
- *“If you were the creative director, what would your ad say?”*
- *“If you were in your friend’s shoes, what would you do?”*



Associations

You can ask respondents to link a word or image to a category, product, brand, or event. Then ask how the association ties to the topic.

You can get people to bind one concept to another. Often associations produce metaphors, analogies, and similes.

Some association techniques include word associations, imagery associations, and personifications.

Here are examples:

Word Associations

Provide a prompt in the form of a word, phrase, or sentence and ask respondents to associate something with it.

- *“When you think of your service provider, what is the first thing that comes to mind?”*
- *“What comes to mind when you hear the term customer service?”*
- *“When you see brand X, what image comes to mind?”*

Imagery Associations

You can show people an image, or ask them to bring or select an image.

Images are pictures, drawings, or illustrations. Then, you can ask people to describe the image.

You can ask how it links to a product, brand, object, or person. Also, ask the respondents to imagine an image and describe it.

- *“Please select a picture that best represents product X. How does the picture speak about product X?”*
- *“How does the image describe product X?”*
- *“What does each person in this picture feel about brand Y?”*

Ask several follow-up questions about how the association relates, and probe to clarify.

Personification Associations

Personification asks respondents to give human characteristics to products, services, or brands.

- *“If your Volvo could talk, what would it say to you?”*
- *“If brand X were a person, what would he or she look like?”*
- *“How does your digital camera feel about you?”*

The challenge of personification is interpretation of data and analysis.

Advanced Projective Techniques

Some advanced techniques include the Rorschach Inkblot Tests and Thematic Appreciation Tests.



Projective techniques have their roots in psychoanalytic psychology. Several psychoanalytic theories abound. The more advanced techniques require training in application and especially in analysis. Analysis of sophisticated techniques involves judgment based on training and experience, and is often open to interpretation and debate.

Projective Techniques and Laddering

In product or service marketing research, laddering works well as a technique to identify how people perceive functional and emotional benefits of a product or service.

The advantage of laddering is it clearly links specific product features, benefits, and emotional benefits together.

People buy product features, functional benefits, high order benefits and emotional benefits. They are primary drivers of wants and needs.

Use practical projective techniques in focus groups and depth interviews to gain new perspective and to dig into underlying feelings and emotions.^{xv}



10.0 EXAMPLES OF FUTURE IQ PARTNERS' FOCUS GROUPS

10.1 CASE STUDY EXAMPLE 1

This is a city with a population of over 50,000. Upon completion of a city visioning project, among the recommendations by Future iQ Partners was to create a new economic development plan for the city. The city's Chamber of Commerce reengaged Future iQ to perform in-depth economic research and targeted stakeholder engagement to provide the requisite data to develop a new economic development plan.

Future iQ Partners designed a six month planning process during 2016. As part of the stakeholder engagement process, focus groups were carried out in September 2016.

10.1.1 EXAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The Questions used in the focus groups were as follows:

1. When I say 'Economic and Business Development'; what do you think that means in the city?
2. How important do you think 'Economic and Business Development' is for the city's future? Why?
3. If Silicon Valley is the technology center for the country, what do you think this city should be the center for in 10 - 15 years?
4. If this city was to develop a new business campus / park, what kind of businesses and jobs do for think should be there?
5. How important do you think it is for people to be able to live and work in this city? Why?
6. Who do you think are currently the primary players in this city's economic development ecosystem? And who should be?

10.1.2 COMMON THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

Common Themes Per Question	Chamber	Community
1. Meaning of Econ/Bus Dev. In This City		
Attraction and Retention of Businesses	✓	✓
Leverage of Edina and its Neighborhoods Identity	✓	✓
Employment Growth	✓	✓
Strong Diversified Tax Base		✓
Diverse Business Community		✓
Filling or Removing Empty Buildings		✓
Adapting Land Use	✓	
Residential Development	✓	
Population Growth	✓	
Tourism	✓	
More Green Spaces	✓	
Marketing Edina	✓	
2. Importance Econ/Bus Dev. For This City's Future		
Attraction of New Residents	✓	
Need for People to Live and Work in the City		✓
Balance of Business and Residential	✓	✓
Diversity of Ages Changing Face of The City	✓	✓
Necessary to Keep Lively, Relevant Community	✓	✓
Retain Aesthetics of Business Fronts		✓
Relation Employment to Quality of Life		✓
Need it For Education, Parks and Roads		✓
Growth of Community, Property Values and Quality of Residents	✓	
3. Silicon Valley is Tech. Center for Country - What will the City be Centre of in 10-15 years?		
Medical Hub	✓	✓
Retail Shopping	✓	✓
Tourist Attraction	✓	
Superior Education	✓	✓
Shared Work Spaces		✓



4. If This City Were to Create a New Business Campus - What Kind of Business and Jobs Should be There?

Mixed Use Options	✓	✓
Bio Tech	✓	
Restaurants		✓
Hi Tech/New Economics		
Innovation Hub/DEED/Investors	✓	✓
Medical Research/technology Research Centre		✓
Higher Education	✓	
Specialty Medical Area	✓	
Conference and Meeting Spaces	✓	

5. Importance of People Living and Working in This City

Balance	✓	
Important to Have Reason to Stay After Work	✓	
Must be Accessible to Employers Office	✓	
Generational Reasons	✓	
Financial Reasons	✓	
Access to Education	✓	✓
Sense of Connection to Community	✓	✓
Quality of Life		✓

6. Who are the Primary Players in The City's Eco. Dev. Ecosystem. Who Should it be?

Millennials		✓
Econ. Development/City Council/Chamber/Mayor	✓	✓
Health Care	✓	✓
Business Leaders		✓
New Residents		✓
Development Companies - i.e. Hines	✓	
Politicians	✓	
Diverse Stakeholders	✓	



10.2 CASE STUDY EXAMPLE 2

A large Manufacturing Center, located in the MidWest US is the only Government-Owned production facility in the US Department of Defense. The plant provides heavy combat vehicle lines to the military. The manufacturing center employs nearly 700 people and is of vital economic importance to the region. The local Board of Commissioners received a planning grant from the Department of Defense's Office of Economic Adjustment to support economic/ workforce planning, industry realignment and supply chain development. Future iQ Partners were contracted to lead Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this project. The ultimate conclusion of Phase 2 is to create a Collaborative Growth Plan for the region.

As part of the stakeholder engagement for Phase 2 of this project, 7 focus groups were held in September 2016.

10.2.1 EXAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The Questions used in the focus group sessions were as follows:

1. Do you think the concept of a globally competitive region is important and viable? Why?
2. What should be the key role of the economic development, defense, education, business & Industry and local govt. ecosystem in driving the region towards the vision?
3. What would a collaborative regional workforce development system look like?
4. What would a collaborative regional-wide industry innovation strategy look like?
5. Who needs to lead this process, and who should be at the table?
6. What is the next key step?

10.2.2 COMMON THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

Theme	Eco. Dev.	Not for Profit	Local Govt.	Business and Industry	Education	Young Professionals	Defense Sector
Importance of Regional Concept	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Desire to Collaborate	✓			✓		✓	
Employers/Bus. to Communicate with Each Other	✓			✓			
Retention of Businesses	✓	✓					
Attraction of Company via Incentives				✓	✓		
Marketing the Region and Quality of Life	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Employers/Businesses to Drive the Vision	✓		✓	✓			
All Stakeholders Involved in Communicating Vision	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
All Stakeholders Role in Collaboration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Priority Identification then Implementation	✓			✓	✓		
Regional Brand	✓	✓					
Connect Businesses and Education - Future Workforce Demand	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Key Role of Training/Education Sector			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Collaboration with Career/Innovation Centers	✓						✓
More Internship and Apprenticeship Roles	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Regular Stakeholder Meetings	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Youth Attraction and Retention Strategy	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Innovation Task Force From Each Sector	✓			✓	✓		
Youth and Diversity Focus		✓			✓	✓	
Share Resources		✓	✓				
Local Infrastructure and Aesthetics			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



11.0 SUMMARY

Focus groups take their roots in the social sciences and have been adopted by market researchers as a valuable interface between businesses and their customers. Whilst some idea of frequency can be gained from focus groups, in essence, focus groups do not seek to measure; they uncover issues, unravel processes and test reactions and perceptions. They can be used stand alone, and they can augment and complement other methodologies. When choosing this data collection methodology, the purpose of the study needs to be considered carefully.^{xvi}

The ingredients of a successful focus group are bringing together the right people, in the right environment, with an efficient group moderator and the correct line of questioning.

The logistics of setting up groups cannot be underestimated; the best moderator with the best stimulus tools will not manage to achieve the research objectives with wrongly recruited respondents and vice versa.^{xvii}

Focus groups have made a huge contribution to social research and to the business environment. They can be criticized for their subjectivity, for the small sample sizes and the purposive sampling methods that are used. However each research design has its flaws and the objective of the research is crucial in determining the methods which are used to collect data. Quantitative methodologies have their strengths in standardization, reliability, and measurement, usually through surveys with larger sample sizes; however the qualitative focus group design has its strength in the richness of the data, the ability to understand and explore perceptions, behaviors and motivations. It is not the type of research that seeks to control and predict, rather it will provide understanding and insight, and it is this very feature that gives the focus group its unique position as a research methodology.

Focus Group data helps in analysis and presentation of stakeholder views





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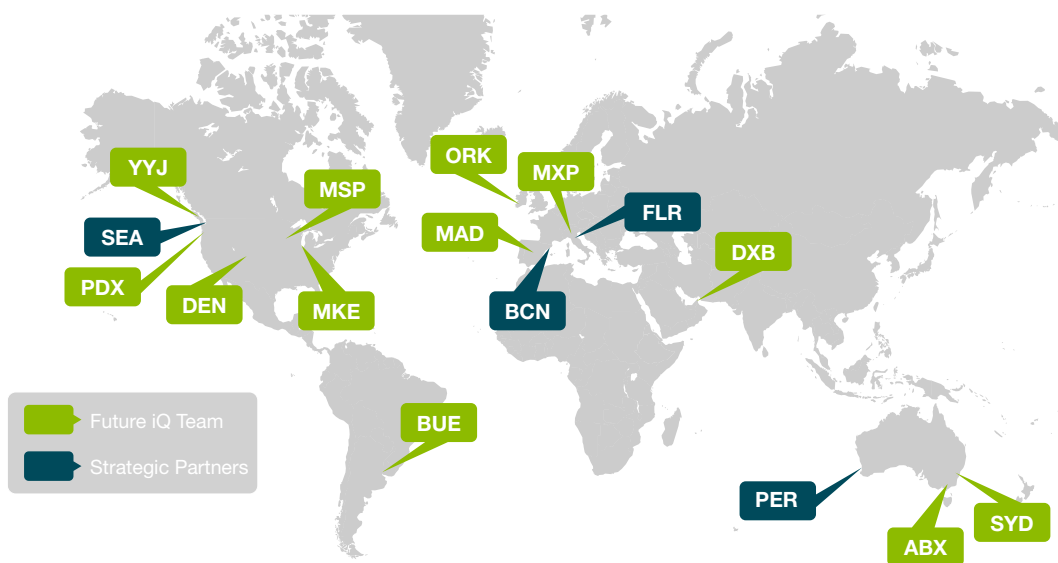
13.0 ABOUT FUTURE IQ PARTNERS

Future iQ Partners is a market leader in the development and application of scenario planning, network analysis, industry and regional analysis, and community engagement and capacity building. We specialize in applying innovative tools and approaches to assist organizations, regions and industries shape their economic and community futures. We take a practical, hands-on approach to working with groups and communities. With over a decade of business experience, the company has grown to have a global clientele spanning three continents.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT FUTURE IQ PARTNERS AND OUR RECENT PROJECTS VISIT:

www.future-iq.com or by email at info@future-iq.com

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