Horizon Scanning

Overview

Horizon scanning is a structured evidence-gathering process. The process involves collecting or reviewing a broad range of evidence, research and opinions with the aim of identifying weak (or early) signals in the form of events, patterns and trends or other developments that allow for the identification of potential opportunities and challenges.

Horizon scanning can be used at any time. Horizon scanning can be an ongoing process or conducted to inform a specific piece of work. The greater the amount of scanning undertaken, the easier it may be to identify emerging developments.

Why use horizon scanning?

- To spot 'weak signals' – things which may be on the horizon but may not be captured in the dominant discourse. Horizon scanning acts as an early warning radar, uncovering issues that should be added to an ongoing watching brief (including any potential hazardous developments).
- Inform policy development, innovation and decision making
- Assist in assessment of risk, or to better understand and explore uncertainties.
- Assist in understanding potential opportunities and challenges.
- As a foundation for other activities such as driver analysis, trend analysis or scenarios.

Level of expertise

Horizon scanning requires a medium level of expertise.

People, equipment, cost and time

- People - Individual or group for the collection phase. Analysis phase should be undertaken by a group.
- Equipment - Excel spreadsheet (or other database) for information capture.
- Cost - If going beyond free sources of data, there may be subscription costs.

- Time - An ongoing processes of scanning with intermitent analysis workshops.

How to 'horizon scan'

- There are no set rules for undertaking horizon scanning. The key is to gather thoughts, evidence and opinions surrounding your topic of interest from across a broad spectrum of sources.
- Horizon scanning works best when considering a specific topic or issue, but can also be conducted more broadly.
- Horizon scanning is usually undertaken by several people to allow for a diversity of views, which is essential. This enables conversations around findings and expedites the process. Participants may be part of the same team or drawn from across the organisation. Participants from outside the organisation can also be included.
- There are two points to horizon scanning: collection and analysis.

Collection

- It is important that the information you collect as part of your horizon scan is recorded somewhere. A simple database can be used to record key observations/findings and summary information. The database should be populated and accessed by all people contributing to the scan. The types of information you want to capture in your database are:

  o the date of the article, report, interview

  o the title of the article or report

  o a short summary of the item, capturing key messages

  o the source of the item

  o any known forces that are driving the issues being reported

  o any beliefs and assumptions that the author/reporter has expressed

  o a link to the article if available electronically (can include hyperlinks to records of conversations you may have had.

- If you have multiple people contributing to a database, you should also add a column to identify who made the database entry.

Where to look

- Most people rely on commissioned research, statistics, journal articles and press reports to inform their views on a topic. Horizon scanning requires you to consciously look beyond traditional sources.
- In addition to these traditional sources, some alternate sources of information include:

  - blogs, opinion pieces, and social media

  - talkback radio and other radio journalism

  - interviewing practitioners, clients, governments, service providers and other members of society

  - participating in and reading papers and lectures from conferences and think tanks

  - web-based videos, such as TED Talks or YouTube channels.

- There are software products entering the market which can assist in horizon scanning activities. DEEWR has a product called BuzzNumbers which provides social media monitoring.

What to scan for

Look to capture events, patterns of events, any suggested trends and known drivers of trends. You are also interested in understanding the underlying influences of the author's opinion. This often leads you back to a series of events or patterns that others are witnessing, which you may not necessarily see.

Look for the novel, the first ideas, change, wildcards, opportunities, threats and the unprecedented.

Analysis

- Once all information is collected, that information should be analysed.
- Analysis of the scan involves an in-depth review of the insights of each scan source.
- The objective of the analysis is to uncover the events, patterns, trends and drivers within the information.
- This step also requires an aggregation of the results.

What do you walk away with?

- Learnings from the scan may be captured in an informal discussion or synthesised into a short paper or report.
- The process of populating and reviewing the database will increase your intelligence into the issue you are concerned with. The people who participated in the scanning process will have a changed perception and way of looking at the future.
- A rich source of ongoing insights. The database you have created should be periodically analysed to help uncover emerging developments. It can also be useful to consider what may be driving those larger patterns and trends.

Tips

- It is important to be objective when collecting information for your database. Be aware of your thinking style and your biases. If you limit yourself to views that are commonly accepted or dismiss anything that you do not agree with you are unlikely not get any new insights.
- Review a broad spectrum of information, beyond usual timescales and sources.
- Having a diverse group of people involved in the scanning helps to deliver a comprehensive scan.
- The material captured during the scan does not need to be 'on topic' to be of value. It is often more valuable if the material represents an
- Do not discount alternative or fringe perspectives, these often become mainstream in time.
- Ensure a balance of evidence and intelligence.

Further information

Sources

- The UK Government Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre.
- The Australia and New Zealand Horizon Scanning Network.
- Shaping Tomorrow, Practical Foresight Guide.

Resources

- A YouTube video on the future of the Internet, which relates to horizon scanning and futures work.