

## Step 2: Scanning in the Horizons Foresight Method

### Overview

**What it is:** Thoughtful scanning is the foundation of great foresight. The objective in scanning is to identify developments that could fundamentally change or disrupt the issue or system that we are studying in unexpected ways. The challenge is to look for early signs or weak signals that change is occurring. These changes can take many forms: a new technology, economic restructuring, a famine, new values, new gender roles, new ideas, etc. The list is open ended. In the absence of data, weak signals are the evidence that disruptive change could be underway.

Weak signals are defined as developments that are perceived to have unknown or low probability of occurring and a potentially high disruptive impact if they do occur. There could be one or two incidents or data points that indicate something different is happening. Most people are unaware of them. If they do hear about them, people often ignore or discount weak signals, because they don't fit their plan or mental model. Most people focus on the expected future, the high probability, high impact changes coming at them, because these issues need to be addressed. People who focus on the low probability developments are often thought to be crazy or wasting their time. In scanning, it is important to legitimize a very broad search, beyond the traditional concerns of the organization, because that is where most surprises come from. In the Horizons Foresight Method, related weak signals are combined into one-page insights. These insights describe a change and why it could be significant. Some of them become change drivers in the scenario process. Insights are a key building block in the Horizons Foresight Method.

**Where it fits in the Horizons Foresight Method:** The bulk of open scanning, or non-directed scanning, is done near the beginning of the process. At this early stage, it helps analysts develop a better understanding of the issue and the larger ecosystem that shapes it. At later stages in the process, directed scanning is used, as needed, to develop a deeper understanding of specific aspects of the system.

**Challenges in this step:** The most common question from newcomers is “where do I look for weak signals?” There are a number of simple frameworks (like STEEG—society, technology, economy, environment and governance) that remind you to look in new areas. Interviewing thoughtful people with different perspectives on the system is often useful. The key is to look beyond the organizational silo or your normal interests. Good scanners are constantly learning and re-thinking their analysis. Perhaps the hardest problem for scanners is to be aware of our own assumptions, which act like blinders. Scanning forces you to challenge and break out of every professional, cultural, experiential and generational framework that you have learned over your lifetime. You have to be open to surprise. When something does not fit your existing mental models, take a second look at it. If you hear someone saying “we will be really challenged if that happens,” then that might be a weak signal.

**Summary:** Scanning is the foundation of great foresight. It is difficult because it forces us to examine our deepest and most pervasive biases and to learn new things. It takes courage to identify weak signals and insights that may disrupt an organization's shared analysis of and existing plans for the expected future.

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