HORIZONS
Insight

Next Stop: Scanning and Foresight

Learning from the past is "always important [but] it is not enough when we are moving into a future that differs profoundly from the past. … Learning from the future is vital to innovation. Learning from the future involves intuition. It involves embracing high levels of ambiguity, uncertainty, and willingness to fail. It involves opening ourselves to the unthinkable and sometimes attempting to do the impossible. But the fears and risks are balanced by feeling ourselves part of something important that is emerging that will truly make a difference."
(Forward by Peter Senge[1])

What is Scanning and Foresight and why is it Important?

Scanning and foresight are tools to help us to think about the future. Scanning identifies changes in the domestic and international environments that could have significant implications for government policy and programs. Foresight processes explore how these changes may evolve and interact to create new policy challenges and opportunities. The processes are not trying to predict the future, but to explore the range of plausible futures that may emerge and to help identify assumptions and strategies that are robust in preparing for an uncertain future.

But beyond and foremost, foresight is a natural human trait that allows us to consider a problem, explore options, weigh pros and cons and in so doing develop mental models of possible strategies and desired outcomes to help better plan for the future. With that perspective in mind, Horizons' foresight process assembles a range of visual tools which helps people surface their mental models and discuss them as a group. Engaging many perspectives ensures a more robust analysis which can then lead to better advice.

Key Tools and Terms in the Horizons Foresight Process

Tools and Terms	Descriptions
Mental Models	Everyone builds mental models about the way the world works from the images, experience, knowledge and stories which we carry in our minds. We use these mental models to run 'movies' to explore alternatives and to help us make decisions. This capacity to visualize and run simulations is an often and under-utilized resource. A variety of imaging exercises can help us tap into the power of this resource in a structured way.
Weak Signal	A sign that a significant change is starting or that it could be underway. Weak signals challenge our mental model. We have an 'ah ha' moment because it does not fit our understanding. Weak signals are found by reading, interviews and dialogue.
Insight	Builds our understanding of how an issue or system may evolve and what the consequences might be. Credible insights are the 'evidence' that help us reason about the future.
Trend	A continuous change that is evident from quantitative data. Trend data can help us understand the baseline or expected future.
Change Driver	Causes significant change in the system we are studying. Change drivers are often the focus of environmental scans and key elements in many foresight processes.
Influence Diagram	A visual tool for mapping plausible cause and effect chains into the future. It helps us explore, discuss and assess the possible future impacts of change drivers in an orderly way.
System Map	A visual tool that supports dialogue by identifying the critical elements in a system, allowing participants to develop an appreciation of how a system may behave or evolve under different assumptions.
Scenario	A story about the future. There are many types of scenarios and methods to develop scenarios. All of them explore multiple, plausible futures.
Policy Challenge	A challenge which current policies and institutions do not appear to be ready to address. One of the major products of our foresight work is to identify significant policy challenges that lie ahead. In identifying these challenges, opportunities often emerge.
Assumptions	One of the main products of foresight is to identify credible assumptions that are robust across a range of futures to help inform research, policy development and decision-making. We look at two kinds of assumptions. At the start of a project we try to identify the 'current assumptions' that are buried in current policy and dialogue. At the end of a project we test the current assumptions against the scenarios to identify 'credible assumptions' that appear to be robust across a range of futures.
Strategic Uncertainties	The questions that we want the foresight study to illuminate.

Foresight... A Path to Policy Preparedness

Such studies when conducted by governments, allow policy makers to reflect on how the environment is changing and what additional information and planning may be required to ensure policy preparedness…Resilience.

Notes

[1] *Scharmer, Otto C., Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges. 2009. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco, CA, P.xvi.*