



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

HORIZON SCANNING

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Horizon scanning (or environmental scanning) is a term used to describe an organized formal process of gathering, analyzing and disseminating value-added information to support decision making.

There are a variety of definitions in English for horizon scanning. This situation in part stems from the rather recent differentiation of scanning activities proper from what, in the private sector, is referred to under the umbrella term of “competitive intelligence.” Furthermore, the term as such is more commonly used in Europe and a number of Commonwealth nations whose public administrations are actively engaged in the “foresight process.” Be that as it may, horizon scanning is generally understood to refer to the active, ongoing and systematic monitoring and assessment of a technological, commercial or other type of environment with a view to anticipating the changes that are likely to occur in it. Being focused and continuous (as opposed to passive and episodic), horizon scanning fits with an organization's longer-term objectives regarding strategic directions and risk management. It is thus of use in detecting and assessing emerging threats and opportunities and in guiding decision- and policy-making ahead of actual events.

The evolution of horizon scanning, past and present

The origins of horizon scanning date far back in time, with some authors citing Sun Tzu and his *Art of War* dating to c500 BC, in which he stressed the vital role of intelligence and broader environmental information from a military perspective (Juhari and Stephens, 2006, p. 66). In the private sector, scanning (or competitive intelligence, as it is referred to) dates to the early 20th century, at which time it figured among corporate marketing research activities (Juhari and Stephens, 2006, p. 72). Today, environmental scanning is a core activity of private enterprise, on a par with strategic planning or resource management (Balmisse and Meingan, 2008, p. 17). The situation is different in the public sector, however: horizon scanning activities have only recently been introduced among public bodies although they have been spreading quickly. An ever growing number of governments have horizon scanning teams (Conference Board, 2008, p. 2); some of the better known teams are the Quebec government's Réseau de veille intégrée sur les politiques publiques, France's Centre d'analyse stratégique, New Zealand's Futurewatch program and the United Kingdom's Foresight project. Where the latter two entities are concerned, scanning is focused specifically on the science and technology sector (Conference Board of Canada, 2008).

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The horizon scanning process

The basic definition proposed above implies a series of major well-identified phases of a formal scanning process: gathering, analysis, as well as dissemination and storage. Upstream from these phases is, however, the step that consists in identifying an organization's needs regarding information, the means and formats of dissemination, and access to information. Thus, in order to guide the gathering of information and avoid an information overload (or a paucity of information), an organization will define the target areas of its scanning activities and select those sources that it considers to be reliable.

Collection: During this phase, information of use to the organization is gathered. Various research tools will thus be required, particularly in order to locate information on the Internet (although, obviously, the Web does not constitute the only source of information). Moreover, both formal and informal sources come in for consideration. It is also important to note that horizon scanning characteristically draws on information that is available to all free of charge or that is contained in limited access documents intended for a relatively exclusive target audience. Unlike espionage activities, however, horizon scanning does not draw on information that is illegally acquired or accessed.

Analysis: This phase serves to sort out and prioritize the information of use to the organization. The relevant information must be selected and validated, sifted (in terms of what is essential and of secondary importance), categorized, and analyzed using various tools (mind map, tables and charts, SWOT analysis, etc.). Finally, links or patterns occurring between data must be established.

Dissemination and storage: This phase consists in defining the relevant means of dissemination. As has been noted by Michael Porter, the objective of business intelligence is to provide the right information to the right person at the right time so that the right decision is made. The choice of the format and time of dissemination will have an impact on the appropriation of the information by the members of the organization. Finally, although little attention has until now been dedicated to the subject of the storage of scanning products, this phase nevertheless represents a major dimension of an organization's collective intelligence and knowledge management approach.

As a way of bringing the entire process full circle, an organization should plan a feedback phase that will enable users to offer their views concerning the horizon scanning process and thereby create a basis for making any necessary adjustments and corrections.

Challenges

While competitive intelligence is well established in the private sector, horizon scanning appears to be on shakier ground in public administrations, where it constitutes a potential target of budget cuts. In this context, the continued pursuit of horizon scanning in the medium and long term represents a formidable challenge.

For scanners, additional challenges lie in the emergence of Web 2.0 and, specifically, the proliferation of blogs and the creation of content by individual Web users. Two examples of such challenges consist in information overload and the problems associated with validating the collected data.

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Finally, the current trend of open government, whose aim is to enhance the transparency of public administrations through the public dissemination of a considerable quantity of data, represents a further challenge to scanning teams. This trend has triggered an exponential increase in data that is readily accessible, generally reliable and of use for horizon scanning purposes – provided that the stream is managed appropriately.

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