

2020



AJASN

AUSTRALASIAN JOINT AGENCIES SCANNING NETWORK

# What is horizon scanning?

'We focus on "emerging issues," attempting to identify what might become a problem/opportunity in its earliest possible stage of emergence, even though the empirical data for their existence are very scanty. But the evidence is there. We do not "make up" emerging issues.' (James Dator, 2018)

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The Australasian Joint Agencies Scanning Network (AJASN) was first convened in 2004. The member organisations are government agencies from Australia and New Zealand.

In return for a modest annual membership fee the members are provided with a monthly newsletter, a shared 'scanning hits' electronic database, and three meetings each year. Member organisations are also offered a short horizon scanning training session.

Member organisations may also work together to write brief scanning reports throughout the year.

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Horizon scanning is a structured process designed to capture, make sense of and assess the importance of emerging issues, trends and developments in train – which are often not very obvious today – and which might significantly influence current policy, service delivery, and practice.

Horizon scanners spot changes before they become 'old news', so that decision makers can plan on how to explore or exploit or prepare for these changes to deliver the most positive outcome for their organisation. In other words, horizon scanners identify issues that will become prominent at the point when awareness of them is low (e.g. they are the subject of few articles and discussions.)

Horizon scanning activities and systems are not ends in their own right – they inform other functions (setting strategic directions, investment decisions, risk management, innovation opportunities, future technology identification, national security concerns etc.) Other horizon scanning applications include: intelligence gathering, priority setting for science and technology research and innovation investments, benchmarking and organisational learning.

## Focus on the future

*Horizon scanning is at its heart quite a simple concept; it's about engaging systemically with the future in order to make better decisions today.*

Horizon scanning focuses on how the future will be different. You help decision-makers 'travel to the future' in order to see what they could change today to prevent undesirable events from coming true, or to prepare their organisations for the impact of change. You practise 'seeing around corners' for opportunities to better position your organisation, or to achieve some goal, under changing circumstances.

## Relevance

Horizon scanning related research shows that:

- Horizon scanning is not the same as media monitoring or people paying attention to the environment in which they work.
- Individual scanning is not as robust as group scanning, and an individual's efforts can be inconsistent depending on their workload, skills and biases.
- Working with qualitative methods allows decision-makers and social actors to be more aware of the future impact their decisions could have.
- Including perspectives from the margins, fringes, and frontiers – the 'grey' literature – means you are less likely to base your thinking about change on faulty assumptions, bias or outdated information (the time it take for research studies to be published, for example), or mainstream opinion (rather than the thinking of people challenging and transforming the environment in which you work).

## Benefits

The AJASN is a platform providing members with the opportunity to think collaboratively (and from many perspectives) about the future. This opportunity is valuable because otherwise we tend to very much focus on operational, day-to-day decisions (usually from a narrow organisational perspective). While it is important to think about the short term, it is equally important to think about the long term. However, thinking about the long term and the short term at the same time is not always easy to do, and participating in the AJASN can assist members with this.

The AJASN benefits member organisations by:

- Facilitating collaborative (including cross-agency) analysis and projects;
- Encouraging peer mentoring and networking in scanning and analysis;
- Modelling government/policy-specific applications of scanning and analysis;
- Providing access to tailored resources (scanning newsletters, past reports and a curated database of trends and insights); and
- Providing access to in-house training support, by arrangement.