

Strategic foresight that's grounded, disciplined and built for action

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Right thinking

Strategic foresight is having a moment. Across sectors, leaders are scanning the horizon for signals of disruption, commissioning trend reports and running scenario workshops. That's understandable: disruption cycles are shortening, risks are increasingly interconnected, and long-held assumptions are being tested more often.

But foresight only earns its keep when it changes decisions, when it sharpens strategy, informs posture and strengthens an organisation's ability to deliver on its purpose in a shifting world. Too often, scanning becomes a catalogue of trends or a list of things to watch, disconnected from the choices leaders need to make. The result is familiar: interesting insights, unclear implications.

At Right Lane Consulting, we treat horizon and environmental scanning as a discipline of organisational sense-making, not content generation for its own sake. Our objective is to help clients build a structured, repeatable approach to identifying, interpreting and prioritising external drivers of change, so they can be firm on the destination, but agile in the route. This article outlines the perspective we bring to foresight projects and how we make scanning a source of actionable intelligence.

Why scanning matters now

Every organisation operates within a wider system: social, economic, political, technological, environmental and market forces that shape what is possible. Those forces move, interact, and sometimes shift quickly. Regulatory settings

change, stakeholder expectations evolve, new technologies reorder industries, and climate risk is testing the future viability of places and economies.

In this context, strategy can't be fixed. It must be a living response to a dynamic environment. Strong organisations are those that can anticipate change early, make sense of what it means for them, adjust posture before risks bite or opportunities pass, and stay anchored in what they exist to deliver.

Strategic foresight supports this. It builds a forward-looking evidence base, helps leaders see around corners and creates the confidence to move before signals are obvious. It is not prediction: the future is not a single path. The point is to widen what leaders consider plausible and to prepare them to respond with intent.



Our framing: scanning as organisational sense-making

Scanning is a family of activities with different purposes, so clarity about what each contributes matters. They may frequently be used interchangeably; but are not synonyms.

Our framing rests on three interrelated disciplines:

1. **Environmental scanning** — identifying and monitoring trends and drivers of change in the external environment.
2. **Horizon scanning** — spotting early signals and potential discontinuities that are not yet widely recognised.
3. **Strategic foresight** — integrating these insights into coherent views of alternative futures and their strategic implications.

Together, these disciplines provide structure. Environmental scanning gives visibility on system forces. Horizon scanning sharpens attention to emerging shifts at the edges. Strategic foresight connects both to strategic meaning and action. Underneath this is a simple premise: scanning is how organisations notice, interpret and respond to cues from the world around them.

This view is grounded in theory that treats looking outward as a disciplined organisational capability rather than a one-off research task. Chun Wei Choo frames scanning as the acquisition and use of external information to support organisational knowing — the intertwined processes of sense-making, knowledge creation and decision-making (Choo, 2001). Karl Weick adds that organisations don't simply 'receive' the environment as facts; they must interpret ambiguous cues, build a shared view of what's happening, and update it as events unfold, because that's what makes coordinated action possible (Weick, 1995). These ideas inform our emphasis on interpretation over accumulation: the value lies not in collecting trends but in understanding what they mean for mandate and purpose.

We pair this with Joseph Voros' Generic Foresight Process Framework, which sets out foresight as a connected chain from inputs to analysis, interpretation, outputs, and explicit linkage into strategy (Voros, 2005). It reinforces our insistence that scanning must be designed end-to-end, with translation into strategic implications built in from the start.

Elina Hiltunen's work provides a practical way to distinguish different kinds of signals — established trends, weak signals of emerging change, and potential wild cards that could create discontinuities (Hiltunen, 2008). This underpins our combined environmental and horizon scanning approach, keeping attention on both steady trajectories and plausible breaks in the system.

Finally, we draw on scenario traditions such as the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach associated with Rafael Ramírez and Angela Wilkinson (2016). Their method treats scenarios as a structured way to reframe the strategic context under turbulence and ambiguity, directly testing assumptions and strengthening options and posture, not producing speculative narratives for their own sake.

Taken together, these influences reinforce our core view: scanning and foresight are disciplined sense-making practices that must be tailored to mandate, attentive to different forms of change, and designed to culminate in strategic action.

Our framing: scanning as organisational sense-making

Our objective in foresight work is to establish a structured and disciplined approach that identifies, interprets and prioritises external drivers of change so they inform strategy, risk appetite and organisational posture. The goal isn't to produce a list of trends. It's to clarify:

- what forces are most likely to shape the organisation's ability to deliver on purpose and ambitions
- which of these are most material, and why
- what they imply for direction, positioning, capability and risk
- what should be acted on now, monitored or prepared for.

This is where conviction and flexibility meet. Conviction comes from clarity about purpose and mandate. Flexibility comes from an honest reading of the environment and a willingness to adapt posture as signals strengthen.



Our process: from broad scanning to actionable intelligence

Each project is tailored, but we follow a consistent logic that moves from breadth to focus and from insight to action.

1. Establish the mandate and scanning frame

We start by grounding the work in context: mandate, strategy horizon, operating environment and current uncertainties. This clarifies the decisions scanning should inform, the time horizons that matter, the system boundary, and how the work connects to existing strategy and risk processes.

2. Build the broad view: environmental scanning

We develop a structured picture of external drivers across relevant domains (social, technological, economic, environmental, political, market), using a systems lens rather than silos. We focus on forces with plausible pathways to impact on purpose, operating model, stakeholders or outcomes, avoiding a 'trend-dump' in favour of materiality.

3. Look to the edges: horizon scanning

We then search for early indicators and less obvious shifts, weak signals and potential discontinuities that could reconfigure the environment over time. This includes emerging technologies or business models, early policy experiments, shifting community expectations, geopolitical or scientific inflection points and innovations from adjacent sectors. The aim is to widen the space of possibility and notice what might otherwise be missed.

4. Interpret and cluster

We work with clients to test plausibility and cluster related drivers into a coherent map of change. We focus on interactions between forces and where uncertainty is highest, shifting the work from 'what's happening?' to 'what patterns of change are shaping our world?'

5. Prioritise materiality

Using a framework centred on alignment to mandate, potential impact, and the resources required to respond, we narrow to a manageable set of priority forces for deeper investigation. This keeps attention on what is strategically material, not just interesting.

6. Translate to strategy and posture

We turn priorities into implications for direction and posture: what this means for strategic choices, risk appetite, capability investment, partnerships or ecosystem shifts, and indicators that should trigger action. Where useful, we explore scenarios built around key uncertainties as a disciplined way to test robustness.

Our design principles

Foresight work must balance rigour with practicality. We use a set of design principles to guard against common pitfalls:

1. Tailored to the mandate. The approach is custom-built to support specific decisions and the required timeframes.
2. Future-oriented. We look beyond the present to plausible trajectories.
3. Built for implementation. Translation into strategy and action is designed in from the outset.
4. Selective and disciplined. Clarity and relevance beat exhaustive coverage.
5. Coherent narrative. Insights are connected into a story about what matters and why.
6. Designed for impact. Outputs are compelling tools for decision-making, not dull reports on a shelf.

These principles keep scanning grounded in the reality of leadership choices: they help organisations interpret external change in ways that strengthen purpose, improve performance, and sharpen readiness for what comes next.



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Note: The reflections in this article come from working alongside clients on hundreds of environmental analyses and many scenario planning exercises, always with a focus on translating trends and forces into insights that support strategic decision making. The drafting process was supported by OpenAI's ChatGPT.

Want to know more?

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